

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# The Sunday Telegraph

## Beyond British

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FRANCIS BACON/  
HENRY MOORE | ★★★★★  
Ashmolean, Oxford, to Jan 19  
ashmolean.org; 01865 278 002

Apologies both for the presumption and the punning – but, so convinced was I in advance what my opinion of this exhibition would be, that I was already thinking of potential headlines on my train ride up to Oxford. “Torrid Henry fried by Bacon” was one; “Bacon sizzles, Moore’s the pity” another.

Presenting the work of 20th-century Britain’s two biggest artists, sculptor Henry Moore and painter Francis Bacon, side-by-side in a museum for the first time, the show aims to reveal little-known parallels and similarities. But where exhibition pairings are concerned, side-by-side actually means head-to-head. What may have been conceived, curatorially, as two artists in conversation always ends up as two artists in competition. And in such a scenario, I could only really foresee one winner: bruiser Bacon.

Put crudely, where the painter’s visceral visions of writhing subjects expressed an outrage at the absurdity of human existence, the sculptor’s languorous, rhythmic figures seemed to reflect an essentially benign view of the universe. A case of existential howls and universal serenity.

Take the formative influence on both men of Picasso. Moore’s two *Composition* figures of 1931 recall the Spaniard’s “Bone” figures of the late Twenties (in which he radically remodelled the human skeleton). In Moore’s hands, Picasso’s violence is softened; his harsh forms blunted and rendered sinuous.

As for Bacon, frustratingly he destroyed most of his early work; yet, by 1944’s *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, he’s taking Picasso to a darker level. His nauseating monsters, with outsized bodies and polyp heads, gasp for breath in chambers of airless orange, representatives of a warped world of war and death camps.

By boldly displaying these two titans together, the curators deserve credit for trying to cast new light on artists we think we know so well. But the risk is that the agonistic set-up, mixing paintings and sculptures throughout, will confirm prejudices rather than dispel them.

For me, Moore’s insipidity is only enforced by seeing his sedentary bronze *King and Queen* (inspired by a hieratic Egyptian sculpture in the British Museum) beside Bacon’s own seated, authority figure, *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. The royal couple seem inert compared to Bacon’s pontiff, a phantom of extemporised brushstrokes who seems to be disintegrating before our very eyes, as if his throne were an electric chair.

The show’s insurmountable problem remains the baggage and bias one brings to it. I surely won’t be the only visitor harbouring a preference for one artist over the other. They remain such diametrically opposed figures, both as artists and men, it’s difficult not to take sides. Educated at the Royal College of Art (where he later taught), Moore was the happily married, establishment figure, who inhabited a vast Hertfordshire estate, sat on the board of countless



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THE ESTATE OF FRANCIS BACON; THE HENRY MOORE FOUNDATION

foundations and supplied huge bronzes to urban plazas across the globe. Upon his death in 1986, a thanksgiving service was held at Westminster Abbey.

Bacon, by contrast, was a self-taught, solitary bachelor with a fondness for drink, gambling and sadomasochistic gay encounters in the shadows of Soho. Upon his death in 1992, nobody was invited to the cremation. It's hard to get beyond the clichéd dichotomy here of edgy outsider and comfortable insider.

If, though, you can leave your prejudices at the entrance somehow, this show certainly has its rewards. Much of the focus is on Bacon's strivings to achieve a sculptural vocabulary in painterly form. He longed to create a 3D vision in 2D: as evident as anywhere in the elastic

forms of *Two Studies from the Human Body*, inspired by Eadweard Muybridge's photos of a discus-thrower.

Though he never made a sculpture himself, he often flirted with the idea. One drunken evening in the mid-Fifties, it's said he turned up at Moore's door demanding lessons, even though the artists were barely acquainted.

Both men were profoundly affected by the Blitz, and Moore became his most "Bacon-esque" in resulting works. In his famous drawings of people sheltering from air raids in the London Underground, his subjects adopt such extreme body positions they've been compared to the corpse casts of Pompeii.

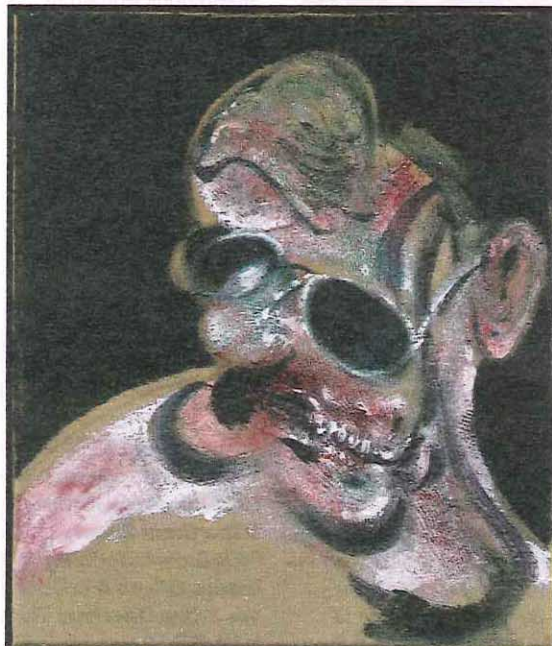
With *Falling Warrior*, meanwhile, he managed to capture the agony of a dying soldier, in one final, coiling fight for life. In a

neat juxtaposition, the warrior – legs apart – is displayed facing Bacon's nude portrait of Sixties socialite Henrietta Moraes in similar pose, splayed and serpentine on her bed. The implication? That there's a latent sexual force to Moore's work and that, perhaps, he was as versed as Bacon in the competing Freudian forces of Eros and Thanatos.

Rodin was a key reference point for both artists, too. Moore increasingly admired the sense of pressure from within the Frenchman's figures, of bones pushing through to the surface. *Reclining Figure: Festival* (1951) duly mixes passages of sinuous flesh with boney tautness.

The work is paired (for obvious postural reasons) with Bacon's *Lying Figure in a Mirror*, yet the painter took very different lessons from Rodin. Dynamic disposition, for one, as well as animated surfaces, which Bacon adapted into vigorous brushstrokes.

So does the exhibition work? Well, yes and no. As expected, quiet man Moore loses the shouting match emphatically. Yet, for all their differences, seeing the pair's work side by side, one is struck by their *shared* fascination with the human form and condition. They looked beyond the landscape and narrative traditions of so much British art and, accordingly, found acclaim far beyond British shores.



**FACE-OFF** 'Animal Head' by Henry Moore (1951, top) and 'Portrait of Man with Glasses III' (1963) by Francis Bacon