

**Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud**  
Common Stature as Painters, Diverse Approaches to Painting

ARTS 1304 (Art History II, ITV) – Section OPC001  
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*Outline*

Thesis Statement

Undoubtedly, Francis Bacon (born Ireland, lived/active United Kingdom, 1909-1992) and Lucian Freud (born Germany, lived/active United Kingdom, 1922- ) are both respected as masters of modern figurative painting. By comparing the style and technique of Bacon's triptych "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" (1969, oil on canvas) with Freud's "Reflection with Two Children" (self-portrait, 1965, oil on canvas), the artists' distinct characteristics emerge.

I. Introduction

- a. Contemporaries Francis Bacon (born Ireland, lived / active United Kingdom, 1909-1992) and Lucian Freud (born Germany, lived / active United Kingdom, 1922- ) shared many unique qualities.
- b. Should one survey a Bacon retrospective, he or she would find psychological anguish – content that some might consider more appropriately produced by the grandson of Sigmund Freud.
- c. Thesis statement: See above.

II. Francis Bacon

- a. Bacon believed distortion to be the most appropriate way to convey fact with his paint.
- b. Personal quote: Francis Bacon.
- c. Even though Bacon often used bright solids as a backdrop for his forms, he frequently cast down the mood by painting in hues of blue and black.
- d. Amazingly, Bacon did follow orthodox artistic convention in that he mastered ideation and scope; admired the achievement of icons like Titian (1488-1576), Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), and Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669); and derived thematic union via visual cooperation and sequencing.
- e. Such a triptych is "Three Studies of Lucian Freud," produced by Bacon during the decade that he developed numerous small head studies of his close friend.

III. Lucian Freud

- a. According to Freud, his work contained himself and his surroundings, creating an autobiographical summary for viewers.
- b. Personal quote: Lucian Freud
- c. In his early career, Freud often held identification as surrealist, position plants and people in unusual ways.
- d. At the same time, Freud's paintings radiate human essence – if not sexuality then emotional attraction.
- e. These diverse, complex characteristics certainly apply to "Reflection with Two Children" – a Freud self portrait that includes Rose and Ali, two children that he fathered with Suzy Boyt ("Smiling Woman," 1959, oil on canvas) and who were introduced to the piece like cinema latecomers.

IV. "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" vs. "Reflection with Two Children"

- a. A comparison of the style of "Triptych" vs. "Reflection" reveals the independence each artist displayed with his work.

- b. Bacon and Freud also chose diverse approaches when setting up each works' composition.
  - c. Freud's inclusion of his daughters is notable for composition, since the artist is much more inclined than Bacon to include numerous figures within individual works.
  - d. In addition, these pieces show contrast of technique with each artists' application of paint and use of texture to promote visual impact.
  - e. Finally, it is important to consider that these paintings all contain reference to the same individual: Lucian Freud.
- V. Final Section
- a. One characteristic that both Freud and Bacon showed in their lives: Determination and focus.
  - b. While they had this characteristic in common, and while they often gained similar feedback from critics and art enthusiasts, Bacon and Freud – friends and contemporaries – still maintained separate creative styles and techniques.
  - c. Most importantly, the individual characteristics of these two paintings – Bacon's "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" and Freud's "Reflection with Two Children" – show that these two accomplished figurative painters had established artistic methodologies.

### Conclusion

By analyzing "Reflection" and "Triptych," these artistic differences – such as color choice, composition, figurative treatment, and paint application – clearly emerge. Consequently, each artist developed a body of work that shows advanced achievement, yet emphasizes individuality of character and approach.

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*Paper*

Contemporaries Francis Bacon (born Ireland, lived / active United Kingdom, 1909-1992) and Lucian Freud (born Germany, lived / active United Kingdom, 1922- ) shared many unique qualities: tough constitutions, whimsical attitudes, and independent minds (Sinclair 175). Those minds developed compelling depictions of the human form, figures that often evoked harsh feedback from modern critics. Despite similarities in personality and artistic experience, Bacon and Freud painted with distinction. These longtime friends, considered inseparable in the 1950s and 1960s, orchestrated portraits of each other that demonstrate individualism (Farson 250-251). Each extended his singular, personal approach to a wide range of imagery.

Should one survey a Bacon retrospective, he or she would find psychological anguish – content that some might consider more appropriately produced by the grandson of Sigmund Freud (Feaver 14). While Bacon intentionally disfigured for emotional impact, Freud frequently created more realistic human bodies that otherwise lacked humanity. Their lifeless expressions and colors create the presence of an object rather than a person. Although Bacon publicly decried any expressionist tendencies, and Freud purported a more compelling interest in impasto brush strokes over personal expression, both artists often provoked passionate interpretation of their work (Peppiatt 31).

Undoubtedly, Bacon and Freud are both respected as masters of modern figurative painting. By comparing the style and technique of Bacon's triptych "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" (1969, oil on canvas) with Freud's "Reflection with Two Children" (self-portrait, 1965, oil on canvas), the artists' distinct characteristics emerge.

Bacon believed distortion to be the most appropriate way to convey fact with his paint (Yard 8). Many interpreted his asymmetric forms as chilling, riled, fevered with anxiety and terror, immersed in emotional turmoil. When asked about his content – which ambitiously included humans and animals, figures and portraits – Bacon replied:

“People always seem to think that in my paintings I’m trying to put across a feeling of suffering and the ferocity of life, but I don’t think of it at all in that way myself. You see, just the very fact of being born is a very ferocious thing, just existence itself as one goes between birth and death. It’s not that I want to emphasize that side of things – but I suppose that if you’re trying to work as near to your nervous system as you can, that’s what automatically comes out ... Life ... is just filled, really, with suffering and despair.”

(Gross 29)

Even though Bacon sometimes used bright solids as a backdrop for his forms, he frequently cast down the mood by painting in hues of blue and black. When he did embrace a deep burgundy, electric orange, or somber blue tone, he contorted or made mysterious the form or figure within. In this artistic sense, and in others, Bacon adopted an independent course, forgoing the abstraction of his contemporaries. He also exploited his bountiful memory and exceptional creative capabilities to achieve heroic status in the London arts community (Farr 24).

Amazingly, Bacon did follow orthodox artistic convention in that he mastered ideation and scope; admired the achievement of icons like Titian (1488-1576), Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), and Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669); and derived thematic union via visual cooperation and sequencing (Farr 24). In order to relay remoteness and iconic power, he glazed and framed with heavy gold. He often embraced forceful, central figures (such as Pope Innocent X, the subject of a Velázquez portrait) who sat atop singular, banal backgrounds. From

the late 1930s onward, Bacon derived much content from black-and-white documentary photographs, and from colored reproductions of original work. [His studio floor saw numerous paint-stained photographs, creating his “heap of broken images” (Peppiatt 34-35).] Although as he began his career, Bacon preferred individual panels (and interpretations derived there from), he later used the triptych to associate multiple companions.

Such a triptych is “Three Studies of Lucian Freud,” produced by Bacon during the decade that he developed numerous small head studies of his close friend (Farr 143). In it, he begins use of bright colors for backgrounds while incorporating a common cane-bottomed studio chair and headboard. These triptychs saw curved eye lines, which echoed those of Bacon’s childhood landscapes in Ireland. The effect: A heightening of the stage-like quality of each piece, and an opportunity to debut individualized personal characteristics upon multiple platforms. Additionally, each painting shows a somewhat common Bacon characteristic – the outline of a box-like figure surrounding (and sometimes fractionalizing) his subject.

According to Freud, his work contained himself and his surroundings, creating an autobiographical summary for viewers (Feaver 35). Notoriously elusive and considered by many eccentric, Freud, like Bacon, consistently expressed his belief in personal response:

“The painter makes real to others his innermost feelings about all that he cares for.

A secret becomes known to everyone who views the picture through the intensity with which it is felt. The painter must give a completely free rein to any feelings or sensations he may have and reject nothing to which he is naturally drawn. It is just this self-indulgence which acts for him as the discipline through which he discards what is unessential to him and so crystallizes his tastes. A painter’s tastes must grow out of what so obsesses him in life that he never has to ask himself what it is suitable for him to do in

art ... The painter's obsession with his subject is all that he needs to drive him to work.  
(Gruen 318).

In his early career, Freud often held identification as a surrealist, positioning plants and people in unusual ways. But Freud's later portraits, oft completed while familiar models (family, friends, famous painters, or lovers) sit or lay before him, have created both his artistic notoriety and his reputation for exceptional ingenuity. Disconcerting and peculiar, his male and female portraits, often pictured nude, show lifeless expression and coloration amid passionate, incisive brushwork. The constructions seemingly represent the material turmoil – even dejection – of his models, as well as the psychology of the artist himself (321).

At the same time, Freud's paintings radiate human essence – if not sexuality, then emotional attraction (Feaver 35, 41). His mission – to astonish, disturb, seduce, and convince – was achieved when he displayed his subjects' inherent animal virtues. By requesting that many of his models rest or even sleep, Freud dismisses audacity, enthusiasm, practicality, and self-consciousness. Nudity further reveals their biological history. Fellow artist Frank Auerbach describes Freud's subject as not cooked, but raw for optimal digestion – void of the gravy of ostentatious tone or color, and free from formal composition on his canvas plate (Auerbach 51).

These diverse, complex characteristics certainly apply to "Reflection with Two Children" – a Freud self portrait that includes Rose and Ali, two children that he fathered with Suzy Boyt ("Smiling Woman," 1959, oil on canvas) and who were introduced to the piece like cinema latecomers (Feaver 30). Positioned with a mirror below his feet, Freud painted his own body foreshortened, large circular lights above his shoulder and hindquarter, and a grayish-green background palleted in his surroundings. With a look of unapproachable distance on his face, Freud gazes downward into the viewer's eyes as if he or she is lying motionless on the floor. The

two female children resemble the opposing expressions of theater masks. They have popped up along the lower left-hand corner – one laughing and smiling, the other with a pensive frown.

A comparison of the style of “Triptych” vs. “Reflection” reveals the independence each artist displayed with his work. With the former, Bacon (especially later in his career) intensified his color scheme, dividing the background of these pieces with lighter shades of yellow and green (Farr 154-156). Further, Bacon enhanced the quality of the blue and gray clothing colors and skin tones chosen for his figures. By contrast, Freud remained true to his desire for figural glorification by downplaying the ceiling behind his self-portrait (Feaver 30). He also maintained focus on facial features and, to some extent, on the centered circular light, by darkening each figures’ apparel.

Bacon and Freud also chose diverse approaches when setting up each works’ composition. Bacon maintained a common centralization of form on canvas but desired ongoing figural movement (Peppiatt 41). Freud sought innovation in viewpoint, human position, and physical detail (Feaver 36). “Triptych” demonstrates a singular form per piece deconstructed to reveal multiple expressions. By contrast, “Reflection” shows a relatively common, humanly expression per character – one that reinforces Freud’s quest to reveal humanity’s connection with animals. Moreover, while Bacon’s figures capture a straightforward perspective and figural movement, Freud’s painting shifts its perspective between father and daughters. The viewer lies below Freud’s portrait, but directly faces his offspring while their eyes shift away.

Freud’s inclusion of his daughters is notable for composition, since the artist is much more inclined than Bacon to include numerous figures within individual works. Although widely admired for his portraiture, Freud produced many paintings that featured multiple people or objects – such as “Father and Daughter” (1949), “Michael Andrews and June” (1965-66), “Large

Interior W11” (1981), and “And the Bridegroom” (1993) (Feaver 77, 107, 148-149, 185).

“Reflection” is appropriately included in this group. Bacon, however, usually maintained a single form, providing economy of both color and composition (Gruen 6). His concentration remained focused on adjustment of singular physical and emotional characteristics. “Triptych” shows no deviation from this prescription, one that allowed Bacon expressive success.

In addition, these pieces show contrast of technique with each artists’ application of paint and use of texture to promote visual impact. Later in his career, Freud’s vigorously caked canvases have juxtaposed grave reflections expressed in his work (Feaver 30). Certainly “Reflection” demonstrates Freud’s approach, with its paletted background, layered facial features, and intense brush strokes. Alternatively, Bacon, rather than using paint as a means to create gravity, lightens the atmosphere of “Triptych” by softening his strokes and application. This approach also creates a desired sense of movement and distortion.

Finally, it is important to consider that these paintings all contain reference to the same individual: Lucian Freud. Described as obsessively secretive and somewhat disengaged, Freud demonstrates his complex, distant personality within each piece (Gruen 315-316). Interestingly enough, each artist seems to capture these same qualities while maintaining his own painterly characteristics. Color, composition, application differ. In the end, however, viewer feedback – “shocking” or “affected” or “complex” are examples – often comes full circle, joining Bacon’s work with Freud’s in a one-of-a-kind personal relationship (Feaver 28).

One characteristic that both Freud and Bacon showed in their lives: Determination and focus. Freud often explained that he would review paintings intently before sending them to the framers – each stroke, each step – desiring discovery of any additions necessary to complete the piece (Feaver 49). Bacon, known as a connoisseur of food and frequently of fine liquors, would

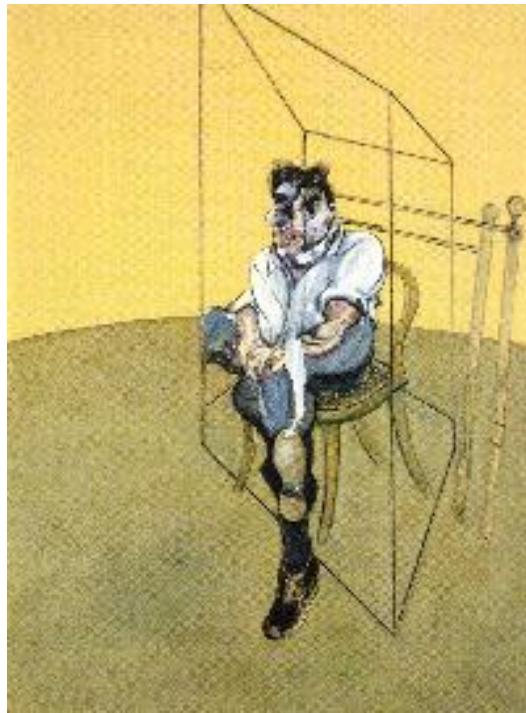
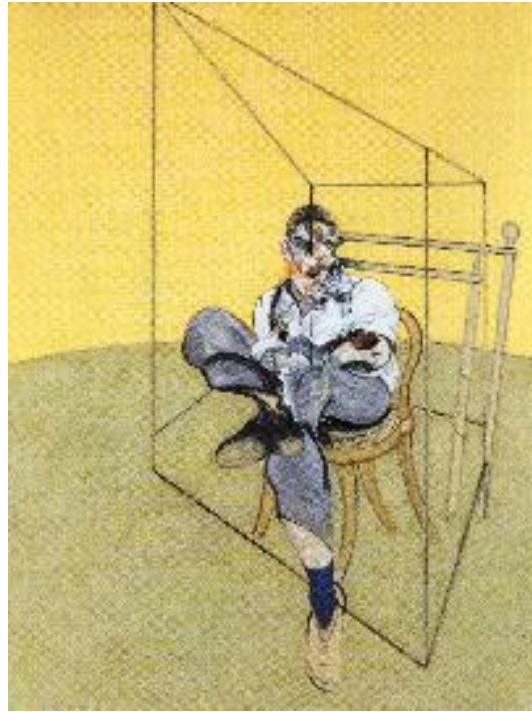
refrain from intake for hours while he concentrated (Peppiatt 26). In conversation, Bacon commented that his whole life went into his work. No doubt Freud shared this intense artistic quality.

While they had this characteristic in common, and while they often gained similar feedback from critics and art enthusiasts, Bacon and Freud – friends and contemporaries – still maintained separate creative styles and techniques. They collaborated and influenced each other, but independently proceeded with their respective creative intentions once faced with blank canvases. By analyzing “Reflection” and “Triptych,” these artistic differences – such as color choice, composition, figurative treatment, and paint application – clearly emerge. Consequently, each artist developed a body of work that shows advanced achievement, yet emphasizes individuality of character and approach.

Most importantly, the individual characteristics of these two paintings – Bacon’s “Three Studies of Lucian Freud” and Freud’s “Reflection with Two Children” – show that these two accomplished figurative painters had established artistic methodologies. Bacon drew his inspiration from his memory and his creative ideas (Farr 24). Freud drew his inspiration from the technical analysis of those who sat in front of him. Meticulously chosen, Freud’s models exhibit a desirable imperfection that he captures in near perfect form. Meticulously inspired, Bacon’s figures capture emotion that many fear to explore. Both Bacon and Freud have provoked intense personal reflection and understanding by many who consume and admire their tremendous work.

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“Three Studies of Lucian Freud”  
1969  
oil on canvas  
Francis Bacon



“Reflection with Two Children”  
1965  
oil on canvas  
Lucian Freud