Are Auerbach and Bacon Rembrandt's artistic heirs?

By Alastair Sooke

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 1662 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. Set back to the wall immediately behind Bacon's head is a paint-splattered 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, "Raii 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 Croatian 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, chunky 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 (Francis Bacon, Courtesy Marlborough Fine Art)

For the art historian Taco Dibbets, director of collections at the Rijksmuseum, the answer lies in Rembrandt's ability to penetrate to the core of his subject, no matter what he was painting. "Over the centuries, Rembrandt has inspired artists in different ways," Dibbets tells me. "Something that has fascinated a lot of artists is the way he depicts different emotions, 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, classical likenesses, 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."

Francis Bacon with self-portrait (Corbis Images)

Like Rembrandt's moving late self-portraits, such as Self-Portrait with Two Circles (c. 1655) in London's National Portrait Gallery, in which the artist depicts himself buffeted by the experiences of his life, Bacon's self-portraits have a merciless, unsettling aspect. They are unreadable to some head-on at the spectacle 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 Dibbets. "People complained that he didn't go to Italy to learn the lessons of classical sculpture and painting."

Yet perhaps it is his reverence 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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