

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
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FRANCIS BACON

June 3 - August 28, 1990

A retrospective of fifty-nine paintings by English artist Francis Bacon opens at The Museum of Modern Art on June 3, 1990. Honoring the painter on his eightieth birthday, FRANCIS BACON presents powerful, often troubling representations of the human figure. This first overview of Bacon's work in the United States in over twenty-five years was organized by James T. Demetrion, director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The exhibition was coordinated for The Museum of Modern Art by John Elderfield, director of the Department of Drawings and curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture.

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Francis Bacon, who developed as an artist independently of any school or movement, is one of the preeminent painters to have emerged in the aftermath of World War II. Ranging from intimate portraits to monumental triptychs, his work is rich in personal symbolism and literary allusions. Assembled from collections in the United States, Europe, Japan, Australia, and South America, the exhibition traces the evolution of Bacon's art from the beginning of his career to his most recent work.

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Many of Bacon's compositions of the late 1940s, which begin the exhibition, focus menacingly on the head and mouth. These agonized faces were inspired in part by the image of the screaming nurse in Sergei Eisenstein's film Potemkin (1925). In his early canvases the artist transcribed the brutality and isolation of individuals who have been pushed to the limits of their physical and emotional endurance.

Works from the early 1950s include landscape and animal subjects, as well as Bacon's first reworking of masterpieces by past artists. In a series of paintings of popes, Bacon had used the Portrait of Pope Innocent X (1650), by the seventeenth-century Spanish painter Velázquez, to mount an assault on authoritarian imagery.

During the 1960s, the artist began creating large diptychs and triptychs, including portraits and complex figure compositions. Three Studies for a Crucifixion (1962) treats this religious subject as a metaphor for human suffering, depicting the crucified figure as a butchered carcass.

Vigorously intensive figure studies continued to be the artist's major focus in the 1970s and 1980s. Bacon has made many portraits, often from photographs, of such friends and colleagues as Isabel Rawsthorne, Muriel Belcher, Lucien Freud, and Frank Auerbach, as well as a number of self-portraits. The so-called "Black Triptychs" of the early 1970s concern the suicide of Bacon's long-time friend George Dyer. The portraits, although distorted and transformed, reveal highly individual psychologies.

Bacon's technique encompasses a synthesis of accident and order. He works on unprimed canvas, using brushes and rags to apply the paint. While passages of his canvases display splattered pigment and impasto, the

backgrounds generally are covered with a thinly applied, uniform color. He frequently uses a linear, box-like armature to isolate and emphasize particular images, usually single figures. Since the 1960s, Bacon has chosen to display all his work in broad frames and behind glass in order to formalize his unorthodox imagery. The physical barrier of glass serves both to distance the viewer from the painting and to unify the disparate textures of the surface.

Born in Ireland of English parents in 1909, Bacon left for the European continent at age sixteen and settled in London in 1929. He destroyed much of his early work and effectively started his career at age thirty-five. Bacon's paintings have been exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide. Some of his most recent one-person exhibitions have taken place in Tokyo (1988), Moscow (1988), Paris (1987), and London (1985). The last New York retrospective of his work was mounted in 1963 by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

The New York showing is the last stop for the exhibition, which opened at the Hirshhorn Museum last fall and traveled to The Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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PUBLICATION

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