

New show examines artist Bacon's debt to Rembrandt

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 By [Mike Collett-White](#)

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(Reuters) - An exhibition at a new London gallery examines what its owner believes is a long overlooked subject -- 20th century painter Francis Bacon's debt to 17th century Dutch artist Rembrandt.

It was Rembrandt's Spanish contemporary Diego Velazquez who is most closely associated with Bacon in the minds of most art lovers, due to the Irish-born painter's famous series of interpretations of the 1650 portrait of Pope Innocent X.

While the relationship between Bacon and Rembrandt is less obvious, gallery owner Pilar Ordovas believes it was nonetheless crucial to the way the modern artist worked.

"There have not been any exhibitions, any publications, nothing dedicated to the importance of Rembrandt in Bacon's work," she told Reuters at her new Ordovas gallery in central London.

"I really felt that it had been overlooked," added the former Christie's executive who helped negotiate some of the biggest art sales in recent years before leaving for a two-year stint at the Gagosian gallery in London.

"He (Bacon) really looked at Rembrandt, and what he loved about late Rembrandt was the use and the application of paint, how incredibly loose it is and how almost abstracted, but at the same time full of meaning."

The exhibition, "Irrational Marks: Bacon, Rembrandt" opens on Friday at the new space in an exclusive area of the city.

It takes up two of the gallery's white-walled rooms and features several Bacon self-portraits, photographs, a video of Bacon in which he discusses Rembrandt, and, perhaps most impressively, the Dutch master's "Self-Portrait with Beret" from 1659.

The painting, on loan from the Musee Granet in Aix-en-Provence, [France](#), was the same work Bacon returned to several times to admire, and also appears in the background of a photograph of Bacon taken by [Irving Penn](#).

That photograph, given by the artist to his influential friend, manager and confidante Valerie Beston, was what gave Ordovas the idea for the exhibition in the first place.

"If you wanted to do anything Bacon-related -- write a book, do an exhibition or buy a painting -- you needed to speak to Ms. Beston," Ordovas explained.

"She was a really, really crucial part of his life and he left her one of perhaps his most important self-portraits."

Ordovas handled Beston's estate in 2006, and at the subsequent auction at Christie's a Bacon self-portrait went for 5.2 million pounds.

"Bacon ... made several trips to go and see this (Rembrandt) painting. He never admitted to having seen the Velazquez portrait ... he always said that he didn't want to be disappointed by it."

Although Bacon often worked from photographs, Ordovas added that she, like others, suspected he may have seen the original Pope Innocent work despite denying it.

"The influence of Rembrandt on Bacon's painting is not a literal reference," she explained.

"It's not like with Velazquez ... to which he dedicates the series. The main influence from Rembrandt's work is the way that he uses the paint, the looseness of the paint."

Ordovas said that despite her success in the auction world, she was ready to launch her own gallery and stage "museum-quality" exhibitions.

The Bacon show is non-commercial and runs until December 16. The gallery will also allow her to offer a private space for selling 20th century and contemporary art in the secondary market.

(Reporting by Mike Collett-White, editing by Paul Casciato)

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