

FRANCIS BACON ON THE RIVIERA

Francis Bacon's visits to Monaco from the late 1940s onwards had a crucial impact on his work. A new foundation opened by collector Majid Boustany celebrates this connection, as **Charles Darwent** explains.

When Erica Brausen, fabled owner of London's Hanover Gallery, gave Francis Bacon £200 for his work, *Painting* (1946), he did what any self-respecting gambler might do and set off for Monte Carlo. By 1947, he was broke.

Under pressure to send home more canvases and lacking the means to buy them, he took an abandoned picture off its stretcher and started to paint on its back, something he would continue to do for the next half-century. Painting *alla prima* was riven with risk; but that, for Bacon, was the point. The artist lived in Monaco on and off between 1946 and 1950 and continued to visit regularly until his death in 1992. It was there that he began to explore the shadow-side of his canvas, and his own inner darkness.

All of which makes the opening of an art centre devoted to Bacon's work in Monte Carlo less unlikely than it might sound at first. Majid Boustany, the man behind the new Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation, explains, "Bacon always said, 'I want a very ordered image, but I want it to come about by chance.'" Boustany reasons, "It was here in Monaco that he began to work on the back of his canvas. Like roulette, painting was an activity that depended on luck and chance. Whenever he started a picture, just as when he entered the Casino de Monte Carlo, he risked losing everything."

There is a case, then, to be made for seeing Bacon as a Monegasque artist, in spirit at least. When Prince Albert of Monaco opened Boustany's foundation on 28 October, the artist's birthday, he was also, with good reason, staking a national claim. Perhaps Bacon's debt to the principality has been overlooked because so few



Collector and founder of the MB Francis Bacon Foundation, Majid Boustany.

(Below) Art historian Reinhard Hassert and Francis Bacon, Casino Gardens, Monte Carlo, 1981.

(Right) The interior of the MB Francis Bacon Art Foundation, which is open to scholars now and to visitors by appointment from March 2015. +377 93 30 30 33.



paintings survive from his critical early stay there. Martin Harrison, the author of the Bacon *catalogue raisonné* and who is also on the board of the foundation, is convinced that the 1946 trip to Monaco was not Bacon's first: "I suspect he also spent a lot of time there before the war, although I can't prove it yet," says Harrison.

It was the stay from 1946 to 1950 that fomented revolution in Bacon's art, however. Letters from the period make it clear that among other experiments undertaken were studies for the Pope paintings that would occupy him throughout the 1950s. For all that, little survives in his oeuvre that can firmly be labelled "Made in Monaco." "The *Belfast Head II* [1949] is on a French stretcher," muses Harrison, "and the landscape in the 1950 *Study for a Crucifixion* is said to be of Monaco. But there's really nothing much apart from that."

As a result, Boustany has focused his

collection on graphic works, and on building up what Harrison describes as "an excellent library of rare things, as well as what is probably the best archive of photographs of Bacon anywhere in the world." There are other rarities besides. "Perhaps ten pieces survive from Bacon's early time as a furniture designer in Queensberry Mews, and we have two of them [a rug and a stool]," Boustany says. Although he is discreet about which paintings belong to the Foundation, he does enthuse about one work, *Watercolour* (1929), which dates from the same elusive period: "This is the earliest known survivor of Bacon's pictures," Boustany says. The collection is housed not in what he calls "a white-box museum," but in the *belle époque* Villa Élise. "After his legendary Paris exhibition at the Claude Bernard Gallery in 1977, Bacon remarked that he enjoyed showing in smaller, more intimate spaces,

where his paintings seemed more intense" Boustany says. "I wanted this one to be as much as possible like a boudoir."

As to why a Swiss-Lebanese hotelier – he co-owns with his brother the palatial Hôtel Metropole in Monaco – should have devoted so much of his life to Francis Bacon, Boustany recalls a visit to Tate, made in the early 1990s as a student in London. "I remember walking into a gallery and suddenly being faced with *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* from 1944," he says. "These half-human, half-animal organic forms challenged interpretation and triggered in me the need to explore his world. After having had Bacon in my shadow for over 20 years, I knew I had to do something about that, so I initiated the project of a Foundation dedicated to the artist."

Charles Darwent is an art critic and author.