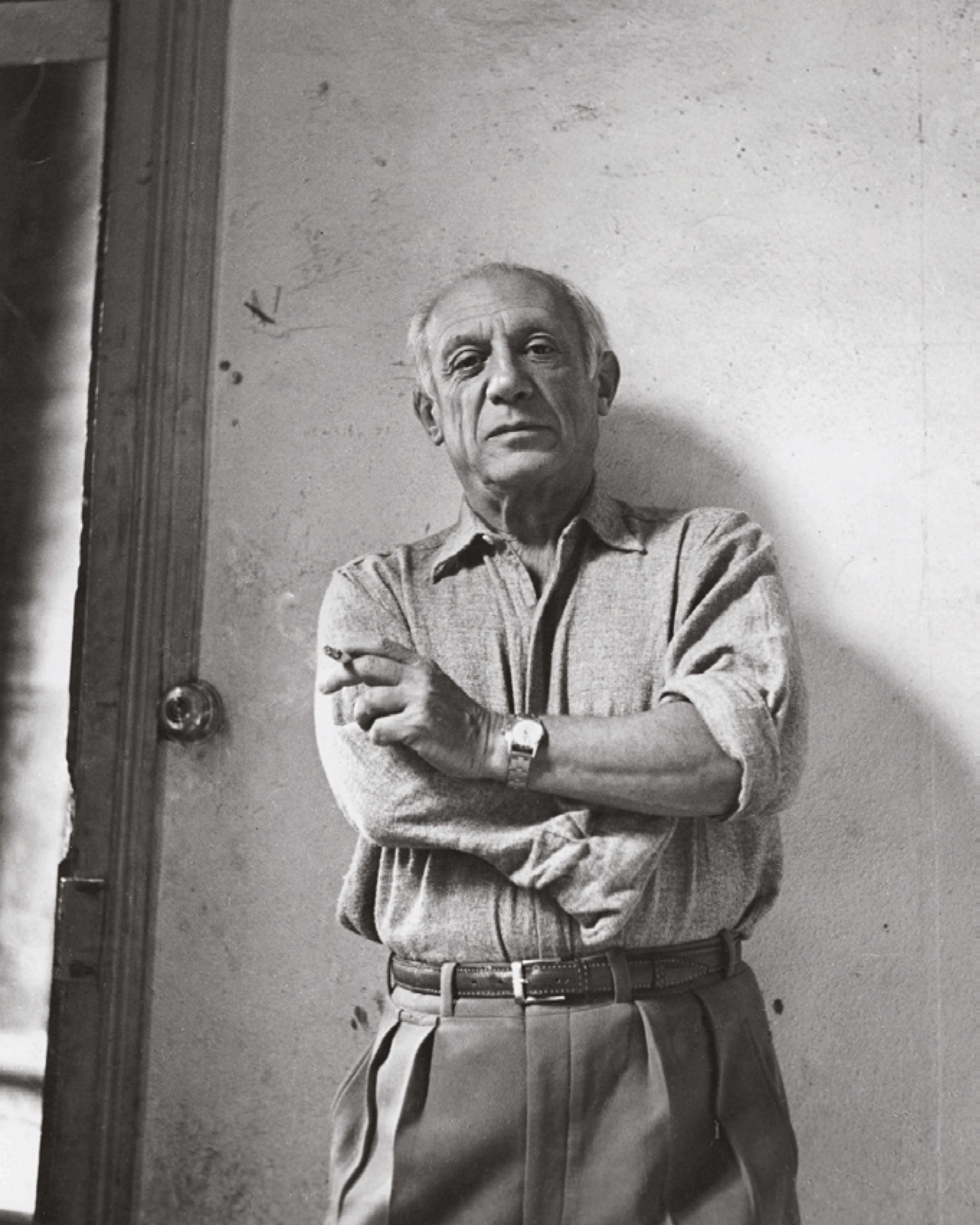


PICASSO BACON

What It Feels Like
to Be Human



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Edited by
Ralph Gleis and Michael Peppiatt

With texts by
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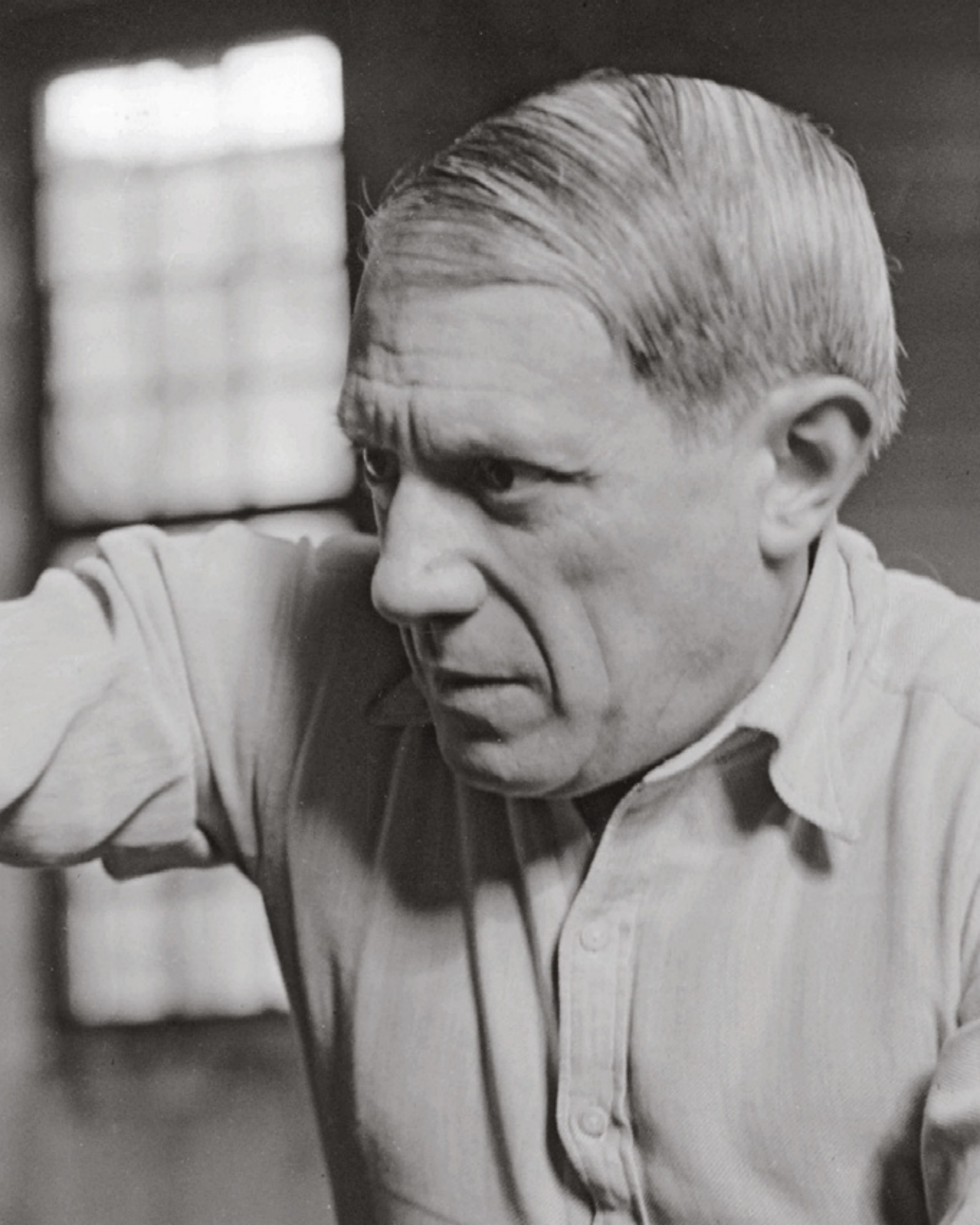
ALBERTINA

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Preface

Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon each left a mark on their respective eras through figurative painting and have had a far-reaching influence on art up to the present day. This meeting of the twentieth century's most significant painters is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the Albertina's 250th anniversary programme. The exhibition *What It Feels Like to Be Human* explores the profound emotions and dramas of the human condition, showcasing the work of two artists who were uncompromising in probing existential experiences in their art.

Picasso and Bacon do not encounter one another here as isolated artistic figures but rather enter into a dynamic dialogue. The Albertina is thus building on an approach it successfully tested last year with the exhibition *Leonardo – Dürer*. The aim is not to compare the biographies of two artists, but to open a methodological inquiry that offers a fresh perspective on their respective bodies of work. While the common thread linking the two Renaissance geniuses was drawing on a coloured ground, the focus here is on analysing the artistic means by which Picasso and Bacon, each in his own specific way, revolutionised the depiction of the human body. The exhibition is therefore not intended as an attempt to interweave two life stories. Instead, the power of the works is revealed through an open exchange that impressively demonstrates how both artists radically redefined the human figure. Their visual worlds speak of destruction, vulnerability, brutality and violence, transforming the body into a vehicle for expressing existential experiences.

During his first trip to Paris in 1927, the young Bacon saw Picasso's work for the first time – an encounter that proved to be pivotal for his own artistic development. However, this exhibition deliberately looks beyond the mere question of a linear model of influence. Instead, the focus is on the artistic dialogue, the examination of those visual innovations that led to a new conception of the human body, and the exploration of what the works still have to say to one another today. This juxtaposition offers a fresh perspective on the individual creative output of both artists. Here, Bacon's work breaks free from the biographical interpretation that has long dominated and emerges as an independent, pioneering contribution to figurative painting. At the same time, Picasso's radical reinvention of the human figure – and, above all, his less frequently exhibited Surrealist paintings – also appear in a new light when viewed alongside Bacon's work. Although there is no record of the elder artist engaging directly with the work of the younger, Picasso was certainly able to follow the developments of the subsequent generation of artists right up until his death in 1973.

The unusual juxtaposition in the exhibition is based on the insights of Michael Peppiatt, one of the world's leading experts on Francis Bacon and his oeuvre. A contemporary of Bacon's and his biographer, he has spent decades researching the artist's life and work, exploring it in numerous publications. He was appointed curator of this exhibition and was pivotal in initiating this highly ambitious project. He has also succeeded in weaving an extraordinary array of exceptional works by these two artistic giants into a compelling conceptual narrative. The fact so many significant loans could be brought together is thanks in no small part to his long-standing international network and high level of personal dedication. For this, I offer him my heartfelt thanks. Equally crucial to the success of the exhibition was the in-house curatorial expertise. As a curator at the Albertina, Gunhild Bauer brought to the project her

many years of academic experience and profound specialist knowledge, particularly regarding French Modernism. In close collaboration with Michael Peppiatt, she developed a sophisticated exhibition concept that allows Picasso and Bacon to enter into a vibrant dialogue, primarily through the power of their works. I would like to thank her most sincerely for her extraordinary dedication and tireless commitment. I would additionally like to thank special advisor to the exhibition, Francis Outred, for the benefit of his experience and insight with both artists in crafting this curatorial narrative. The curatorial team at the Albertina received expert support from the assistant curator Eva Maria Pirker and from Michael Kurtz, Michael Peppiatt's assistant, to whom I also extend my heartfelt thanks.

Bringing the works of these two artistic giants together in such a concentrated way was only possible thanks to the generous support of numerous international museums and private collections. More than seventy exceptional loans – including key works from the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid – impressively demonstrate how Picasso and Bacon fundamentally transformed the image of the human being in the twentieth century. We would like to express our sincere thanks to all the lenders, both institutional and private. Without their trust and extraordinary willingness to support the project, we would not have been able to bring this artistic dialogue to life in all its depth and pictorial intensity. Special thanks in this regard go to Francis Outred for successfully securing many high-calibre private loans, having convinced the owners of the significance of the project. We would also like to thank Michael Ziegert for his constant support.

Beyond the exhibition, the accompanying catalogue explores the central themes in greater depth with carefully researched essays and offers surprising insights. It examines – particularly in the key essay by Michael Peppiatt – how both artists explore the question of what it actually means to be human. The essays by Alyce Mahon and Martin Hammer trace shared art historical points of reference, such as the Spanish Baroque painter Diego Velázquez, while Ben Ware's contribution examines the role of the political in their work. It thus becomes clear that viewing Picasso and Bacon side by side opens up a wealth of perspectives on the creative output of two masters whose work one might have felt was already familiar. We would like to extend our warmest thanks to all the authors for their insightful contributions, which reveal new facets of both artists' work.

The production of this publication was in the capable hands of Sandra Maria Rust and Mona Brahner. I would like to thank them, as well as Klaus E. Göltz, for the highly appealing graphic design.

A large-scale exhibition project such as this presents particular challenges for everyone involved. That this exhibition was nevertheless successfully realised is down to the efforts of many people. Particular credit is due to the exhibition management team, led by Barbara Buchbauer and Kristin Jedlicka, and to the conservation team led by Eva Glück.

Both the exhibition and the catalogue demonstrate how fruitful a comparison can be between two artists who have more differences than similarities, as it is precisely these few points of contact that offer significant new value for understanding each artist's work and for the development of figurative painting.

Ralph Gleis
Director General of the Albertina





Picasso – Bacon

What It Feels Like to Be Human

MICHAEL PEPPIATT

Out of the blue, Francis Bacon turned to me with his searching, wide-eyed look and said, 'There's no way round it, you see. I have to be conscious of Picasso the whole time.'

It was October 1973 in Paris, and we had arranged to meet at the rough-and-ready café-bougnat in the street where I lived in the Marais, an area which intrigued Bacon by its mix of grand buildings and low life. By way of welcoming the artist back in the wake of his fateful retrospective at the Grand Palais,¹ I had set up a lunch there with several of his closest friends in the city, having prevailed on Bébert and Marie-Hélène, the couple who ran the place, to prepare a special menu from the fresh produce delivered from their village in the Auvergne.

Although Picasso's name did not come up again in the conversation, it was very much in the air since the artist had died a few months earlier and major exhibitions of his work were being scrambled together. It dawned on me that, apart from myself, all our guests had been closely associated with the late Spaniard. Michel Leiris, former Surrealist, prominent memoirist and ethnographer, had known him and written about him since the 1920s, while his wife Zette had run the influential gallery founded by her stepfather Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, which represented Picasso throughout the Occupation (while Kahnweiler himself was in hiding). Aldo Crommelynck, the renowned printmaker, had worked almost exclusively for the prolific Picasso, and the major Parisian art dealers Claude Bernard and Nadine Haïm were professionally involved with his art as a matter of course.

Even though Bacon and Picasso never met,² a glance around the table indicated how intensely intertwined their lives had grown. Not only had the two famous artists shared dealers and a certain Parisian milieu, but a more meaningful, intellectual kinship had evolved between them, most noticeably through their friendship with Leiris, a mainstay of dissident Surrealism who acted as interlocutor and confidant to both (figs. 1–3). Although the lunch had not been planned with anything so profound in mind, links between Bacon and Picasso that had never occurred to me before began to coalesce, suggesting parallels between the cultural spheres – the ancient world, the Old Masters and poetry – which both artists inhabited. Remembering a remark from Picasso about artists never coming out of nothing, I glimpsed a line of succession leading all the way from Altamira and Egypt to our ebullient guest of honour who had just raised his glass to toast us all.



1 | Francis Bacon and Michel Leiris in Paris, 1975, photo: Michael Peppiatt

Bacon was generally reluctant to admit to specific artistic influences, but he never made a secret of his enormous debt to the Picasso paintings he most admired. During our long friendship, he referred regularly to both the man and his art, often in the same breath, as the other major influences on his work, from antiquity to Michelangelo, Velázquez and Degas. As with all other artists' work, however, he was notably selective. If he prized Michelangelo's drawings or Degas's pastels above their other achievements, he was also primarily fascinated by Picasso's beach scenes of the late 1920s and early 1930s. As time passed, Bacon became outspokenly critical of Picasso's late work, and when, not long after our lunch, we visited an exhibition of that period, he claimed that the Spaniard should not have 'let out' many of the pictures on show. The English painter would indeed vie with the older artist throughout his career, eventually striving to surpass him and become to the second half of the century what Picasso had been to the first.

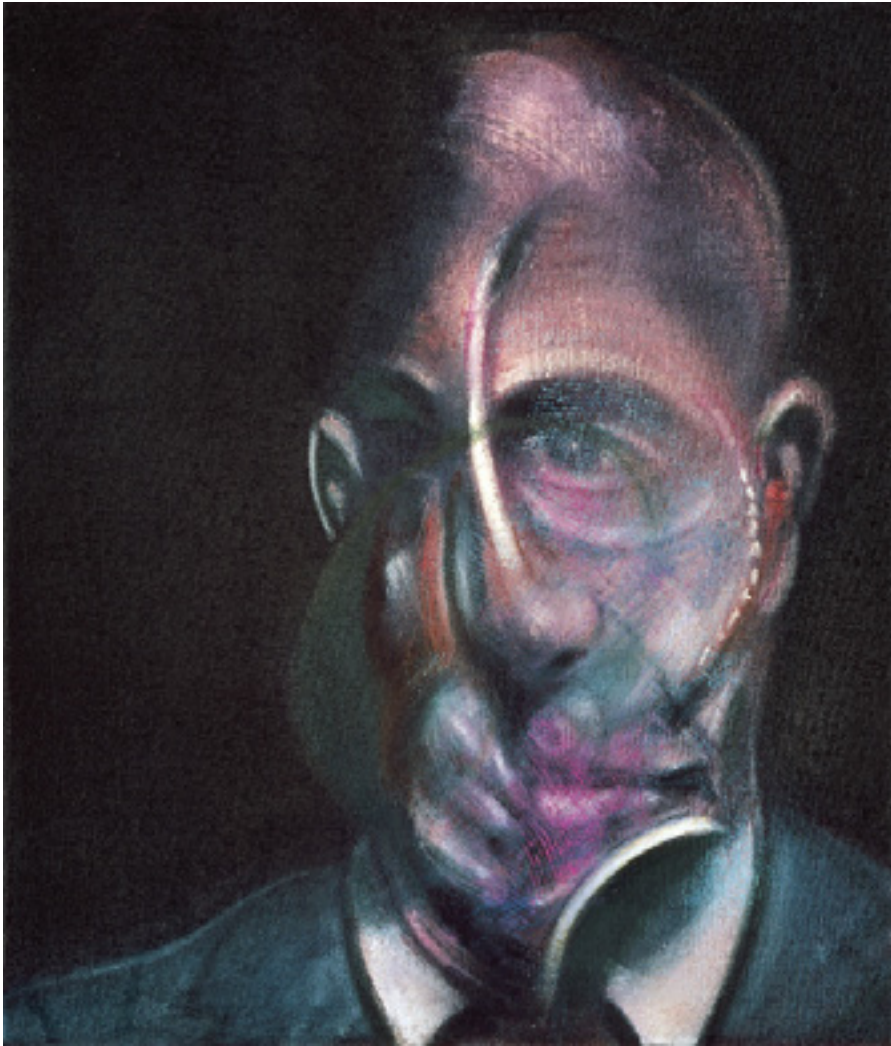
It was Bacon himself who claimed that coming across an exhibition of Picasso's drawings at the Galerie Paul Rosenberg in Paris in 1927 inspired him – although he was only seventeen and still fresh from rural Ireland – to try his hand at painting. The drawings in this particular exhibition were relatively naturalistic, exemplifying Picasso's neoclassical style, and even if they sowed seeds in his imagination, the young Bacon would actually focus for several years thereafter on furniture design and interior decoration, an activity he



2 | Pablo Picasso, *Michel Leiris*, 1963,
pencil and oil pastel on paper,
37.2 x 27 cm, Musée national d'art
moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

later disowned. Nevertheless, he followed the Spaniard's dramatic stylistic development closely in exhibitions in Paris and London and in avant-garde journals such as *Cahiers d'Art*.

The surrealistic biomorphic figures Picasso painted while staying in Dinard during the summers of 1928 and 1929 (and renting a beach hut for trysts with his new lover, Marie-Thérèse Walter) struck Bacon as strangely compelling creatures (cats. 1–3, 8). They appear transformed into a parallel race, with elongated limbs and tiny faces. Some jump around, playing with a ball or reassembled across stretches of yellow beach against expanses of bright blue sea and sky. Others, in a series of pen-and-ink drawings, are reduced to a jumble of precariously arranged bones. Despite their non-human weirdness, they are almost cartoon-like and oddly vulnerable. Bacon said years later that these pictures come closer than any other modern artwork to evoking what 'it really feels like to be human'. 'They were', he commented elsewhere, much 'more human and more poignant' than the tragic figures in *Guernica* (1937), which struck him as overly 'illustrative' (cat. 10). Bacon later explained to me that 'Certain works of Picasso', most notably the beach scenes at Dinard, 'have not only unlocked images for me, but also ways of thinking, and even ways of behaving. It doesn't happen often, but I have experienced it. They released something in me and made way for something else.'³



3 | Francis Bacon, *Michel Leiris*, 1976, oil on canvas, 34 x 29 cm, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

What Picasso boldly stated with these works was that it remained possible to create startlingly new images of humanity which resonated with the modern condition. As such, they clarified for Bacon the purpose of his own art, by 'opening up all sorts of possibilities ... of organic forms made about the human and animal world'. Thus Picasso became an ever-present mentor for him – his greatest, most vital father figure. For the first fifteen years of Bacon's development as a painter, Picasso was a dominant, even overbearing, influence. What little has survived of Bacon's work from this early period is heavily indebted to the older master. In the early 1930s, Bacon – and his close Australian artist friend Roy de Maistre – often used a stuffed doll as their model, its long neck, bulbous body and egg-like head clearly recalling Picasso's biomorphic figures. Meanwhile the more ascetic, skeletal construction of the creature in his austere, monochromatic *Crucifixion* (1933; cat. 6) directly relates to Picasso's bone figures of 1932 (fig. 4).

The kinship between Bacon and Picasso was publicly recognised from this early period. In 1933, Bacon's work was twice displayed with Picasso's at London's Mayor Gallery, and his *Crucifixion* was reproduced alongside Picasso's *Bather with Raised Arms* (1929) in the art historian Herbert Read's influential book *Art Now* (fig. 5; cat. 6). Reviewing these shows, the critics also remarked on the affinity between the new painter's style and themes



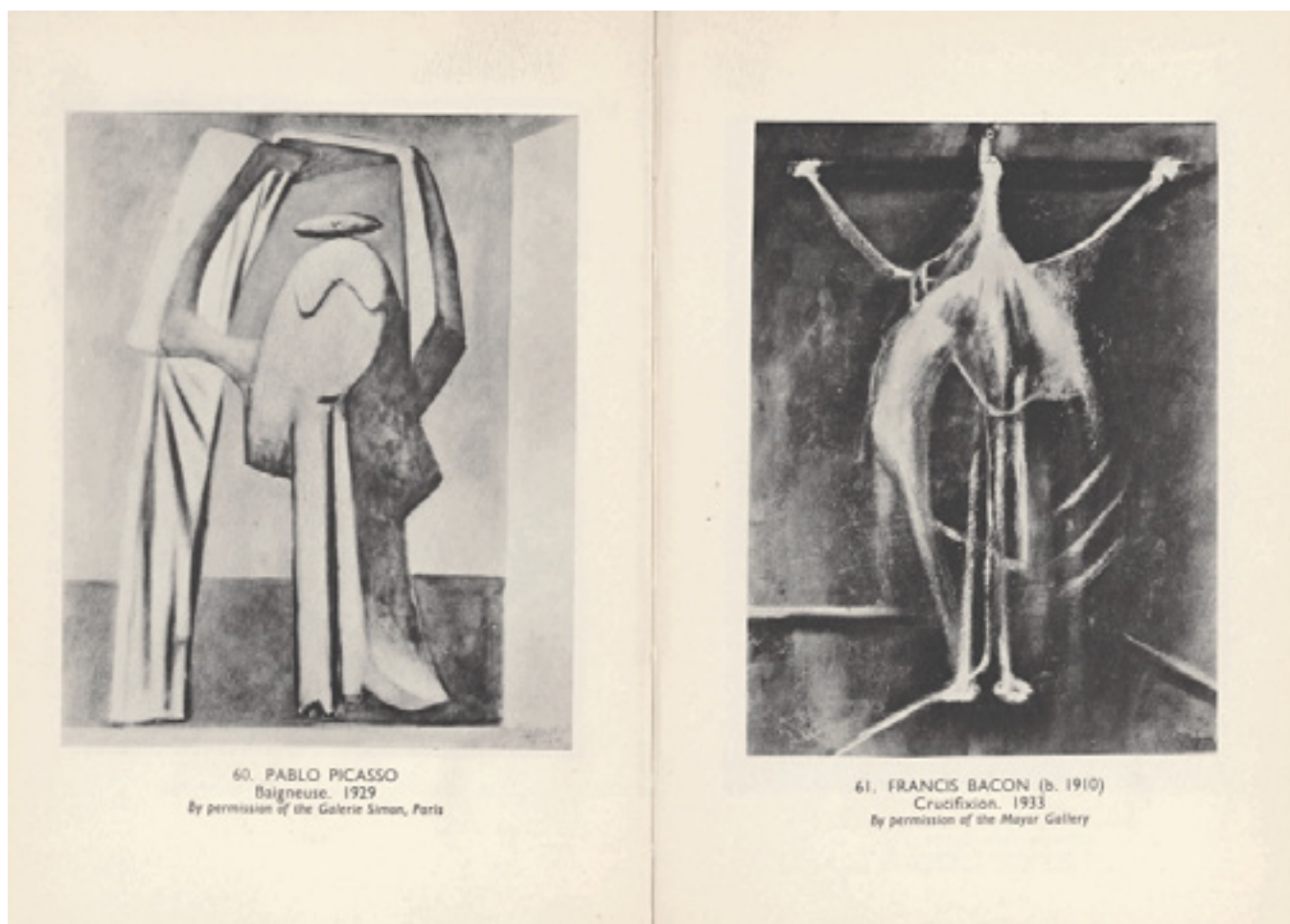
4 | Pablo Picasso, *The Crucifixion*, 1932, India ink on paper, 34.5 x 51 cm, Musée national Picasso, Paris

and the recent work of the far more famous Picasso, mostly by way of dismissing, even ridiculing, the younger man's efforts.

It would be a full decade before Bacon began to establish himself in his own right on the international art scene. Even his breakthrough triptych, the 1944 *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, is dominated by snarling adaptations of Picasso's disquieting biomorphs. Subsequently, both his subjects and his style would mature, take on their own recognisable identity and shift away from Picasso's influence. Bacon's brushwork would become more impastoed and unruly, his forms less linear, and he would begin to be internationally acknowledged for his explosive, even nightmarish, contribution to modern art.

Yet well into old age, Bacon would continue to mention Picasso's name – quite unprompted – to deliver a telling remark or to express his admiration for those haunting Dinard bathers. He also returned to Picasso's motif of the key turning in a bathing hut door in his *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1967; cat. 4) and, several years after the Spaniard's death, in *Painting* (1978).

There are dozens of moments across Bacon's later output that call back to Picasso's earlier influence. Look at the left-hand face in his 1976 *Three Studies for a Portrait* (fig. 6), for instance, where the sweeping nose (or possibly lock of hair, bisecting the portrait with a

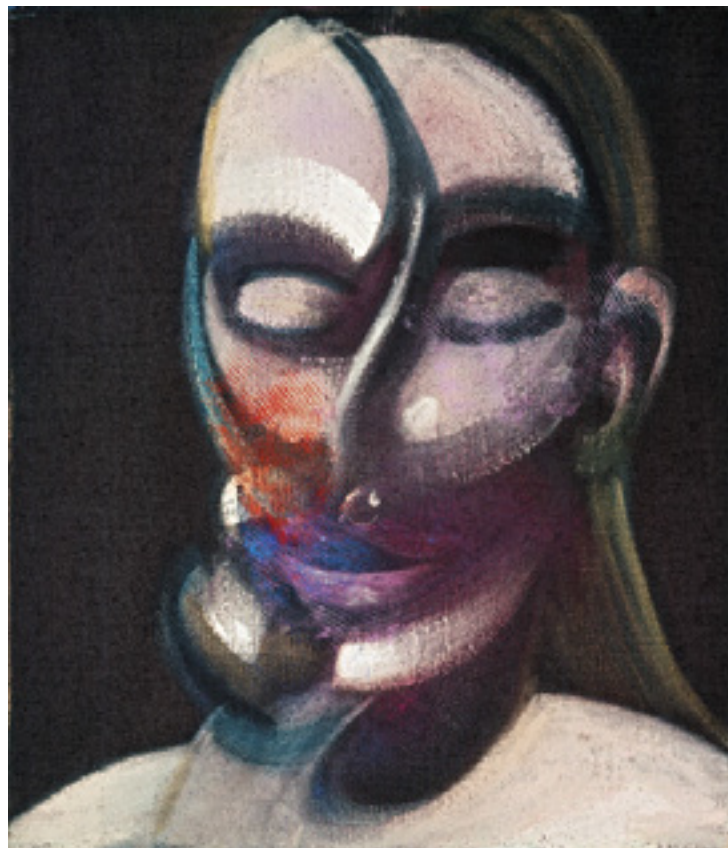


5 | Herbert Read, *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1933), figs. 60–1

line of white and black) echoes the more graphic and equally striking nose of the bottom-right figure in Picasso's famous *Les Femmes d'Alger* (fig. 7). These studies are as mask-like as any pictures in Bacon's oeuvre, perhaps even suggesting an admiration for the African sculpture that so inspired Picasso. (A testament to Bacon's appetite for visual sources, this particular triptych also references a still from Alain Resnais's 1959 film *Hiroshima, mon amour*, in which a lock of hair falls down over actress Emmanuelle Riva's face.) Similarly, Bacon continued to discuss Picasso in his correspondence with Michel Leiris, referring in 1978 to Picasso's ambivalent relation to Surrealism, and in 1981 ending a letter to him with 'All my love to you and Zette – I often think of the beautiful exhibition of Picasso's drawings'.⁴ Perhaps he was referring to the exhibition he had seen in 1927 that inspired him to start out on his lifelong artistic journey.

The Albertina exhibition begins quite naturally with this tale of an all-powerful sorcerer influencing a younger apprentice, but it also attempts to move beyond already familiar narratives. Rather than simply viewing the artistic relationship between Picasso and Bacon as a one-way influence, the exhibition looks for the multiple *resonances* in their work. It seeks to understand how they each reinvented the vocabulary of figuration for their respective periods and transformed the way we now visualise and react to the human body.

6 | Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for a Portrait*, 1976, oil on canvas, three panels, 35.6 × 30.5 cm (each), Private collection



Understandably, exhibitions and writings about the relationship between the two artists have tended to focus on Picasso's influence on Bacon. But this emphasis is of limited and primarily historical interest: it is also reductive, limiting the discussion of the ways in which the two artists' work interact. Just as Bacon's pictures gain immeasurably when viewed through the lens of Picasso's most inventive and suggestive forms, so Picasso's work takes on a deeper resonance once it is confronted with Bacon's almost deliquescent, post-war imagery. Their highly complex visions, drawing on countless different sources, clash and coalesce, draw apart and merge again. They were both above all *receptive* artists, absorbing influences sponge-like from every source, high and low, and assimilating an extraordinary archive of allusions and unexpected strands of consciousness that permeated the times through which they lived.

Moreover, as Bacon forged his own unique style, he came to be compared with Picasso as an equal, even a successor. In 1967, the English painter's revelatory exhibition at the Galerie Maeght coincided with several events honouring Picasso's long career, also in Paris, and critics agreed (in a survey conducted by *Connaissance des Arts*) that Bacon was the more vital of the two. There was a sense among the Parisian intelligentsia that the younger man had surpassed his master – that his work was more meaningful in a post-war world that needed new images with which to confront the pain and horror that humankind had brought on itself.

Bacon himself, famously sharp-tongued, was openly critical of what he considered Picasso's weaker works; as mentioned earlier, he even declared Picasso's 1937 anti-war



masterpiece, *Guernica*, too 'illustrative'. If he was Picasso's artistic offspring and heir, then he was also petulant and rebellious – a conflicted, ambitious son, bent on outstripping his ageing father in inventiveness and relevance.

It might be more accurate, then, to say that both artists developed a visual language which related to their respective cultural and social climates – a sentiment voiced back in 1948 by Bacon's friend and later rival Graham Sutherland when he wrote that only Bacon's work contains 'the germ of recovery & the possibility of a post-Picasso development'.⁵ This is the contextual foundation on which this exhibition has based its approach, with the aim of representing both artists at their most emotionally powerful and historically significant.

Despite being nearly thirty years his senior and often uninterested in keeping up with the currents of contemporary art, Picasso was very much aware of Bacon's progress. Most notably, he wrote to their mutual friend, the artist and writer Roland Penrose, in June 1962 to say that he had looked at Bacon's Tate retrospective catalogue (1962) and had 'liked it – some of it very much – please tell B. liked ideas and technique – sometimes very good'.⁶ Despite this touching attempt to communicate his admiration, there is no suggestion that Picasso was ever stylistically or otherwise affected by Bacon. By the 1960s, he was looking further back, having made interpretations of Velázquez and Manet, as well as dozens of musketeers and nudes, rather than negotiating the threatening phenomena of post-war art.

Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon remain, very arguably, the two most significant figures in the history of modern figurative painting. They are artists who took the twentieth century apart in order to reassemble and capture it with unprecedented intensity. 'The age de-