

ART FINDERS KEEPERS

## Francis Bacon

The artist's Monaco connection has inspired two unlikely collaborators to create a private foundation for his work. Emma Crichton-Miller reports. Portrait by Fabio Massimo Aceto



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Majid Boustany and Martin Harrison are an unlikely pair. Boustany is an elegant, softly spoken Swiss-Lebanese property developer who lives in the tax-light enclave of Monaco and owns the palatial Hôtel Metropole with his brother. His family has a tradition of philanthropy and has supported business students at Harvard and Cambridge Universities. Harrison, in the classic tweedy garb of the English academic, is witty, garrulous and learned, once a photographer's assistant at *Vogue*, but today a renowned Francis Bacon scholar and author of the artist's catalogue raisonné among many other works. For the past five years, these two have been collaborators on an extraordinary project – to create, in Monaco, a private foundation dedicated to Francis Bacon. “For me, Bacon is one of the most uncompromising and enigmatic British figurative artists of the postwar era,” says Boustany. “He is the painter of the human condition, the human presence, the human drama.”

The foundation opened to scholars in October 2014, and from March this year, the public too is invited to explore the remarkable collection, by appointment. The basis of the Foundation is Boustany's vast array of photographs, prints, letters, drawings and paintings by the artist, buttressed by a research library of catalogues and other books in four or five languages, and enlivened by ephemera from Bacon's studio and two of fewer than 15 pieces of furniture designed by him. Boustany has accumulated most of these pieces over the past 10 years, and it is Harrison, with his encyclopaedic knowledge of the artist, his network of collectors, academics and the heirs of Bacon's friends, and with his gift for eloquent encouragement, who has been a significant aid to Boustany in this monumental task.

Born in 1909, Bacon lived in Monaco on and off between 1946 and 1950 and continued to visit regularly until his death in 1992. The backgrounds of several key paintings from the early 1950s were based on views in Monaco and the French Riviera. But although Boustany's family had lived in Monaco since the early 1980s, it was not until Boustany moved to London, where he was sent to study international relations and business, that he encountered Bacon's work.

“One day in the early 1990s, when I was at Tate Britain, I was confronted by his *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* [1944],” he says. “This painting shocked and intrigued me and started my relationship with Bacon. I wanted to know more about him and read biographies; slowly it became a passion.” He began to collect lithographs, engravings and photographs of Bacon by other people.

In 2010, however, Boustany resolved to take his obsession further. “Bacon had been my shadow for more than 20 years. I had to do something,” he explains. So he went to the Francis Bacon Estate, to see what potential there might be for initiating a project in Monaco. And it was through them that he met Harrison.

Harrison was intrigued by the idea. “When I first met Majid, I was, of course, curious about where he came from,” says Harrison. “Of all the places – besides London and Paris – that might have a legitimate claim to be relevant to Bacon's life and work, Monaco is the one.” He saw a logic in collecting things that related, firstly, to Bacon in Monaco, and, secondly, to Bacon in France, “because strangely, it hadn't been looked at.”

This is the focus Boustany has adopted: paintings from the late 1940s and 1950s when Bacon was living in Monaco; a wide selection of graphic work, including lithographs of studies for *Portrait of Pope Innocent X after Velázquez* (1965) and *Portrait II (after the Life Mask of William Blake)* (1955); and a huge collection of photos by, among others, Cecil Beaton, Carlos Freire, John Deakin and Henri Cartier-Bresson, mostly relating to Bacon's time in France. While prices for the letters, ephemera and photos begin at several hundred pounds, those for studies from the early period Boustany is interested in begin to rise steeply. *Study for a Portrait* (1953), for example, sold in 2011 for nearly £18m. Meanwhile, *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* (1969) went for \$142.4m in 2013. A particularly fertile source has been the estate of Bacon's friend Denis Wirth-Miller, alongside auctions and private sales.

“We have one of the largest collections of exhibition catalogues in the world,” Boustany says. Harrison adds teasingly, “This rat has books in his library, including rare early catalogues, that I haven't got and I hate him for it. You can pay a fortune for them; I have shelled out £500 for four folded pages from 1955.” And then there's a multitude of letters. As Boustany says, “Paintings are important, but a letter explaining something could be just as vital for scholars.”

It is the service Boustany is providing for future scholars by gathering material in one place that has really drawn Harrison to the project. “It is tracking his life in France, and I think that is terrific.” And it has enabled him to delve deeper into Bacon's Monaco years: “After he arrived, within a couple of months he was writing to people – Duncan MacDonald, director of the Lefevre Gallery, and the artist Graham Sutherland – about beginning his studies of popes, inspired by Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X.” These studies did not survive (Bacon regularly destroyed his work, covering his creative tracks) and the first ones that did are from 1949. But, as Harrison puts it: “Clearly he was formulating the mature Francis Bacon in his head – no doubt even while gambling. To me, Bacon becomes Bacon in 1949 in Monaco.”

Boustany's favourite work in his collection is perhaps a painting called *Figure Crouching* from 1949: “It makes me shiver every evening in my living room. It is a haunting image, a large painting.” So precious is it that for most of the year, Boustany can only open his curtains at night, when the Mediterranean sun has faded. “I have been living like a vampire for the past four years,” he says. He has just, however, surrendered the painting to the more high-tech surroundings of the Foundation, where it can be viewed by visitors.

What he would still like to find, however, is a pope – “a really iconic image”. Harrison, by contrast, is proudest of having persuaded Boustany to buy *Figure with Monkey* (1951). “There is a possible connection with the strange Russian surgeon [Serge] Voronoff and his monkey-gland experiments.” Voronoff lived in the Château Grimaldi during the period Bacon was living in Monaco.

Harrison's current campaign, however, is for Boustany to buy a unique table that Bacon designed in the 1920s: “It is the single most important piece of furniture, with a direct bearing on what he painted. And he won't obey me.” Boustany laughs gently. “He is the best advisor. That is why he is on the board of the Foundation. We will get it!”

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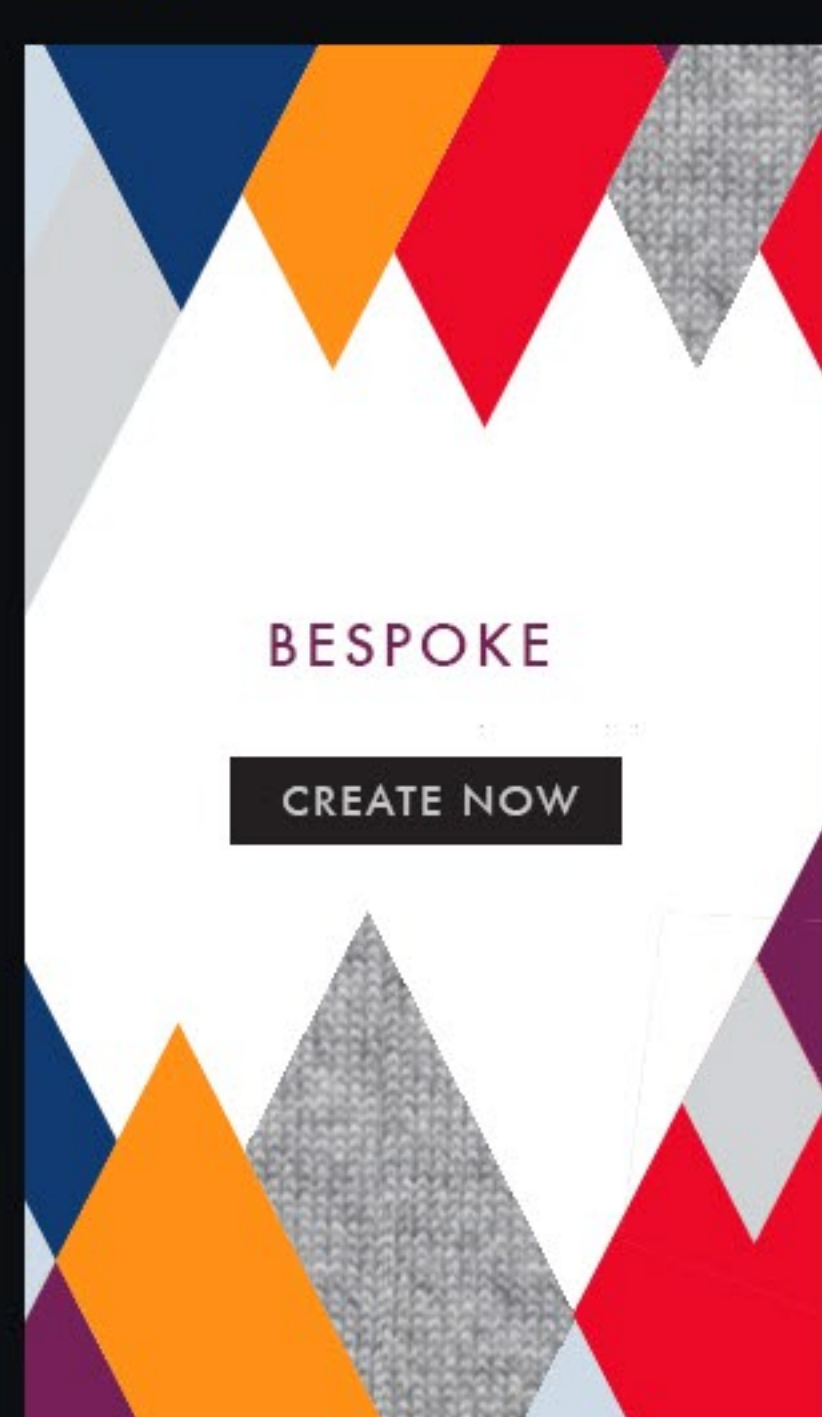
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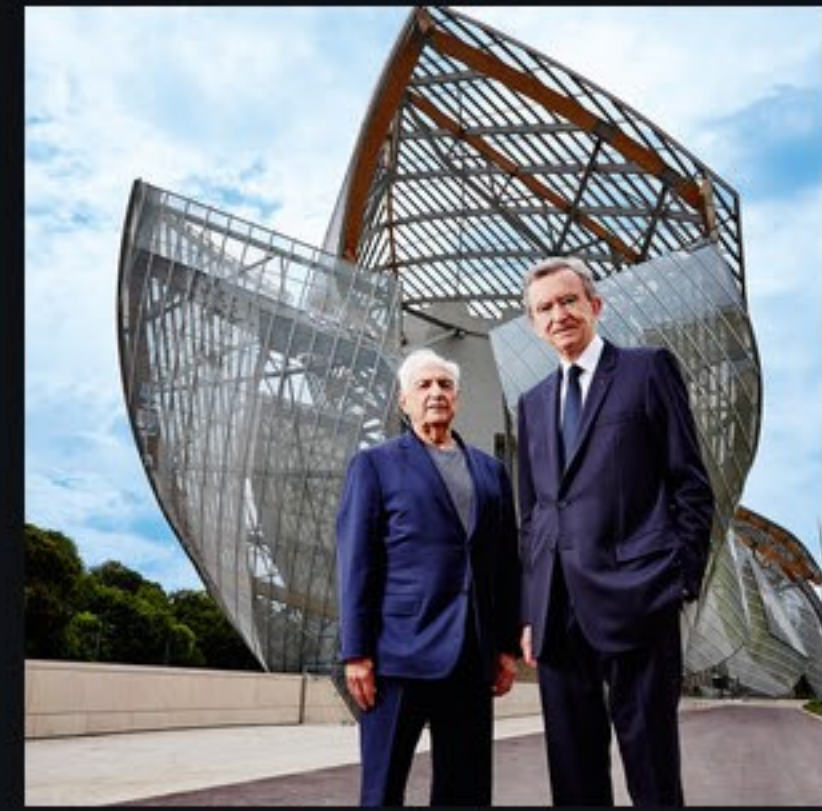
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