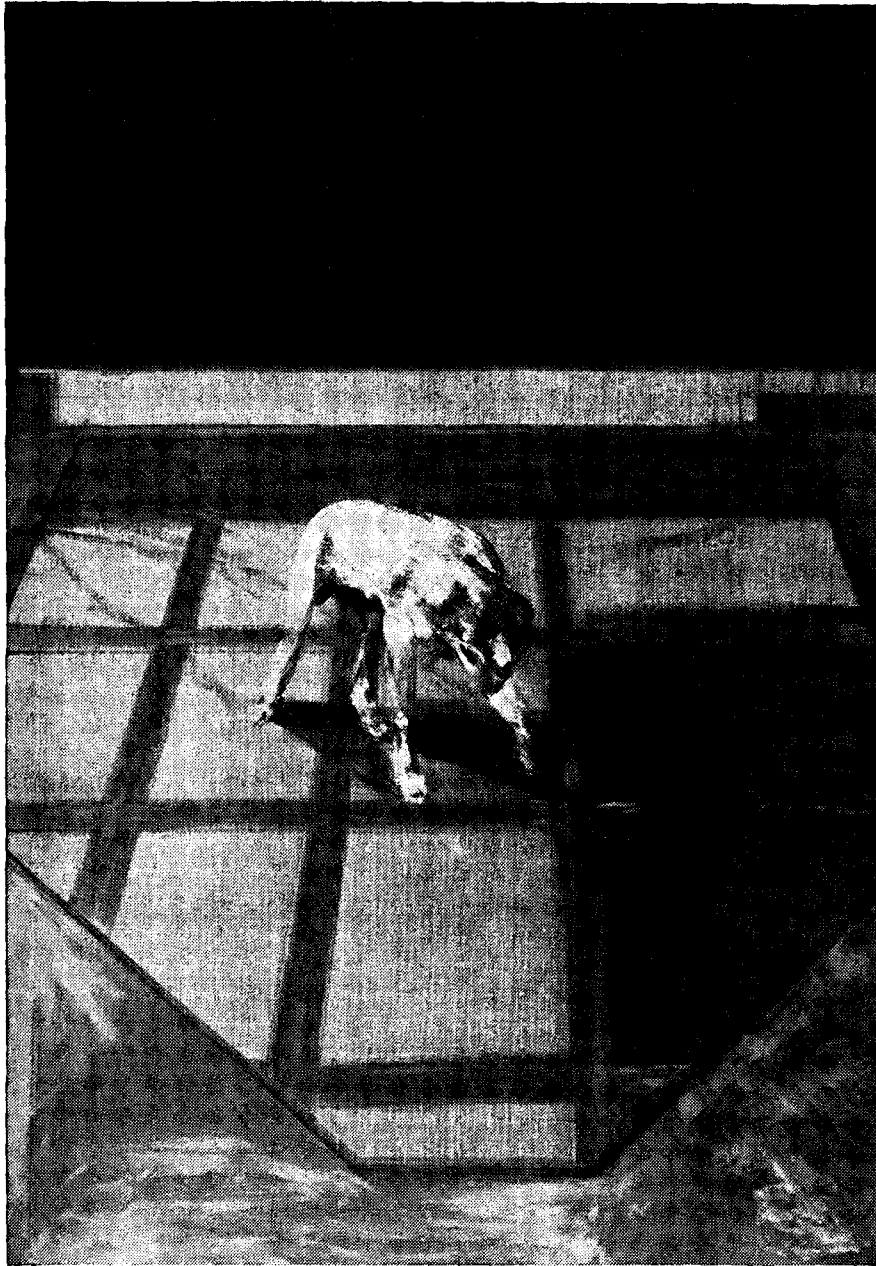




## Mr. Francis Bacon



—Collection The Museum of Modern Art.

"Dog," by Francis Bacon—"a sort of palsied motion."

**T**HE British critic Robin Ironside, in describing modern English painting, has referred to "that minor lyrical tradition . . . that has been kept flickering in England ever since the end of the eighteenth century, sometimes with a wild, always with an uneasy light, by a succession of gifted eccentrics." The words are appropriate to the art of Francis Bacon, currently on display at Durlacher Brothers in New York. We might,

however, eliminate the adjective "minor." To my mind Bacon, born in 1910 but active as an artist only since the mid-1940's, has emerged as one of the finest painters in postwar Europe—a brilliant technician and the creator of a compelling imagery.

I suppose Bacon should be described as an eccentric in that he destroys his paintings at an alarming rate. On the proceeds from those few he sells he departs for Monte Carlo

to try out a self-invented and presumably fallible system for breaking the bank. These seem minor aberrations compared to those of English painters like Wainwright the Poisoner and a host of others lost in desuetude and drink, and as a man Bacon is apparently mild in manner and appearance. As an artist he is motivated by an inner life of very great intensity. If an eccentric, he is so in the creative sense that Blake was one, and Samuel Palmer, and Turner. His pictures clutch at our consciousness with frightening tenacity, like the prints of Goya.

The name of Goya brings to mind Bacon's debt to another Spanish master. If his "Study of a Figure in a Room" owes something to the "Esto es peor" etching from Goya's "Disasters of War," the present show also includes part of a long series of pictures of a seated clerical figure inspired by Velasquez's "Portrait of Pope Innocent X" at the Doria Palace in Rome. These paintings all retain certain features of the Velasquez portrait, notably the Pope's hat and white collar and the carved ornaments at the top of his chair. But the variety of facial expression and general emotional content in Bacon's pictures is astonishing, ranging from murky indifference to open horror, with arm raised to stifle a scream. For sheer technical virtuosity these paintings are not unworthy of their Spanish prototype—remembering that Velasquez was a supreme master of the oil medium's sensuous capacities. Yet Bacon is the opposite of a precisionist in technique. He works on large canvases at lightning speed. Furthermore, according to Robert Melville, "Bacon never makes a drawing. He starts a picture with a loaded one-inch brush of the kind that ironmongers stock, and almost the entire work is painted with such brushes. In these broad brushstrokes, modernism has found its skin . . ." What a skin! The animal in the Museum of Modern Art's painting called "Dog" is so luxuriously handled that Velasquez's incandescent pigment comes to mind.

**B**ACON'S imagery is as remarkable as his technique. A valuable clue to its genesis is given by a photograph of a wall in the artist's studio, taken by the American critic Sam Hunter, and used as an illustration to his fine article on Bacon (*Magazine of Art*, January 1952). On the wall are pinned numerous reproductions and photographs, among them the Velasquez portrait of Innocent X, a photograph of the present Pope being carried aloft in the Papal chair, a page from Eadweard Muybridge's "The Human Figure in Motion," a

Seurat reproduction, photos of a charging rhinoceros and of a baboon (Bacon recently traveled in South Africa and has always been fascinated by the jungle), news shots of dramatic contemporary events, stills from movies, and photographs of the Nazi dictators. The images on the studio wall supply a glossary of Bacon's expressive means in iconography: incomplete, of course, but revealing. Past art and present reality are dual stimuli to his vision. The Velasquez portrait of Innocent X plays against the snapshot of Pius XII; the lessons of men like Seurat, Vuillard, and Sickert are adapted in the present show to a landscape with two figures huddled in the high grass, like fugitives in a modern gangster film.

Bacon is especially fascinated by the drama of contemporary existence, as recorded in the pictorial sections of the press. Photographic quotations, thoroughly transformed, are often used in his work. As an example, in several of his pictures based on the Velasquez portrait the face of the figure is bisected and blurred by a hanging cord with tassel. One of the photographs on Bacon's studio wall shows Hitler staring out of a window. Directly in front of the dictator's face appears an irrelevant and (for Bacon) haunting detail—a window-shade cord with tassel. There can be little doubt that this detail has been transferred, through some strange associational process, to Bacon's recent portraits of a clerical figure. For him the accidental minutiae of pictorial journalism become the accents of a tormented vision in which chimera and reality are fused with extraordinary conviction, as in certain prose passages by Thomas De Quincey. His interest in such minutiae finds precedent in the surrealist esthetic, whose oblique influence on current English painting is by no means spent. (In 1935, for instance, Dali described in *Minotaure* the apparitional quality of a tiny spool of thread, lying in the extreme foreground of an otherwise conventional photograph of a Paris street scene.) But Bacon's preoccupation with psychological matters does not run in the direction of Freudian autobiography, as it did with many of the surrealists. His vision seems more extroverted than theirs, though no less personal. His aim, he is reported to have said, is to record our epoch's hysteria.

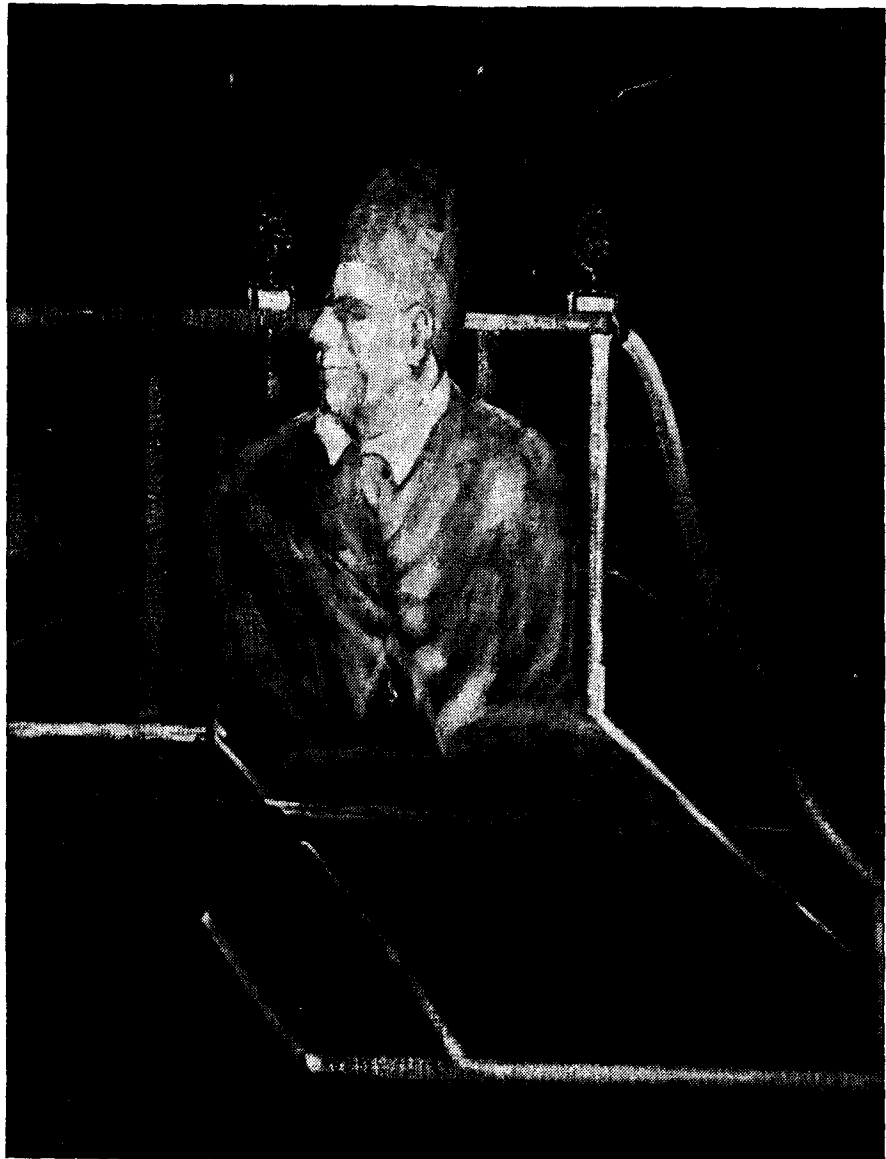
Like numerous artists of the past and present, Bacon has been much concerned with the problem of suggesting motion, a fact which explains the presence on his wall of a page from Muybridge's book of action photographs. Throughout the history of art some of the greatest painters and

sculptors have turned to this problem. The "Victory of Samothrace," with its flanged draperies, proposes one solution; "The Faithless Shepherd" by Bruegel, its figure frozen in so untenable a pose that immediate further motion is inferred, proposes another. In our time the Italian futurists and allied artists like Marcel Duchamp have sought to give movement to their figures. Bacon's solution of the problem is both new and effective. By scumbling the surfaces of certain portions of his canvases he manages to suggest a sort of palsied motion. The head of the cleric in his portrait series is never entirely still; it seems to tremble with apprehension or is contorted by a scream. Similarly, the animal in "Dog" sags forward, as though preparing to settle in a chosen place.

Another astonishing fact about Bacon's art is how quickly it has come to maturity. In 1945 he completed some studies for figures at the base

of a crucifixion. These pictures show the influence of Graham Sutherland in color and, perhaps, of Matta in their cruel, distraught forms. But the following year Bacon painted several large compositions, most of them since destroyed, depicting a man standing in what appears to be a butcher shop, before a battery of microphones. The man's face has no features except a gaping mouth. Over his head is an umbrella (Chamberlain's?); behind him hang a carcass of beef and Hitler's window-curtains with cords and tassels; two sides of beef are placed in the cage-like structure in which he stands. The picture (now in the Museum of Modern Art) was first entitled "Man with Microphones," and obviously instruments of public communication have had a profound symbolic significance for Bacon. The image's satirical impact is unforgettable, its technical richness superb. It announces the arrival of a first-rate talent.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.



Eight Studies for a Portrait (No. 2), by Francis Bacon.



# Incarnation of Old Dutch

**"Jacques Villon: His Graphic Art,"** edited by William S. Lieberman (Museum of Modern Art. 24 pp. 23 illus. 50¢), is a catalogue of an exhibition of etchings and other works now on exhibition in New York that will shortly begin a tour of leading American cities. Below, Walter Pach, distinguished American art critic, discusses Villon's work and his reputation in this country.

By Walter Pach

**F**OLLOWING their present showing, lasting until November 15 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the etchings and other graphic works by Jacques Villon are to visit the principal cities of the United States on a tour planned to continue for at least two years. In view of the considerable labor involved in assembling these prints from collections here and abroad, it is natural to ask why the Museum has undertaken such an effort. True, Villon is now seventy-eight years old, and in the time since he was sixteen (an age represented in the show by two etchings already of masterly skill) his reputation has grown. His art, too, has grown, from the slenderness of his early manner to its present mingling of ripe intellect, fine sensualism, and a seizing of overtones from the ether.

But until the last decade or two Villon's achievement was appreciated far more by his fellow workers than by the general public. If it is the artists who pass the final judgment on matters of their profession, the question may still be asked why it is thought that a dozen or more American cities should be interested in seeing work that, for many persons even today, seems little more than caviar to the general.

To come at once to that last point, the American people appear to have a taste for this particular type of caviar. An exotic food, perhaps, it is still one of a very concentrated kind. And what is all too often forgotten is that Americans have a record no less than extraordinary for recognizing—and buying—modern art while it is still modern: witness, for example, our great collections of Barbizon pictures, many of which came to us

directly from the easels on which they were painted.

The present homage to Villon's art is only a logical outgrowth of the appreciation he first met with here forty years ago. When he was first presented to our public at the Armory Show of 1913 all nine of the paintings he showed were bought before the exhibition left New York and, some years later, at his first one-man showing in America twenty-nine out of the thirty-five paintings exhibited were acquired by collectors from various parts of this country and Canada. This very unusual appreciation is only in part to be explained, I think, by the beautiful color quality in Villon's painting: it derives quite as much from his share in carrying out an idea generally looked on as modern but clearly anticipated, as I hope to prove here, by one of the greatest Old Masters. It is not comparing Villon with Rembrandt to say that the glorious Dutchman and the modern Frenchman have a similar lesson to give us on the score of subject matter. Confront the loftiest expression of tragedy and of religious feeling in Rembrandt's work with what he makes of perfectly commonplace themes, and you see that a "noble subject" is completely unessential for him: his prodigious effects are simply the workings of a great soul rendered visible. Take a book of the master's etchings and turn from his awesome vision of the Crucifixion to his plate of "The Hog": with the one subject as with the other what you are admiring is the genius of the man.

It was most humbly that Jacques Villon effaced himself before the endless detail of the architectural etchings which were one source of his livelihood before his personal work sold in sufficient quantity, and his respect for other men (often inferior to himself) permitted him to do prints which translate works by various moderns in very remarkable fashion. Such penetration into arts other than

his own has given him an insight into the past also, and it has frequently expressed itself in profound observations on the masters in their relationship with the work of today.

Other great moderns have shown this quality of mind. Cézanne both in his words and his work appears to us always nearer to the classics (we remember his saying "I want to do over from nature the work of Poussin"). Matisse spent years in copying at the Louvre, and then created a masterpiece out of a free derivation from an old Dutch still life; and Picasso, at first a follower of Goya and Greco, gave us only recently a powerful and personal lithograph from a painting by that incarnation of sixteenth-century Germany, Lucas Cranach.

**T**HE examples of such a mentality in France might be extended indefinitely, and far back into the past. If I emphasize Villon's share in this splendid tradition it is in order to point out one of the two things that separate him, as if by an abyss, from the spurious moderns too often to be found on museum walls. Of course, any number of other differences between him and the tribe of camp-followers might be mentioned; but after noticing the unshakable hold that the modern masters have on the past, and then comparing such support with the rootlessness of their imitators, I come to what I believe to be the most important factor of all in showing us the validity of the great men of today, and the futility of the herd that merely follows.

Returning to that demonstration given us by Rembrandt of the true source of our enjoyment of art, the modern period had not gone far enough with the great Dutchman's idea when still-life painting was given its new significance in the latter nineteenth century and the early twentieth. After all, painters were still retaining subject matter—apples, plates, etc. The next step was the freedom with which those "Wild Beasts," the Fauves, adapted the lines and colors of nature to the needs of picture making. But a further step was to come, the biggest since the Renaissance, as has been affirmed by Diego Rivera. This was the Cubists' abolishing of all phases of the subject's appearance. Picasso and Braque retained, as a rule, some elements of what our eyes see, something of the sense of solidity or of the play of light and shadow. Villon, on the other hand, gave himself the discipline of rejecting from his picture every element that could be explained as merely aspect of the seen world. For a certain time at least we find him

