

Caravaggio-Bacon

*At the Galleria Borghese, the unprecedented encounter between
Caravaggio and Bacon*

From 2 October 2009 to 24 January 2010, the Galleria Borghese celebrates Caravaggio, on the fourth centenary of his death, by exhibiting next to his masterpieces, twenty paintings by one of the great artists of the second half of the twentieth century, Francis Bacon, in celebration of the first centenary from his birth. These two extreme personalities entered the collective imagination as “cursed” artists, and with equal intensity and inventive genius expressed the torment of existence in their paintings.

Four hundred years later these troubled personalities meet for the first time at the Galleria Borghese, enhanced by thirty masterpieces by the two painters from the major museums of the world.

“Caravaggio - Bacon” is curated by Anna Coliva, Director of the Galleria Borghese, and by Michael Peppiatt, biographer, close friend and greatest connoisseur of Francis Bacon. It is organised by MondoMostre and made possible thanks to the support of BG Italia, ENEL and Vodafone.

The Galleria Borghese offers a juxtaposition of paintings by Caravaggio and Bacon, proposing that the viewer participate in the exceptional aesthetic experience it provides, rather than following the usual critical historical reconstruction.

Therefore, there is no theorising that Bacon may have relied on Caravaggio’s work, but merely visual suggestions, evoking spontaneous parallels that arise from formal combinations. Bacon has nothing of Caravaggio and was not inspired by him, but if there is an artist of our time who can be equated with Caravaggio, it is Bacon.

Caravaggio and Francis Bacon were some of the most revolutionary and profound interpreters of the representation of the human figure. In the diversity of their poetics and their eras, both penetrated the mystery of existence and art with disturbing originality, representing the spiritual truth in the most traumatic immediacy of the flesh.

The direct comparison between the works, however, is opposite to Bacon’s practice. He always refused to exhibit his works with those of the artists of the past, many of whom he loved with great relish. His eye for the great masters was one of astonishing genius, so advanced that it did not necessarily involve any direct influence on his painting. His innumerable figurative sources, including those of artistic origin, were always filtered by photographic mediation, through which an exorbitant quantity of images affected his perception, with the only logical order being the instinctive demands of the new work in progress.

But this exhibition must set aside the hypothetical reconstruction of the artists' intentions and their histories.

The real protagonist of the exhibition is the viewer in the setting of the Galleria Borghese. The museum is a space for contemplation, necessarily imposing its own conditions on the works of artists who had foreseen, in the case of Caravaggio, different original conditions, for example those of the altar or private collection. The works take on an independent existence in the museum setting.

So, following the vocation of the Galleria Borghese, it is Caravaggio who summons Bacon, because like him he manifests a profound approach to existence, surpassing the awareness and capacity to logically express the culture of his day.

The juxtaposition and the emotional parallels exalt the most direct and traumatic representation of the great themes of human existence, expressed in the veracity of the flesh. This allows the viewer to contemplate to what extent that which was most intimate, perturbing and aberrant must have been encountered by both painters' brushes in their profound investigation of the human soul.

Caravaggio's history is closely tied to that of the Galleria Borghese, a privileged place to celebrate the fourth centenary of his death. In fact, the two paintings he brought with him at the time of his death were destined for Scipione Borghese, and his most intense and historically richest relationship was with the Cardinal, as a consequence. The Galleria Borghese keeps the traces of this relationship alive through six masterpieces, the *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, *Young Sick Bacchus*, *Madonna and Child with St. Anne (dei Palafrenieri)*, *David with the Head of Goliath*, *St. Jerome Writing* and *St. John the Baptist*, which make it possible to illustrate the entire arc of his life.

The permanent collection of the Galleria Borghese will be enriched by seminal works of his such as *The Denial of St. Peter* from the Metropolitan in New York, the *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, the last Caravaggio from Palazzo Zevallòs Stigliano in Naples or the *Portrait of Fra Antonio Martelli, Knight of Malta* from Palazzo Pitti.

Canvases by Francis Bacon from the major museums of the world will be added to these, on special loan to the Galleria Borghese following the monographic exhibition organised by the Tate Modern, the Prado and the Metropolitan. In these works, the English artist wanted to investigate more intensely the mystery of the soul through the ideal representation of the body, a body that seems disturbed and deformed to us but above all, suffering.

Caravaggio's works will be combined with 17 of Francis Bacon's masterpieces: the great triptychs such as *Triptych August 1972* from the Tate Gallery in London and *Triptych inspired by the Orestia of Aeschylus* from the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo, his images of Pope Innocent X of Velazquez as *Head VI* from the Arts Council Collection in London, portraits such as *Study for a portrait of George Dyer*, *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne 1966* from the Tate Gallery or *Three studies of Lucian Freud*.

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