

Star Pieces from the Tate Permanent Collection

Background Notes

Richard Thomas - 8 June 2022

I have been invited to present a set of celebrated artworks from the Tate collection that have been of special interest to me while working there over the past thirty-five years.

When Henry Tate opened the National Gallery of British Art, the painting *Ophelia* by John Everett Millais was a reason in itself for many to visit, and it remains very popular. I have greatly enjoyed looking at *Ophelia* with many groups of visitors, some with specialist knowledge, and that pleasure increased with time.



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-2
Oil paint on canvass (76.2x111.8cm) Tate.

An elegant visual rhyme links Ophelia and the floral pattern of her dress to the flowers floating beside her, cut off before their time, in contrast to the many flowers in full bloom around her. It is also rewarding to pay attention to the detail of plants on the far bank over to the extreme right. People have often assumed that the flowers there are Purple Loosestrife.

Queen Gertrude describes the scene we witness in the play, Hamlet, and refers to

“...long purples

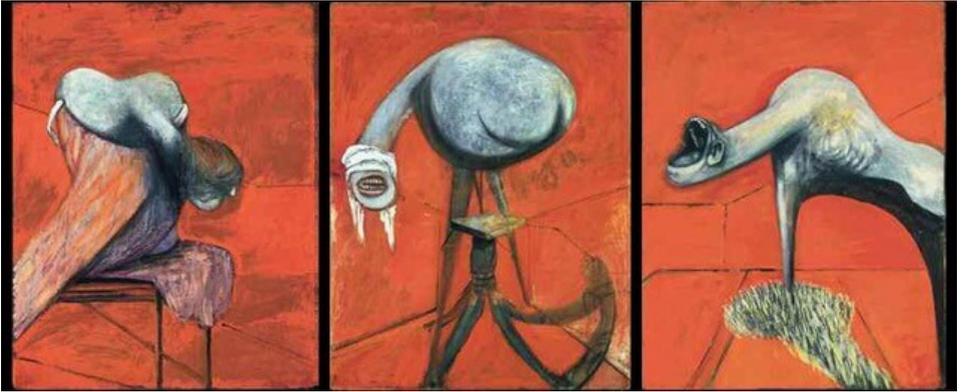
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,

But our cold maids do dead-men’s-fingers call them. “

If instead of Purple Loosestrife these are Orchis Masculina, the rude Latin name (testicles) explains the mirth of liberal shepherds, and orchids are also known for putrid smells that can lead others to name them as Dead Man’s Fingers. Death is kept in mind by the wilted leaves nearby, drooping over what may be intended to resemble the ghostly suggestion of a skull. The absence of the jester Yorick could be evoked here, along with his special role at court to deflate grandiose and fanciful excess and restore sanity. If the jester is dead, no wonder the court is deranged and the tragedy of Ophelia’s death unfolds.

Millais House near the Natural History Museum in South Kensington has a blue plaque outside stating that it was home and studio for both John Everett Millais and later for another artist, Francis Bacon. I enjoy the unlikely idea of such very different artists inhabiting the same space.

Another reason for introducing Francis Bacon at this point is the fact that he was living not very far from Winchester, at the village of Steep, near Petersfield when he began to create *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, c. 1944. He regarded it as his true beginning and his breakthrough to a lasting theme. The painting has bold simplicity, charged with visual impact and emotive body language, but it defies any simple or narrow interpretation. It confronts us with a reality where idealism has been shattered.



Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, c. 1944
Oil paint on 3 boards (each 94 x 73.7cm) Tate.

Bacon had discovered that he wanted to paint after seeing the work of Picasso and treasured a copy of the surrealist magazine *Documents* in which Georges Bataille praised the work of Picasso for achieving the effect of “no longer reaching up towards an ideal, but instead a catastrophic fall from a rotten sun.” Painted as the Second World War entered its final phase, people often see it as an expression of the emotional turmoil generated by atrocity.

Bacon explained that the *Oresteia* cycle of plays by Aeschylus was in his thoughts when he made the set of paintings. The figures resemble the Furies who pursue Orestes before being mercifully transformed into the Eumenides by Pallas Athena. She resolved the debate in Athens about the justice or injustice of the judgement imposed on Orestes for killing his mother, which he did to dutifully avenge his father’s, Agamemnon’s, death. Considering him to have acted nobly she altered the fate he had accepted and the Furies became his helpers. Some have extracted a moral from this, that of confronting the source of anxiety and thereby gaining strength.

Martin Hammer noted the painting having the distinctive grey and orange combination that evokes the Nazi uniform of the new Republic to Last a Thousand Years. Hammer published fascinating observations about Bacon’s use of Nazi propoganda photographs. Bacon had been unable to attend the Berlin Olympics where the cultural offering was the *Oresteia*. Goering, Goebbels, Himmler and Hitler attended the performances, and London trembled at the approach of the Furies...

As if that isn't enough of an interpretative overload, Andrew Brighton offers a different perspective for the Crucifixion subject. Bacon asked for guidance from Roy de Maistre, an Australian artist who shared his enthusiasm about Picasso's recent work. Roy de Mestre had changed the spelling of his surname to match the counter-enlightenment theologian Joseph de Maistre, who considered the fall from grace as so profound that all are steeped in evil, corruption permeating the church too. Baudelaire would state that de Maistre taught him how to think; set free from the boredom of routine existence by arriving at an exhilarating sense of imminent damnation.

We will now proceed to one of the proudest possessions of the Tate Collection, and a painting that Picasso described as his second-best:



Pablo Picasso, *The Three Dancers* , 1925

Oil paint on canvas (215.3 × 142.2 cm) Tate. Purchased 1965

Some people will expect to hear the painting he regarded as his best to be *Guernica*; rapidly made and immediately exhibited on the international stage in a dramatic public response to an atrocity of the Spanish Civil War in 1937.

However, Picasso regarded *The Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, as his best painting - the one that won him recognition amongst the avant-garde painters of Paris in the early years of his career. With that work Picasso first established his capacity for going to the extreme limits in revising existing ideas of taste and style.

Picasso stated that because *Guernica* relies for its meaning on matters outside the picture it is a lesser artwork than both *The Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the Tate's work, *The Three Dancers*.

It has become customary for people to relate *The Three Dancers* to events in his personal life. I like to set the picture free from such matters. Alive with shifting visual activity, hidden faces and variable readings of body-language; there is much more to engage our interest. To begin with, a central figure stands out boldly with a dramatic balletic gesture, where the dancers upraised arms signify wings. Flying up from the nest, is a sign in ballet for Liberty, for Freedom. Two more figures dance, one on either side, and all three are holding hands. But there are more than three heads. Another four heads can emerge, some in profile, including one that is like a crescent moon, suggesting a hidden aspect of the self. After the picture has revealed some of its hidden content, a return to the central figure allows a very different reading of the body. Arms extended on either side, while feet are overlapped, it resembles a Crucifixion, and nearby lurks a personified shadow of death. The painting plays with our minds, taking us from Freedom to the opposite extreme, just as our minds are invaded by a sense of unreality in the midst of experience.



Germaine Richier, *The Large Chessboard*, 1959
Original painted plaster, Tate

Germaine Richier exhibited at the Hanover Gallery near Oxford Circus where Erica Brausen, the dealer, also exhibited the work of Francis Bacon and launched his career. Richier was a devout Catholic and so there is a striking contrast of mentality between the two artists. But she was also impressed by Picasso's example. After training with Antoine Bourdelle in the tradition of Rodin, she taught others to make portrait sculpture until, during the war, Arno Breker, who had also been a student of Bourdelle, exhibited in Paris. Breker was now Hitler's favourite sculptor. This provoked a crisis for Richier, out of which she emerged with images of shattered humanity, who still have the audacity to survive.

The final piece has sprung a surprise on many visitors to the gallery.



Rebecca Horn, *Concert for Anarchy*, 1990
Piano, hydraulic rams and compressor, Tate

This upside-down grand piano occasionally comes to life in a noisy outburst.

Usually a piano is at the service of the pianist, and remains under control while the pianist performs and impresses the audience. But this piano is more attention-seeking than usual. It is prepared to step out-of-line and break with conventions. It has broken free and run away with its imagination, now hanging from the ceiling like a spider.

The piano acts like a living thing: it gets upset and slowly regains its composure. This might mirror our own experience of being startled by the sculpture. Perhaps it is also displaying so as to challenge rivals and attract mates.

Rebecca Horn has compared the fragility and behaviour of her machines to those of human beings:

“They react as we react. My machines are not washing machines or cars. They have a human quality and they must change. They get nervous and must stop sometimes. If a machine stops, it doesn't mean it's broken. It's just tired. The tragic or melancholic aspect of machines is very important to me. I don't want them to run forever. It's part of their life that they stop and faint.”

© Text Richard Thomas 2022

These notes are for study use by WAHG members only and are not to be reproduced.

Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk