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GAGOSIAN

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Oil be back: is this long-lost, terrifying painting Bacon's very first pope?

The Gagosian Gallery certainly thinks so, and it's well worth heading to Mayfair to see it (if you dare...)

Alastair Sooke

Francis Bacon's Landscape with Pope/Dictator', c. 1946 (detail) CREDIT: The Estate of Francis Bacon

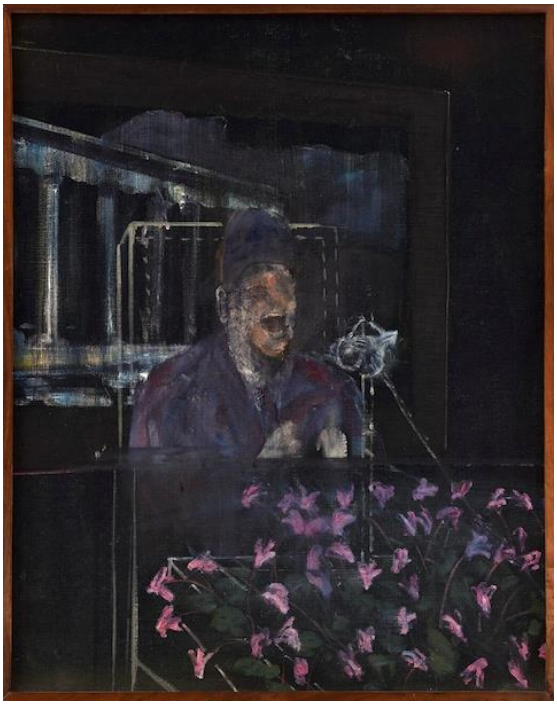
Against a dark, sinister background, a man sits before a microphone, ranting into the night. Who is this screaming, eyeless spectre, with teeth as sharp as a vampire's? Answer: a figure by Francis Bacon – and, according to the Gagosian Gallery, which is about to show the picture in which he appears, his "first pope".

Likely abandoned by Bacon in the early Fifties, when he moved out of a studio in South Kensington, the painting was lost for decades, hidden away, since 1967, in an obscure private collection. Now, following its rediscovery in 2016, it's being exhibited for the first time – not far from the Royal Academy, where three of the artist's pope paintings (he made more than 40, over 20 years) are on display in Francis Bacon: Man and Beast, including Head VI (1949), usually considered the series's prototype.

Anyone interested in modern art will want to see such a potentially important early Bacon for themselves. So, at the first opportunity, I pedalled to Gagosian in Mayfair, where the gilt-framed painting has been hung dramatically (and spookily), surrounded by Stygian drapes, so that it seems to float, by itself, in an otherwise empty, pitch-black space. If this is what the threshold to the underworld looks like, I won't be surprised – and, judging by the distorted, hysterical expression of the picture's purple-clad martinet, we're all going straight to hell.

It was the art historian Martin Harrison who tracked down the painting, which the artist never titled, to a warehouse in northern Italy, while compiling Bacon's catalogue raisonné. Could it be one of three lost "sketches" of Velázquez's 17th-century portrait of Pope Innocent X, which

Bacon mentions in a pair of letters written on the same day in 1946? “It is thrilling to paint from a picture which really excites you,” he told his friend, the artist Graham Sutherland – although he knew Velázquez’s composition only in reproduction, and never visited the original in Rome.
One of the studies, he added, was almost finished, and Gagosian, who insist it isn’t available, believe this is the “new” work. In which case, it must have been painted in Monaco, where Bacon, feeling flush following the sale of Painting (1946), which today hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and features another menacing, eyeless bully, was rattling around the roulette tables, with his lover, Eric Hall, and beloved former nanny, Jessie Lightfoot, in tow.



Francis Bacon's Landscape with Pope/Dictator’, c. 1946 CREDIT: The Estate of Francis Bacon

If correct, the painting, which measures 55 x 43 inches, was executed (on the canvas’s rougher, unprimed side) very early in Bacon’s career, which, traditionally, is said to start with Tate’s 1944 triptych, Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion. Astonishingly, many of the motifs that we associate with his artistic maturity are already present: a solitary male figure; a bestial, chimp-like scream; the claustrophobic sense of being trapped within box-like structures. In the foreground, pink flowers (cyclamens?) crackle and sputter like fireworks. Their pronged, finger-like petals echo the figure’s blurred, gesticulating hands.
In an elegant essay, art historian Richard Calvocoressi suggests that they may, too, stand in for his audience: the “waving or saluting” hands of a crowd listening to a demagogue. Bacon kept press photos of speechifying dictators, and the painting’s neoclassical colonnade recalls buildings by the Nazi architect Albert Speer. Hence, Harrison’s tentative title: “Landscape with Pope / Dictator”. Perhaps those petals represent toxic propaganda tumbling, like spittle, from the figure’s fanged, fanatical mouth.
In fact, isn’t this tyrannical phantom more dictator than pope? He wears a collar and tie, not vestments. (Am I seeing things, or are the notches of a lapel visible in the thin paint describing his outer garment?) True, his throne is a little like that in Velázquez’s portrait, while,

Calvocoressi argues, the predominant blue-violet tonality “anticipates the later series of popes from 1951 and 1953”. His elongated headgear may be a prelate’s “biretta”.
But, at its base, encircling his temples, there’s the ghostly line of a brim, which suggests a different sort of hat altogether. If he is a pope, he’s a shadowy one – the first stirrings of an idea. Still, whoever he is, he’s fascinating, as well as scary, and I suggest you seek this intriguing, transitional picture out.