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STATE OF THE ART | 13 December 2013

Are Auerbach and Bacon
Rembrandt's artistic heirs?

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Rembrandt, Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul (Corbis)

A new exhibition places Auerbach paintings alongside the Dutch master's. Alastair Sooke reveals how the 17th Century painter has influenced modern artists.

In the summer of 1962, the American photographer Irving Penn created a memorable black-and-white portrait of the British painter Francis Bacon. Taken in the artist's studio in a former coach house in South Kensington in London, it presents Bacon's plump and unshaven moon face seen in close-up from an unusually low angle. Stuck to the wall immediately behind Bacon's head is a paint-spattered reproduction of a self-portrait by the 17th Century Dutch master Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. Penn's image establishes a connection between the two artists that is plain for all to see. Rembrandt was a touchstone for Bacon, just as he was for many modern and contemporary artists, including the British painter Frank Auerbach, who in his youth moved in the same bohemian circles as Bacon.

On 12 December, Raw Truth, a new exhibition of six important 1960s oil paintings by Auerbach shown alongside four artworks by Rembrandt, opened in the Gallery of Honour in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It was organised in collaboration with London's Ordoovas gallery, which also staged an exhibition examining the links between Bacon and Rembrandt in 2011.

At first glance, Auerbach's pictures from the '60s – thick, craggy agglomerations of oil paint that verge on abstraction – appear radically different from anything produced by Rembrandt. As for Bacon, his artistic debt to Rembrandt is not as immediately obvious as it is to, say, Van Gogh or Velázquez, both of whom he quoted directly in his paintings – something he never did with Rembrandt. So what was it about their Dutch predecessor that fired the imaginations of both Bacon and Auerbach?



Frank Auerbach, Head of E.O.W. (Frank Auerbach, Courtesy Marlborough Fine Art)

For the art historian Taco Dibbits, director of collections at the Rijksmuseum, the answer lies in Rembrandt's ability to penetrate to the core of his subject, no matter who or what he was painting. "Over the centuries, Rembrandt has inspired artists in different ways," Dibbits tells me. "Something that has fascinated a lot of artists is the way he depicts different humours, different moods, different psychologies. There is such depth to his personalities: the essence of his genius is that rather than trying to make people more beautiful than they are, he depicts them as they really are. That makes his portraits immensely humane and approachable – unlike, say, classic Italian portraits, which are far more aloof and less direct. Rembrandt didn't try to please his subjects or the viewer. With Rembrandt, you are looking at real people."

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Unvarnished

This quality of Rembrandt's "raw truth" – to use a phrase coined by Auerbach – ensured the Dutchman's enduring influence. And there was nobody about whom Rembrandt was more honest than himself: over four decades from the late 1620s until the year of his death in 1669, he produced a remarkable series of around 60 unsparring self-portraits. A reproduction of one of these in which he wears a beret, painted circa 1659 and now in the collection of the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence, is visible in the background of Penn's photograph of Bacon, who, inspired by Rembrandt, executed more than 40 self-portraits of his own.

"Rembrandt was crucial to Bacon in terms of mark-making and the handling of paint," explains Pilar Ordovas of the Ordovas gallery in London. "But he also provided the motivation to make self-portraits. Painting a self-portrait is one of the hardest things to do for an artist – to detach from yourself and be credible and convincing when you are not painting a stranger but yourself. Also, technically it is much harder, because you are looking at yourself through a mirror, and you cannot go around and work as you would from another sitter."



Francis Bacon with self-portrait (Corbis Images)

Like Rembrandt's moving late self-portraits, such as Self-Portrait with Two Circles (c. 1665) in London's Kenwood House, in which the artist depicts himself buffeted by the experiences of his life, Bacon's self-portraits have a merciless, unsettling aspect. They are unafraid to stare head-on at the spectre of physical disintegration. According to the scholar Martin Harrison, who is editing a catalogue of his works, Bacon was fond of quoting a saying of the French poet and artist Jean Cocteau: "Each day in the mirror I watch death at work." This comes across in Bacon's self-portraits, in which his face often looks mangled or bruised, as though it is rotting before our eyes.

Although artists have always held Rembrandt in high esteem, his reputation as his country's greatest painter has not been so assured. During the 18th and 19th Centuries, connoisseurs preferred his pupil Gerrit Dou. "Rembrandt was criticised during his lifetime for not following the rules of painting that the Italians had set out," explains Dibbits. "People complained that he didn't go to Italy to learn the lessons of classical sculpture and painting."

Yet perhaps his irreverence towards the received way of doing things is partly what recommended him to artists such as Bacon and Auerbach in the first place. "I think about Rembrandt and Picasso, they are the two people that I have looked at most," says Auerbach, who was photographed in his studio by Lord Snowdon in the early 1960s in front of a wall decorated with reproductions of Rembrandt's art. While it is unsurprising to hear Auerbach cite Picasso as an influence, it is strange to think that a painter born in Leiden in 1606 could be a forefather of modern art. As Penn's portrait of Bacon reminds us, though, for artists during the 20th Century, Rembrandt felt more like a contemporary than an ancestor.

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