

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

**TITLE:** *Study for Portrait, Number IV (After the Life Mask of William Blake)*

**MUSEUM No.:** 1199.1979

**ARTIST:** Francis Bacon (1909-1992)

**DATE:** 1956 (begun 1955?)

**MEDIUM:** Oil on canvas (estimated from historical records; possible addition of alkyd paint or pastel)

**DIMENSIONS:** 24 1/8" x 20"

**SIGNATURE:** unsigned

**EXAMINED BY:** Laura Richter Le, Graduate Conservation Intern

**DATE OF EXAMINATION:** September 14, 2023

## FRAME AND GLAZING

---

The frame is wooden with a white ground layer, red bole, and a gilded surface. It appears lightly, artificially aged with abrasion and cracks that expose the red bole layer below. In an interview in 1963, Bacon expressed his preference for placing his paintings behind glass and in traditional gilt frames.<sup>1</sup>

There are minor losses to the frame edges, exposing the white ground layer. On the top, proper left edge of the frame, there is a ~2cm square loss that has been inpainted in a past treatment.

The painting is glazed with a reflective plexi. In 1996 and 2004, MoMA curators discussed replacing the glazing with a non-reflective glass, but determined that since Bacon preferred glass on his paintings, the reflective surface should remain in place.<sup>2</sup> However, when interviewed by David Sylvester in the 1970s, Francis Bacon said that although he wanted glass on his works to unify the surface (especially since he never added a varnish), he viewed reflections as an unwanted side effect. He stated, "to want the person reflected in the glass of a dark painting is illogical and has no meaning. I think it's just one of those misfortunes. I hope they'll make glass soon which doesn't reflect."<sup>3</sup> That being the case, the possibility of a nonreflective plexi could be revisited.

## PROVENANCE

---

Hanover Gallery, London

James Thrall Soby, private collection, aquired 1956

Museum of Modern Art, James Thrall Soby Bequest, acquired 1979

## EXHIBITION HISTORY

---

"The James Thrall Soby Collection,"

M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 01 February 1961 - 25 February 1961

"Works of Art Lent by the Alumni of Williams College,"

Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, May-June 1962

"Francis Bacon"

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 18 October 1963 - 12 January 1964

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 24 January 1964 - 23 February 1964

"Cuatro maestros contemporáneos del arte figurativo: Dubuffet, Giacometti, De Kooning, Bacon"

Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, April - May 1973

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with David Sylvester, 23 March, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> See Cora Rosevear's correspondence in the Paintings and Sculpture archives, Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvester, 3<sup>rd</sup> Interview, 1973.

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

Museo de Arte Moderno, Bogota, 30 May 1973 - 28 June 1973

Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, 19 July 1973 - 24 August 1973

Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São Paulo, 13 September 1973 - 07 October 1973

Museo de Arte Moderno, Rio de Janeiro, 15 October 1973 - 04 November 1973

Second Williams Alumni Loan Exhibition

Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, 31 March 1976 – 24 April 1976

Williams College Museum of Art, 8 May 1976 – 13 June 1976

“Artist's Choice: Herzog & de Meuron, Perception Restrained”

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 21 June 2006 – 25 September 2006

“Francis Bacon and Henry Moore: Terror and Beauty”

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 05 April 2014 - 20 July 2014

## ART HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

---

In 1955-1956, Francis Bacon painted a series of five works depicting the life mask of William Blake. Ronald Alley assessed the paintings when one was originally loaned to the Tate in 1957-9. According to Alley, the idea “was suggested to Bacon by a young composer, Gerard Schurmann, who had set some of Blake’s poems to music and who asked him to design a cover for his song cycle. He took Bacon to the National Portrait Gallery to see the plaster cast made after J.S. Deville’s famous life mask of William Blake of 1823.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Alley, Bacon visited the Gallery multiple times to see the mask, and purchased several photographs showing the face from the left side against a dark background, which Bacon presumably used a model for his paintings. Additionally, a photograph (n.d.) shows that Bacon had a plaster cast of the mask in his living room, but it is unknown at what point during painting the series he took the cast.<sup>5</sup> Bacon painted the first three paintings in the series from the Imperial Hotel at Henley-on-Thames in January, 1955. The painting in MoMA’s collection, the fourth of the series, is thought to have been painted a few weeks after. According to MoMA’s archives, the painting was completed over the summer of 1956 (source unknown) and has been dated accordingly.<sup>6</sup> A fifth painting was made the following year, and two others were destroyed by the artist.<sup>7</sup>

Bacon exhibited several of the paintings of the series until the title “Study for Portrait,” but the inspiration for his work was immediately recognized by critics and “After the Life Mask of William Blake” has regularly been included in their titles since then.<sup>8</sup>

## DESCRIPTION

---

The painting was executed on a single piece of plain weave canvas that is relatively tightly woven, at around 36 warp and 44 weft per inch. It has a rough surface, with knots and loose yarns visible through thinly painted passages.

The canvas has been stained all over with a thin black, matte paint, estimated to be oil-based. Artist interviews and technical studies reveal that Bacon frequently began with an oil paint significantly thinned with turpentine as a base wash over raw canvas.

The paint over the forehead and nose of the face has thick impasto. This paint is relatively glossy.

---

<sup>4</sup> Alley, 1964, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Domino, 1996, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> See Paintings and Sculpture Archives, Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>7</sup> Alley, 1964, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Clutton-Brock, 1955, p. 30.

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

The eyes are painted with thin, gestural strokes of ultramarine. The lower half of the face and the neck were formed by dragging paint down vertically.

At the final stage, another layer of black paint was applied to portions of the background. This layer is glossy, generally applied in vertical streaks with a #1 in brush, leaving patches of the matte black layer below visible. Finally, there are four matte, relatively thick strokes of black paint adjacent to the thin pink lines on either side of the figure. These appear to be added to revise the shape of the thin shoulder lines on either side of the figure.

FTIR analysis revealed that the paint was oil based with bone black, alizarin crimson, and likely Prussian blue within the black background. There also was zinc stearate, potentially added to the paint formulation as a drier.<sup>9</sup>

There does not appear to be a varnish. In his 1963 interview, Bacon expressed his desire to preserve the contrast between the matte lower layers and glossy upper layers of paint, which prevented him from using a varnish.<sup>10</sup>

## CONDITION

---

Overall, the canvas and paint are in good, stable condition.

The black background has extensive streaks of efflorescence. These appear to center around exposed layers of the thin base layer of black paint. Under magnification, this layer is a relatively continuous crust (see microscope image), and it was not disturbed when lightly brushed with a thick flat brush. FTIR identified that white layer as a metal soap, likely lead stearate. No lead was found in the sample of black paint. Instead, a sample from the verso of the priming layer contained lead carbonate, or lead white, held in an oil binder.<sup>11</sup> As a result, it is estimated that this is the source of the lead ions migrating to the surface and joining with free fatty acids in the paint layer. The thick impasto of the face and high gloss areas of the black background are presumed to be limiting migration of the metal soaps, as opposed to the thin matte areas where they have appeared. Additionally, since Bacon often thinned this lowest layer with oil or turpentine (see description), there is likely an excess of free fatty acids within this layer.

There are small scattered points of lead soap protrusions (around a dozen total) across the black background. There are minor losses and points of abrasion along the edge of the painting where the wooden insert of the frame covered the surface.

The black paint is soluble in benzene. It is sensitive to water at a high pH, but generally stable below pH 6. The crimson pigment within the black color is more easily disturbed by water.

## TREATMENT

---

- 1) Cleaned the verso with cosmetic sponges and the recto with a nylon brush, using air to clean dust caught in the thick impasto passages of the face.
- 2) Diminished the white efflorescence with a solution of pH 5.5 adjusted water and EDTA, using a brush to apply the chelating mixture, dotting with Evalon, clearing with pH 5.5 adjusted water, and using a blow dryer to limit the paint's exposure to moisture. The white layer was almost completely removed, although faint white material was still visible in the interstices of the canvas. To avoid putting more stress on the paint layer, the cleaning stopped at this stage.
- 3) Inpainted losses to the frame where the white ground layer was visible.

---

<sup>9</sup> Analysis by Kyna Biggs, October 6, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with David Sylvester, 23 March, 1963.

<sup>11</sup> Analysis by Kyna Biggs, October 6, 2023.

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Alley, Ronald., and John Rothenstein. *Francis Bacon*. New York: Viking Press, 1964.

Clutton-Brock, Alan. "Round the London Galleries." *Listener*, vol.54, no.1375, 7 July 1955, p.30

Domino, Christophe. *Francis Bacon: "Taking Reality by Surprise."* Paris 1996, trans. Ruth Sherman, London 1997, p.78.

*Encounter*, No. 43, April 1957, on cover.

Russell, Joanna E., Brian W. Singer, Justin J. Perry, and Anne Bacon. "The Materials and Techniques Used in the Paintings of Francis Bacon (1909-1992)." *Studies in Conservation* 57, no. 4., 2012, 207–17.

Russell, Joanna. *A study of the materials and techniques of Francis Bacon (1909 - 1992)*. Doctoral thesis, Northumbria University, 2010.

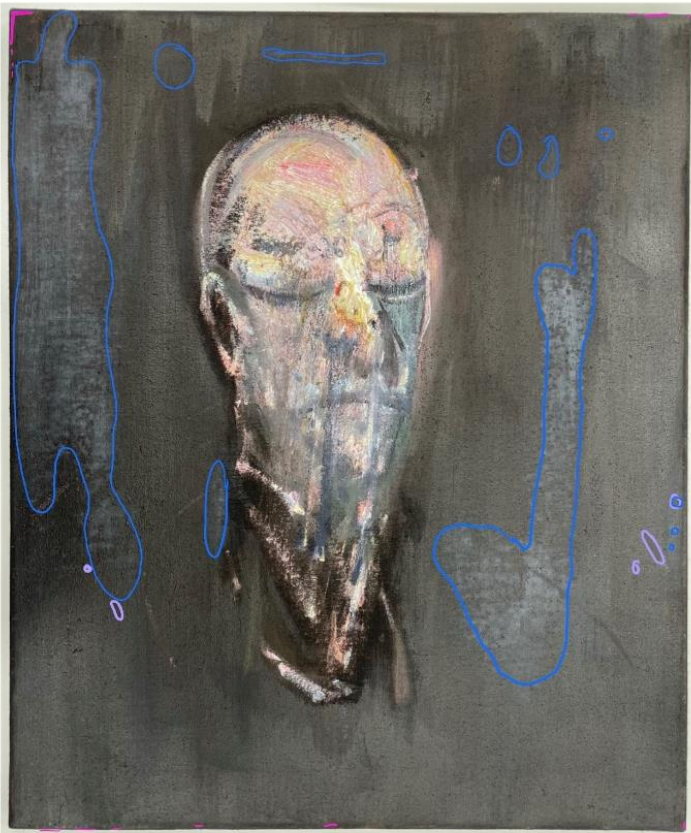
Reproduction, Soby Collection, p. 2

Sylvester, David and Francis Bacon. *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 3rd enl. ed. New York N.Y: Thames and Hudson, 1988.

## IMAGES

---

### Condition Map:



■ EFFLORESCENCE - LEAD SOAPS

■ ABRASION FROM FRAME

■ MATTE PAINT SPOTS

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

## Before Treatment

Normal light:



White efflorescence under 10x magnification:

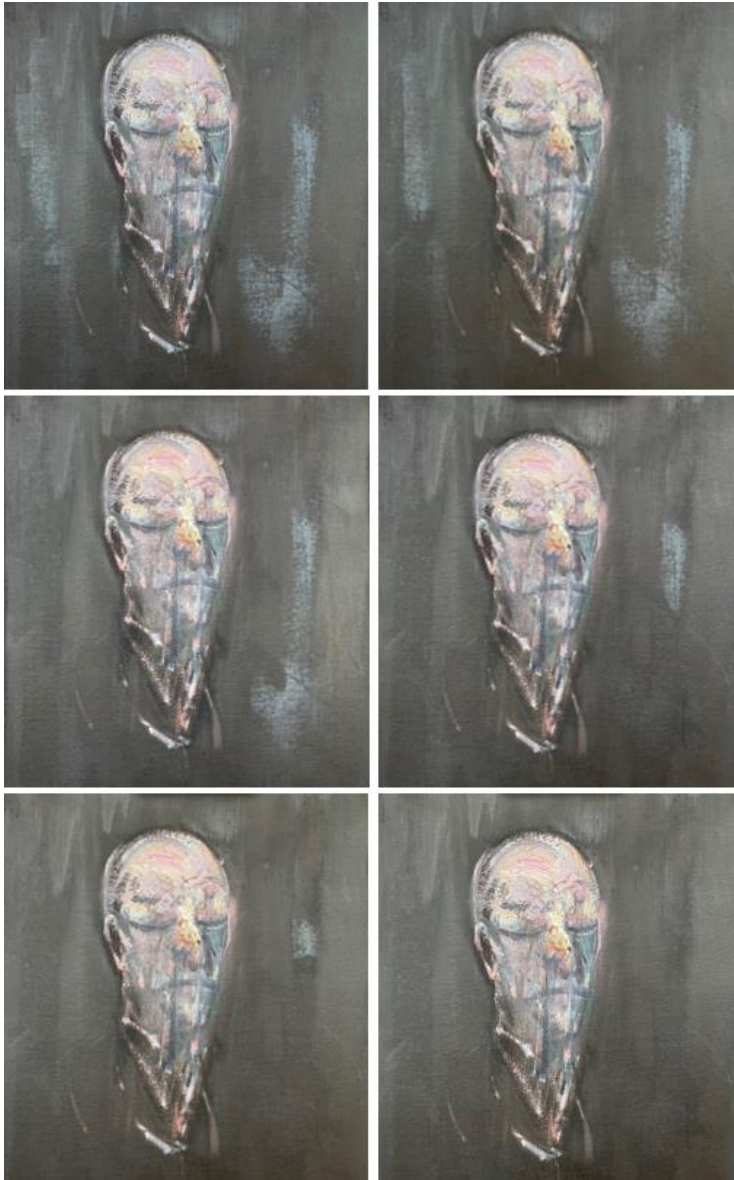


# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

## During Treatment

Overall:



Top left:



# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

Center left:



**After Treatment**

Normal light:



# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

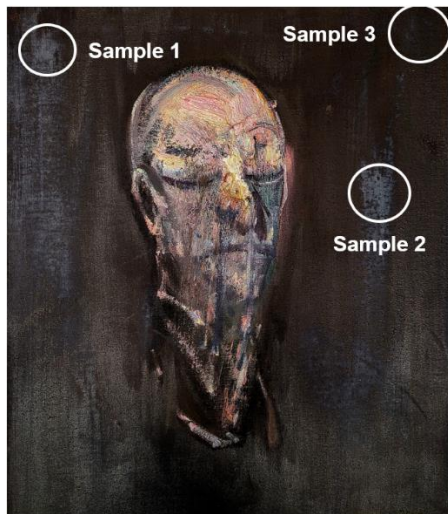
Specular light:



## SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS

---

\*The complete report and analysis by Kyna Biggs is available on the O Drive.



### Samples

Sample 1 – Efflorescence sample from top left side of the painting

Sample 2 – Efflorescence sample from right side of the painting

Sample 3 – Black paint from the tacking edge of the painting

Sample 4 – White ground from the bottom right verso of the painting

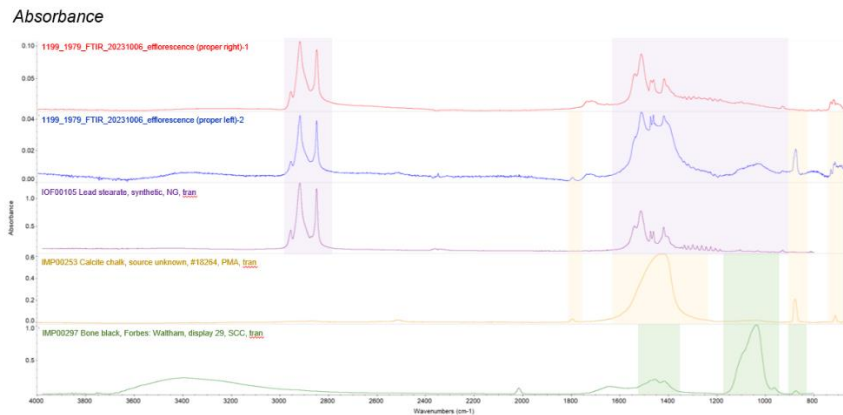
# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

Sample 1

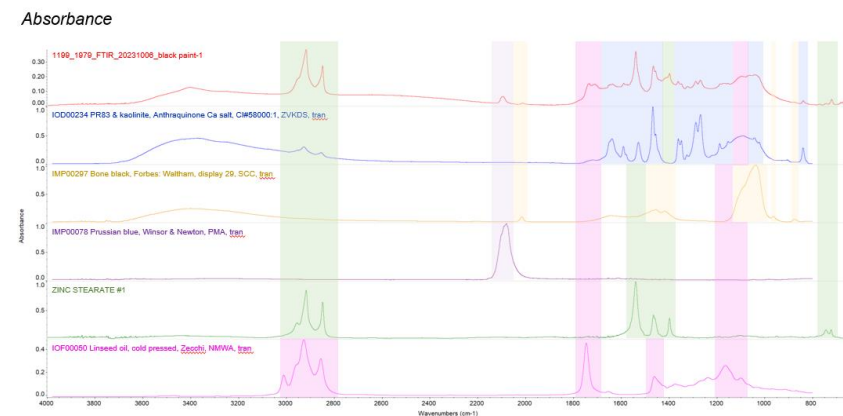


Sample 2



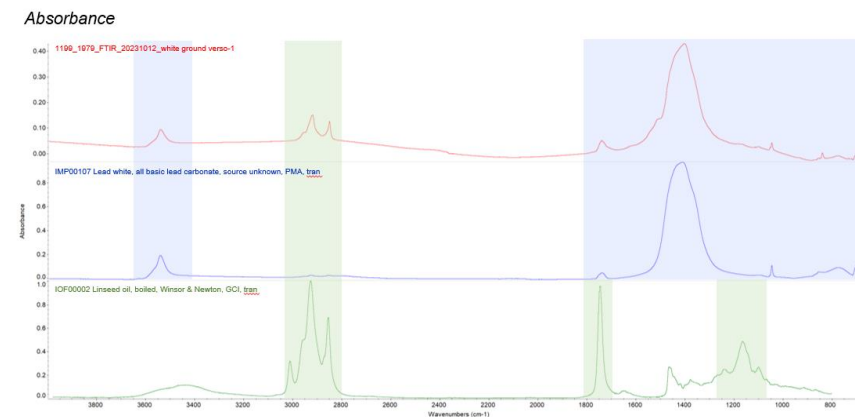
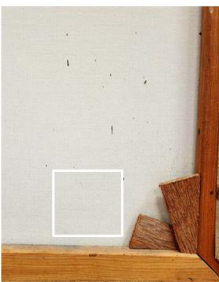
Samples 1 and 2: The efflorescence (from both the left and right side of the painting) was identified to be a metal soap, likely a lead stearate. Additionally, there were inclusions of calcite and bone black, likely from the paint layer below.

Sample 3



Sample 3: The black paint was identified to be composed of oil medium with bone black, alizarin crimson, and likely Prussian blue pigments. Zinc stearate also appears in the paint, likely as a drier in the paint formulation.

Sample 4



# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The David Booth Department of Conservation

Sample 4: The white ground on the pre-primed verso was identified as basic lead carbonate, or lead white, in what appears to be an oil binder. This is likely the source of lead ions feeding the lead soap formation on the painting recto, since no lead was found in the black paint layer.