

Off the Wall

When famous artworks are stolen, there may be an initial flurry of press reports but a blanket of official silence quickly descends, as the police undertake their enquiries and, more often than not, owners await a ransom demand. Typically, it may be several months or even several years before those holding a stolen artwork make any attempt to contact its owners.

On 27 May 1988 a very small painting on copper by Lucian Freud – one of the finest of his early period – was stolen in broad daylight from an exhibition of the German-born British artist held in Berlin. Visitors and the museum guard patrolling the exhibition area saw nothing unusual; and there was no clue as to who took the work from the gallery wall. A month later a man contacted the artist, offering to act as an intermediary, but he did not get back in touch. Nothing of substance has been heard since about the likely whereabouts of the painting.

Lucian Freud met Francis Bacon in London in 1945, and the two artists quickly became friends. Born in 1909, Bacon was thirteen years older and Freud admired Bacon's freedom and daring in his handling of paint. Freud later recalled:

He talked a great deal about the paint itself carrying the form, and imbuing the paint with this sort of life. He talked about packing a lot of things into one single brushstroke, which amused and excited me and I realised it was a million miles away from anything I could ever do.

In the later 1940s and early 1950s Freud painted in a meticulous realist style that owed much to northern Renaissance art and, in particular, to the smooth surfaces and detached manner of the French nineteenth-century master Ingres. Freud's friendship with Bacon, however, helped crystallise his growing discontent with this way of working, leading to his adopting a much freer handling of paint and producing larger scale works in the late 1950s.

Freud painted his friend Bacon only twice. The stolen portrait of 1952 took some three months to complete. In this period Freud worked seated with his canvas – or on this occasion, copper plate – on his knees rather than on an easel; he worked so closely to Bacon, who was also sitting, that their knees touched. The intensity of Freud's gaze – and, with his downcast eyes, Bacon's calm resistance to it – made the portrait one of the most famous, and memorable, of his early career.

In 1988, before the painting was stolen, art historian Robert Hughes recalled:

Lucian Freud 1922–2011

Francis Bacon 1952

Oil on copper

17.8 x 12.8 cm

A small picture, about the size of a shorthand notepad, and one whose extreme compression makes it even more compact in memory; one remembers it as a miniature. The thought of 'miniature', with its Gothic overtones, was affirmed by the surface: tight, exact, meticulous and (most eccentrically, when seen in the late fifties, a time of urgent gestures on burlap) painted on a sheet of copper. There seemed to be something Flemish about the even light, the pallor of the flesh, and the uniform cast of the artist's attention. But there, on the edge of familiarity, its likeness to the modes of older portraiture stopped. What a strange, ophidian modernity this small image had, and still retains! One did not need to know it was the head of a living artist to sense that Freud had caught a kind of visual truth, at once sharply focused and evasively inward, that rarely showed itself in painting before the twentieth century.

In 'normal' portraiture, a tacit agreement between painter and subject allows the sitter to mask himself and project this mask – of success, of dignity, of beauty, of role – upon the world. But here the face with its lowered, almond-shaped eyes and eyelids precisely contoured as a beetle's wing-cases is caught in a moment between reflection and self-projection. It is as naked as a hand ... Bacon's pear-shaped face has the silent intensity of a grenade in the millisecond before it goes off.

Freud tackled a second portrait of Bacon in 1956–7, using his now freer style of painting. But this work remained unfinished when Bacon temporarily left London. By contrast, Bacon painted Lucian Freud on a number of occasions down to the 1970s. The earliest known work was a large full figure study, which began as a portrait of the writer Kafka and which Bacon only minimally adapted. Unlike Freud, Bacon did not rely on sittings and instead worked largely from photographs. As was his style, he obscured and distorted his friend's features in the later portraits.

In 1987–8 the British Council organised a major exhibition of Freud's work, the first outside Britain. The retrospective toured to Washington, Paris, London and Berlin, and one of its acknowledged highlights was the small portrait of Francis Bacon that had been bought directly from Freud by Tate in 1952.

The painting was stolen from the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, on 27 May 1988. A visitor reported the work missing, and the gallery quickly called in the police who sealed the building before questioning and searching visitors. The thief must have used a tool to remove the screws of the mirror-plates securing the frame to the wall (the painting was not wrenched from its fittings). Some speculated that he or she might have had an accomplice to act as a lookout. However, the ease and speed with the work went missing was a source of both mystery and deep embarrassment to the Berlin museum, pointing to a hitherto unsuspected lapse in standards of guarding. A small reward was offered; ports and airports were notified; a couple of fruitless tip-offs were pursued. But the authorities were left in the dark about what had happened to the work. Paradoxically, a painting stolen opportunistically can prove harder to locate than one taken by a criminal gang to be used as collateral in underworld dealings.

The theft of the work left a gap in Tate's holdings of early Freud works. The museum declined to accept the insurance money for the stolen painting, hoping that it would eventually be returned – and because there were no equivalent pieces available with which to replace this exceptional work. The loss also weighed heavily with Freud himself. After the theft he refused to allow the painting to be reproduced in colour. This was partly because he was not pleased with the quality of the existing colour reproduction and partly 'as a kind of mourning'. Reproducing the work only in black and white was, for him, a 'rather jokey equivalent to a black arm band'. It has been reported that Robert Hughes suggested to Freud that he could view the theft as proof that someone loved his work, a compliment in other words. Freud demurred, saying, 'I don't think so. I think somebody out there really loves Francis.'

Freud's friendship with Bacon had waned and later soured as the two men aged, but he remained sorry not to be able to count on this portrait to tell the story of his development as an artist. In 2001, prior to another major retrospective, he designed a WANTED poster to attract the attention of people in Berlin who might know where the work was, offering a reward of up to 300,000 DM. He was hopeful in 2001 that a high profile campaign might lead to new information and the painting's recovery: under the German statute of limitations, a crime could not be prosecuted after twelve years, and the artist hoped that the lapse of time since the theft would allow a deal to be struck and the painting to be returned to the public realm. In a statement to the press Freud asked simply, 'Would the person who holds the painting kindly consider allowing me to show it in my exhibition next June?'

Despite this appeal, nothing was heard about the painting's whereabouts, and to date its location and fate remain as mysterious as when it was stolen in 1988.

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