

Denis Wirth-Miller's studio collection

When he died in 2010 Denis Wirth-Miller left a large quantity of pictorial material, ranging from books to newspaper clippings, in his studio in the Store House, Wivenhoe, Essex. Analysis of this collection has provided much new evidence about his approach to painting. In addition, the many similarities to the contents of Francis Bacon's studio elucidate the artistic relationship between the two friends, which was especially close in the early 1950s.

by KATHARINA GÜNTHER

IN 1944 THE ARTIST Denis Wirth-Miller and his partner, Richard Chopping, a prolific illustrator, bought the Store House on the quayside of the small town of Wivenhoe, on the Colne Estuary in Essex.¹ Wirth-Miller (1915–2010) was to live in this converted warehouse made for storing sails until his death, two years after Chopping (1917–2008). His best-known paintings are of the surrounding countryside, with a particular focus on its wind-swept trees, open salt marshes and flat grasslands. The Store House soon became a bolthole for the couple's illustrious group of London friends, including in particular Wirth-Miller's best friend, the painter Francis Bacon (1909–92).²

Although Wirth-Miller has received growing attention in recent years, little is known about his studio practice and working methods. On the basis of a selection of items from his Store House studio – an eclectic collection of torn-out and cut-out photographic images from books and magazines on content as diverse as botany and body-building – this article aims to provide a better understanding of his preparatory and painting processes. The origins and dates of most of these loose leaves and newspaper cuttings have been established, and their physical state, notably the creative alterations to which some were subjected, has for the first time been analysed. A study of their relationship to Wirth-Miller's works and approach to painting, a significant lacuna in research on his art, may in addition help understanding of his much-emphasised but under-researched artistic relationship with Bacon. It also provides a case study of value in the history of the use painters have made of photography.

Wirth-Miller started his career at the age of sixteen as a fabric designer at the cotton manufacturing company Tootal Broadhurst Lee in Manchester, and did not commit himself to painting until 1939.³ He met

1 and 2. Denis Wirth-Miller's studio, Wivenhoe. 2014. (Photographs Ben Harrison).

Chopping in London in 1937 and in 1941–42 they took lessons at the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing run by Cedric Morris and his partner, Arthur Lett-Haines, at Benton End, near Hadleigh, Suffolk, where they coincided with the young Lucian Freud.⁴ During this time Wirth-Miller and Chopping formed a friendship with Bacon, to whom they had been introduced by mutual friends, the artists Robert MacBryde and Robert Colquhoun. Bacon and Wirth-Miller quickly became close; they went on holiday abroad together and although contemporaries recalled that the relationship could be turbulent and even 'stormy',⁵ to the end of Bacon's life they spoke on the telephone almost every day. Although Wirth-Miller's art has inevitably been overshadowed by that of his famous friend, he exhibited at prestigious London galleries, such as the Beaux Arts Gallery, works by him were purchased for important collections, such as the Arts Council of Great Britain, a biography of him and Chopping was published in 2016 and in 2022–23 a retrospective at Firstsite, Colchester, prompted a reassessment of his achievement.⁶

In 2014 Wirth-Miller's studio was photographed in order to record an impression of the space before it was dismantled. These photographs show how his collection of photographic material – illustrated books, magazines and newspapers, and a few original photographs – was piled up in heaps, littering the floor, shelves, desks and walls of the small space (Figs.1 and 2).⁷ The total number of items in the studio is not known, but judging from these images it must have been at least several hundred. In 2014 some of the studio's contents became available for analysis, following their acquisition by the Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation. Of the 272 items that could be

The author would like to thank the Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation for initiating and supporting her research on the contents of Wirth-Miller's studio. The present article summarises its results.

1 J.L. Turner: *The Visitors' Book. In Francis Bacon's Shadow: The Lives of Richard Chopping and Denis Wirth-Miller*, London 2016, pp.361 and 365.

2 *Ibid.*, pp.112–13, with photographs of

pages from the Store House's visitor's book with entries by Bacon and another close friend and frequent visitor, the Bloomsbury writer Frances Partridge.

3 L. Buck: 'Denis Wirth-Miller: a partial memory', in J. Birch *et al.*, eds: exh. cat. *Denis Wirth-Miller 1915–2010*, Colchester (Minorities Gallery) 2011, pp.10–17, at p.12.

4 *Ibid.*

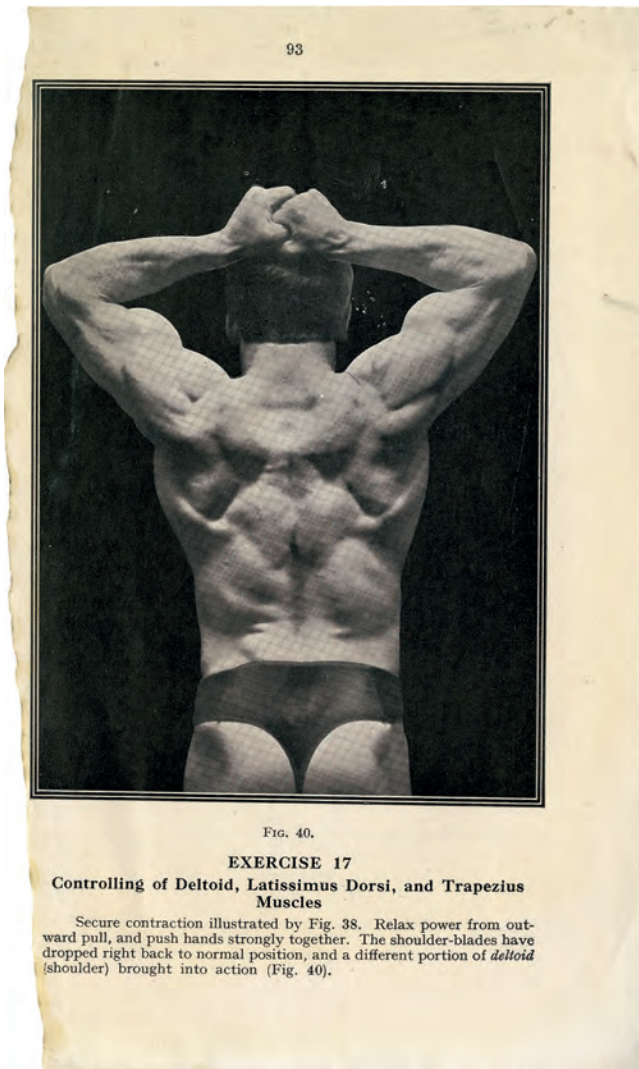
5 D. Sylvester: *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*, London 2000, p.262.

6 Turner, *op. cit.* (note 1) and J. Birch, *et al.*: exh. cat. *Denis Wirth-Miller: Landscapes and Beasts*, Colchester (Firstsite) 2022–23. The exhibition was reviewed by the present author in this Magazine, 165 (2023), pp.66–69. See also D. Buckman: 'Denis Wirth-Miller: Bohemian artist who enjoyed a close association with Francis Bacon', *The*

Independent (19th January 2011), available at www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/denis-wirthmiller-bohemian-artist-who-enjoyed-a-close-association-with-francis-bacon-2187770.html, accessed 26th July 2023.

7 For more photographs of working material, see Turner, *op. cit.* (note 1), plates between pp.184 and 185; see also Buck, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.10.





studied, 212 have been traced back to the books and magazines from which they were removed. Although this is only a fraction of the whole, and a more comprehensive study of the Wivenhoe studio is still needed, analysis of this cross section has proved enlightening in terms of their use and purpose.

Wirth-Miller owned material on a wide range of topics, from archaeology and ornithology to war and conflict. One group, for example, ranges from a picture from an article on the Korean War in a 1950 issue of *Picture Post*, which Wirth-Miller cut out and mounted (Fig.4),⁸ to printed matter on male erotica, athletics and body building, such as twenty leaves torn from a 1949 edition of *Muscle Control or Body Development by Will-Power* by 'Maxick' (Fig.3).⁹ Many pages were torn from books and newspapers but relatively few were altered or embellished by Wirth-Miller. Some images and figures were accentuated by cutting them out, as in a photograph of a semi-nude bodybuilder,¹⁰ and some were

3. Denis Wirth-Miller, working material, page from Maxick (Max Sick): *Muscle Control or Body Development by Will-Power*, London 1949, pp.93-94, Wivenhoe 112, 22 by 13.5 cm. (© The Estate of Denis Wirth-Miller; courtesy Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation / MB Art Collection, Monaco).

4. Denis Wirth-Miller, working material, cut and mounted black-and-white photographic reproduction showing two United Nations soldiers in a trench, from S. Simmons: 'Pusan Beach-Head', *Picture Post* (5th August 1950), p.15, no.724v. (© The Estate of Denis Wirth-Miller; courtesy Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation / MB Art Collection, Monaco).

given painted frames, such as a soldier within a group of American G.I.s in a black-and-white news picture from a 1950 issue of *TIME* magazine (Fig.6).¹¹ Although Wirth-Miller dismantled several of the series of reproductions of photographs by Eadweard Muybridge that he owned, curiously, he numbered the separated images according to their original

8 Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation (hereafter cited as MBA) Item 724: fragment, cut and mounted, S. Simmons: 'Pusan Beach-Head', *Picture Post* (5th August 1950), p.15.

9 MBA Item 606: page from Maxick (Max Sick): *Muscle Control or Body Development by Will-Power*, London 1949, pp.93-94.

10 MBA Item 652: fragment of page from an unknown book, mounted and with pin holes; black-and-white

photographic reproduction of semi-nude male bodybuilder leaning on the wooden pillar of a beach boardwalk.

11 MBA Item 600: recto, cut out image, mounted on cardboard, 'The Defense of Europe', *TIME: The Weekly Newsmagazine*, *Atlantic Overseas Edition* 55:2 (April 1950), p.15.

12 For example, MBA Item 546: fragments of page, cut out and

mounted, from E. Muybridge:

Animals in Motion, London 1899, p.129, series 'The Trot', 'One Stride photographed synchronously from two points of view. The Dog (Mastiff)', figure '6' written in pencil in the upper-left corner.

13 MBA Item 662: page, overpainted, from R.D. Lockhart: *Living Anatomy: A Photographic Atlas of Muscles in Action and Surface Contours*, London 1950, pp.47-48.

14 MBA Item 594.

15 MBA Item 543: fragment of page, mounted on cardboard, Muybridge, *op. cit.* (note 12), p.63, single frame from series 'The Walk', 'Some phases in the Walk of a Dog from series 14'; and MBA Item 574: fragment of page, mounted on paper support with six pieces of brown tape, from *ibid.*, p.191, two frames from the series 'The Gallop' and 'Rotatory-Gallop'.

positions in the series.¹² His most intrusive manipulation was the painting over of heads and figures, as he did with greyish-green paint on a page torn from R.D. Lockhart's *Living Anatomy: A Photographic Atlas of Muscles in Action and Surface Contours* (1950).¹³

Occasionally Wirth-Miller created collages. On one cardboard support, for example, he combined four unidentified clippings: on the verso is an aerial view of a street scene and a fragment of a news picture of a cyclist and on the recto a goalkeeper in mid-air catching a football, together with a nude male torso.¹⁴ Several items, in particular individual cut-out frames from sequences by Muybridge, were mounted on supports. For some, such as the news picture of American soldiers mentioned above, Wirth-Miller used glue. For Muybridge's photographs of a dog walking, he used a number of small pieces of Sellotape (Fig.5).¹⁵ Sometimes he cut two diagonal, parallel slits in the support into which the corners of the photograph were slotted.¹⁶ From an unidentified colour photographic reproduction Wirth-Miller cut out the upper half of a man's face.¹⁷ The result is reminiscent in its plain

5. Denis Wirth-Miller, working material, fragment of a page, mounted on cardboard, showing a single frame from the series 'The Walk', 'Some phases in the Walk of a Dog from series 14', from E. Muybridge: *Animals in Motion*, London 1899, p.63, Wivenhoe 49, 15.5 by 15.5 cm. (© The Estate of Denis Wirth-Miller; courtesy Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation / MB Art Collection, Monaco).

6. Denis Wirth-Miller, working material, cut-out image mounted on cardboard, from 'The Defense of Europe', *TIME: The Weekly Newsmagazine, Atlantic Overseas Edition* 55:2 (April 1950), p.15, Wivenhoe 106, 25 by 18 cm. (© The Estate of Denis Wirth-Miller; courtesy Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation / MB Art Collection, Monaco).



deconstruction of anatomy of the interactive children's book *Heads, Bodies and Legs* that Wirth-Miller wrote with Chopping in 1946, in which body parts from different figures can be combined in any way the reader chooses.¹⁸ Some torn-out pages have a few splatters of paint, such as a fragment from *Picture Post* from 1956;¹⁹ on some, including a Muybridge photograph of a dog, a faint fingerprint can be seen.²⁰ In some instances, as in the marks below an image on a loose page from a body-building magazine, the paint appears to have been applied intentionally.²¹ Overall, however, the torn-out pages show only minor signs of use in the painting process or exposure to it.

The photographic illustrations in the books and magazines that Wirth-Miller accumulated at the Store House sometimes served as source material for his paintings, at least for a period. For example, *Walking man* (Fig.7), an unfinished canvas featuring a suited man moving away from a dark backdrop, is based on a news photograph of a young man named Tom Dooxsee taken when he was on trial for killing a fellow student at Dartmouth College. Published in *TIME: The Weekly Newsmagazine Atlantic Overseas Edition* in 1949, it was cut out, mounted on cardboard and given a dark blue painted frame over the surrounding text (Fig.8).²² In the painting the head is obscured and the legs dissolve into the background, but otherwise the figure is very close to the photograph in the shape, proportions and positioning of the limbs. The painting is dominated by black, white and grey hues that are consistent with the monochrome source image, just as the cropping of the legs corresponds to the photographic source. The most significant deviation is the omission of Dooxsee's head, although, in contrast to other working documents in the collection, Wirth-Miller did not paint over it on the photograph.



16 MBA Item 512: fragment of page, mounted, from Muybridge, *op. cit.* (note 12), p.63, one frame from series 'The Walk', 'Some phases in the Walk of a Dog from series 14'.

17 MBA Item 611: fragment, unknown magazine, colour photographic reproduction of a man's face.

18 R. Chopping and D. Wirth-Miller: *Heads, Bodies and Legs*, Harmondsworth 1946.

19 MBA Item 729: page from

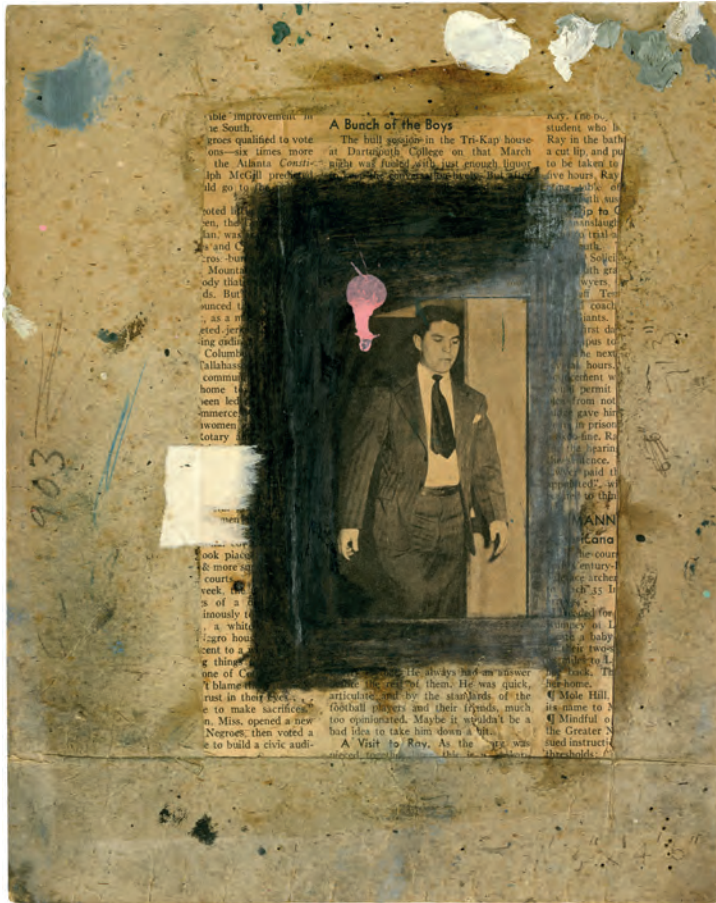
'The end of a record-breaker', *Picture Post* (8th October 1956), p.9.

20 MBA Item 509: fragment cut from E. Muybridge: *Animal Locomotion*, Philadelphia 1887, plate 714: 'Dog; aroused by a torpedo; mastiff. Smith'.

21 MBA Item 636: page, with several small brushstrokes, from an unknown magazine, black-and-white photographic reproductions of body builders, pp.17–18.

22 MBA Item 668.





Opposite

7. *Walking man*, by Denis Wirth-Miller. c.1954. Oil on canvas, 130 by 99 cm. (© The Estate of Denis Wirth-Miller; private collection).

8. Denis Wirth-Miller, working material, fragment of a page mounted on cardboard, from *TIME: The Weekly Newspaper Atlantic Overseas Edition* (13th June 1949), p.16, Wivenhoe 174, 25.5 by 20.5 cm. (© The Estate of Denis Wirth-Miller; courtesy Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation / MB Art Collection, Monaco).

9. Reconstitution of Francis Bacon's studio at 7 Reece Mews, London, at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. (Photograph © Leonard de Selva; Bridgeman Images).

In both the quantity and type of material, the contents of the Wivenhoe studio are reminiscent of those of Bacon's famously chaotic studios, notably the last and best documented, that at 7 Reece Mews, London, which has been reconstructed at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, the contents of which have been available for research there since 2001 (Fig.9). Comparative analysis suggests itself because Bacon visited Wivenhoe not only to socialise, but for at least twenty-five years he regularly shared Wirth-Miller's studio.²³ In a letter from the 1950s to his dealer Erica Brausen, Bacon explained that he was staying 'with Dennis [sic] and Dickey [Chopping] for a few weeks and am working on some small canvases. [...] I am staying in a pub here and working in their home'.²⁴ It is not known which paintings he meant or if they were



ever finished, but fragments of an early version of the left panel of *Three studies of Lucian Freud* (1969; Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation Monaco), found in Wivenhoe after Wirth-Miller's death, are evidence of Bacon's activities there.²⁵ They suggest that the triptych, which was finished at the Royal College of Art, London, was begun in The Store House. It is known that Bacon's *Study for portrait* (1966; private collection) was both started and completed there.²⁶

Spatial proximity may have fostered some exchange on the paintings themselves. In his 1964 Bacon catalogue raisonné Ronald Alley credited Wirth-Miller for painting 'a few brush-strokes' on *Landscape* (1952; private collection).²⁷ In the same year Bacon allegedly turned to Wirth-Miller for help when painting *House in Barbados*.²⁸ Wirth-Miller himself claimed to have contributed to Bacon's *Dog* (Fig.12), but it is more likely that he meant the less refined *Dog* (1952).²⁹ He may also have contributed to a Vincent Van Gogh variation painted in 1957.³⁰ Although there is no definitive evidence that Wirth-Miller made any of these supposed contributions to Bacon's paintings, Bacon might well have taken advantage of the fact that his technically more adept friend was readily available. Although, like Bacon, Wirth-Miller never received any formal training, the skills he had absorbed when working as a pattern designer, and the one and a half years spent at Benton End, where ideas and techniques were exchanged and students were pushed to challenge themselves,³¹ are evident in such sketches as *Study of a dog in movement: running* (c.1953–54; private collection) that demonstrate Wirth-Miller's competent handling of perspective and grasp of anatomy.³² By contrast, as David Sylvester remarked, Bacon 'was forever asserting that he couldn't draw, and this was not a pose'.³³ The two painters themselves recorded little about their artistic exchange,

23 Buck, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.15.

24 M. Peppiatt, ed.: exh. cat. *Francis Bacon in the 1950s*, Norwich (Sainsbury Centre), Wisconsin (Milwaukee Art Museum), Buffalo (Albright-Knox Art Gallery) 2006–07, p.151, transcript of letter from F. Bacon

to E. Brausen 'The Stone House [sic], The Quay, Wivenhoe, Essex, Feb 9th'.

25 For the final painting (private collection), see M. Harrison and R. Daniels, eds: *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné* (hereafter cited as CR), London 2016, no.69–07.

26 *Ibid.*, no.66–14.

27 R. Alley and J. Rothenstein: *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné and Documentation*, London 1964, pp.58–59; CR, no.52–04.

28 M. Peppiatt: *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, London 1996, p.146; CR, no.52–02.

29 CR, nos.52–03 and 52–17.

30 M. Harrison: 'Francis Bacon: painter', in CR, pp.7–63, at p.19.

31 Buck, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.12, and Turner, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.25, 58, 62 and 69.

32 Birch et al., *op. cit.* (note 6), p.41.

33 Sylvester, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.207.



10. *Study for 'Dog in movement'*, by Denis Wirth-Miller. c.1953. Oil on canvas. (© The Estate of Denis Wirth-Miller; courtesy Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation / MB Art Collection, Monaco).

11. *Dog; walking; mastiff. Dread*, by Eadweard Muybridge. (From E. Muybridge: *Animal Locomotion*, Philadelphia 1887, plate 704).

Opposite

12. *Dog*, by Francis Bacon. 1952. Oil on canvas, 198.1 by 137.2 cm. (© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2023; photograph Perry Ogden; Tate Britain, London).

although Bacon did publicly credit Wirth-Miller with introducing him to Muybridge's photographic motion studies when they visited the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, together in 1949, with important consequences for Bacon's art.³⁴ With very few exceptions, Wirth-Miller and Chopping retained a discreet silence about their famous friend all their lives.³⁵

Wirth-Miller had at least a cursory knowledge of Bacon's collection habits and studio set-up. He knew that Bacon 'had a distinct core of source material which could be packed into a couple of suitcases',³⁶ and in a 1964 television documentary he can be seen in the Reece Mews studio together with Bacon and his lover George Dyer.³⁷ The survival of both men's collection of source material – on Wirth-Miller's side at least in

part – and the way this material provided pictorial springboards for their paintings allows for a comparison between their approaches to their art. Both Wirth-Miller and Bacon were interested in publications on physical exercise and body-building. Wirth-Miller's books on this topic are matched by Bacon's copies of *Pumping Iron: The Art and Sport of Bodybuilding* (1977), *History of the Olympics in Pictures* (1972) and an issue of the magazine *Physique Pictorial* from 1961.³⁸ Themes of books owned by Wirth-Miller, such as archaeology, ornithology and violent conflict, correspond, for example, to *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Archaeology* (1960), *Birds of the Night* by Eric J. Hosking (1945) and *The True Aspects of the Algerian Rebellion* (1957), which Bacon kept in Reece Mews.³⁹ Like Bacon, Wirth-Miller owned printed reproductions of works by Rembrandt van Rijn, Alberto Giacometti and Marcel Duchamp.⁴⁰ Sometimes the painters even owned copies of the same books. Unsurprisingly, both Wirth-Miller and Bacon possessed publications containing reproductions of Muybridge photographs, and both owned the books *Stalking Big Game with a Camera in Equatorial Africa* (1925) by Marius Maxwell and *Film* (1944) by Roger Manvell.⁴¹ Although to some degree such overlaps in their collections are a manifestation of the two men's shared visual interests, many of the book's topics, such as war photography, that are prominent in Bacon's collection of material and sometimes fed into his paintings, played no role in Wirth-Miller's art.⁴² It

34 R. Corke: 'Francis Bacon 1991', in *idem: Face to Face: Interviews with Artists*, London 2015, pp.30–39, at pp.36–37.

35 Sylvester, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.262. Wirth-Miller made an exception when talking to Matthew Gale in July 1999 for the preparation of the exhibition *Francis Bacon Working on Paper*, but only two brief comments were referenced in M. Gale: 'Francis Bacon: working on paper', in *idem*, ed.: *exh. cat. Francis Bacon Working on Paper*, London (Tate Gallery) 1999, pp.13–36, at pp.13 and 23.

36 Wirth-Miller quoted in *ibid.*, p.23.

37 *Francis Bacon*, dir. P. Koralnik, Radio Télévision Suisse Romande, 2nd July 1964.

38 Francis Bacon Archive, Dublin City

Gallery The Hugh Lane (hereafter cited as FBA), nos.RM98F136:7, RM98F235:4 and RM98F137:7.

39 FBA RM98F11:52, RM98F137:6 and RM98F12:26.

40 MBA Item 663 page from an unknown book, black-and-white reproduction, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-portrait with beret*, 1661, caption: '91. Self-Portrait. About 1661. Aix-en-Provence, Museum'; MBA Item 699: page from an unknown book, black-and-white reproduction, Alberto Giacometti, *Head of the Artist's Mother*, 1947, p.25; MBA Item 661: page with colour reproduction, Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912, from 'The Great Armory Show of 1913', *LIFE* (2nd January 1950), pp.58–63, at p.60.

41 MBA Item 543: cut-out frame, E. Muybridge: *Animals in Motion*, London 1899, p.63, series 'The Walk', 'Some phases in the Walk of a Dog from series 14' and, for example, RM98F105:147: page, overpainted, E. Muybridge: *The Human Figure in Motion*, New York 1955, plate 124, 'Woman walking downstairs, picking up pitcher, and turning'; MBA Item 889: R. Manvell, *Film*, London and Aylesbury 1944 and RM98F1A:39: page from *ibid.*, black-and-white photographic illustrations, scenes from Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925; MBA Item 679: page from M. Maxwell, *Stalking Big Game with a Camera in Equatorial Africa*, London 1925, plate 13 (chapter VII) 'Face to Face with Rhinoceros Bicornis'; and RM98F1A:38:

page from *ibid.*, 'Appendix B. Plate 2 Assembling a troop of scurrying rats' and 'A truculent individual facing the camera (Indian jungle elephants)'.

42 A photographic illustration of a soldier kicking in a door from the article 'Horreur a Kolwezi', on the rescue of European hostages taken by rebel and militant groups in the city of Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Paris Match* (2nd June 1978), p.99 (RM98F23:6: torn-out page) fed into Bacon's *Oedipus and the Sphinx after Ingres* (1983; Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon), see K. Günther: *Francis Bacon – In the Mirror of Photography: Collecting, Preparatory Practice and Painting*, Berlin and Boston 2022, p.199–201.



is possible that Wirth-Miller acquired books on these subjects in imitation of his friend, or in an attempt to make him feel at home.

There are also noticeable differences between the two collections. Judging from the studio contents that have survived at the Store House and are available for research, some types of material and topics that played a vital role in Bacon's studio are absent from Wirth-Miller's. For instance, Bacon owned thirty-one books on ancient Egypt, and a variety of cookery books.⁴³ He also possessed larger quantities of original photographic prints, handwritten notes with ideas and plans for paintings, together with transparencies and reproductions of his own work. Photographs of Bacon's friends and lovers, books on cities and places where he had lived, publications on bull fighting, which he witnessed in France and Spain, and books on the wildlife that he saw when he visited his family in South Africa make the contents of Reece Mews a picture of his personality and biography.⁴⁴ There is nothing similar reflecting Wirth-Miller's life and interests in the Wivenhoe collection, apart from a set of pages torn out of A.G. Tansley's *The British Islands and their Vegetation* (1939–65).⁴⁵

Even though photographs of Wirth-Miller's studio depict a large number of objects, his collection of source material came nowhere near the four thousand 'flat items' unearthed from Reece Mews after 1992. In addition to this, he usually kept only single leaves on such topics as archaeology or specific sports, whereas Bacon often obsessively bought a number of books on one subject, often acquiring multiple copies of the same publication, such as three copies of Robert Daley's *The Swords of Spain* (1967).⁴⁶ Furthermore, the contents of Reece Mews range from the early nineteenth century to 1991,⁴⁷ whereas the material from the Store House analysed here dates only from 1911 to 1974.⁴⁸

There were also differences in the arrangement of material in the two studios. Known to be very tidy,⁴⁹ Wirth-Miller kept his working material in neat piles whereas Bacon built messy heaps and scattered ripped-out pages, fragments of books and crumpled photographs carelessly over the studio floor (Fig.13). This 'image carpet' formed a giant collage incorporating multiple viewpoints, perspectives and distances from the subject, which may have anticipated the combination of different viewpoints on some of Bacon's canvases. In the left panel of *Three studies for a crucifixion* (1962; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), for example, the figures are placed parallel to the picture plane, but the surrounding space is seen from above.⁵⁰ The democratisation of images of all sorts and their reciprocal fertilisation on the studio floor may have inspired Bacon to combine, in such paintings as *Study after Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953; Des Moines Art Center), sources as disparate as a Baroque painting and a still from the film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).⁵¹

The working material from Reece Mews incorporates a variety of interventions and alterations by Bacon that both have considerable consequences for the image and demonstrate their underlying purpose for him. Although he shared some techniques with Wirth-Miller, they were executed differently. Bacon used cut-outs of faces or figures as stencils, as is suggested by the paint around the edges of a profile of

Dyer cut from a photograph by John Deakin, which forms the basis of such works as *Study for head of George Dyer* (1967; private collection).⁵² Although Bacon, like Wirth-Miller, highlighted elements in an image by framing them with paint, instead of enclosing the entire image he singled out elements of it, such as one figure or parts of a subject.⁵³ Bacon also anonymised figures by obliterating their heads, but did so mostly by folding or taping over them rather than painting over them.⁵⁴ Collages are rare among Bacon's surviving working documents, and none includes a combination of images on both sides of a support.⁵⁵

Other techniques employed by Bacon were not utilised by Wirth-Miller. Bacon sometimes made pictorial additions to a found image – for instance, by drawing a stool on a depiction of a nude in a drawing manual.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the haphazard arrangement of loose leaves, newspaper fragments and photographs in the studio meant that they were often accidentally crumpled, folded, torn and spattered with paint. Bacon cherished these effects of use and decay and sometimes integrated them into his paintings, rendering the battered photographs and decomposed news cuttings the equivalents of the preparatory work of more traditional artists.⁵⁷ For example, a Muybridge series of a pugilist striking a blow has been (probably accidentally) folded in such a way that two frames – two moments in time – are merged into one, creating an anatomically curious 'split', or 'double back' (Figs.14 and 15), which Bacon referenced in *Study from the human body (man turning on light)* (Fig.16).⁵⁸ Such treatment of the photograph undermined its integrity. This is in stark contrast to Wirth-Miller's careful and controlled handling of his own working documents, the alterations to which did not result in meaningful changes to the subject, neither distorting nor elevating the image. A good example is the cutting from *TIME* magazine that served as the pictorial springboard for *Walking man*: mounted, over-painted and paint-spattered, it is one of the most intensely used and modified items from the Store House. In that, it bears a strong resemblance to Bacon's working documents, but its framing, mounting and blob of pink paint have no consequences for the painted canvas. There is no connection between the cutting and the painting beyond the formal aspects of the original photograph. Thus, at first sight, the two sets of material may look similar, but a closer look reveals a different understanding of their use and purpose.

Perhaps inspired by Bacon's treatment of source material, Wirth-Miller toyed with the techniques he observed, but never gave them the significance they had for Bacon. He never matched Bacon's free, inventive and complex appropriation process, in which trivial base images could be transformed into powerful iconography. For example, in 'Figure getting out of a car', which was later overpainted and is now titled *Landscape with car* (c.1945–46; private collection), Bacon converted a figure of a female gardener from an illustration of a colour print in a German book on the history of morality into an eerie fantasy creature, whose neck and head is based on the original figure's arm.⁵⁹ Often the identity of the figure in the source image was changed during the appropriation process, so that, for example, the distinctive appearance of Quasimodo as portrayed in a 1939 film adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* became the source for *Self-portrait* (1956; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth).⁶⁰ In addition, Bacon's

43 See the database of Bacon's books on the website of Trinity College, Dublin, available at www.tcd.ie/History_of_Art/research/triarc/bacon.php, accessed 11th August 2022.

44 Günther, *op. cit.* (note 42), pp.64–68.

45 MBA Item 580.

46 FBA, RM98F93:11, RM98F93:19 and RM98F93:20.

47 FBA, RM98F131:65A: T. Richter

ed.: *Encyclopädie der menschlichen Anatomie*, Leipzig 1834; and FBA, RM98F104:2: A. Perrig: *Michelangelo's Drawings: The Science of Attribution*, New Haven and London 1991.

48 MBA Item 618: page from The Earl of Suffolk and Berkshire, ed.: *The Encyclopaedia of Sport and Games*, London 1911, II, pp.33–34; and MBA Item 496: fragment of a page from *Radio Times* (5th September 1974), p.17.

49 Turner, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.146.

50 CR, no.62-04.

51 CR, no.53-02.

52 CR, 67-06; RM98F130:82:

cut-out stencil from a photograph by John Deakin, *George Dyer in a street in Soho*, c.1963.

53 RM98F110:24: page, overpainted, from A.R. Dugmore: *Camera Adventures in the African Wilds*, London 1920, p.139, RM98F105:147

(see note 41 above); RM98F8:19: E. Muybridge: *The Human Figure in Motion*, New York 1955, lower half of plate 64: 'Man shadow boxing'.

54 RM98F24:39: page (folded) from M. Andronikos et al.: *The Greek Museums*, Athens 1975, plates 60–61; RM98F1:64: page from J. Bouvier and R. Obadia: 'L'Esquisse', Paris 1991, plate 60.

55 RM98F129:50: fragments of pages from T. Borenius: *Rembrandt*, London



13. Part of the floor of Francis Bacon's studio at 7 Reece Mews, London. 1998. Photograph by Perry Ogden. (© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS / Artimage 2023).

backgrounds usually stem from a photographic source different from that of the figure, as is exemplified by three of his dog paintings from 1952: the animals are taken from a Muybridge motion series, but the setting is lifted from a photograph of a Nazi rally at the Zeppelin Feld, Nuremberg.⁶¹ There is nothing similar in Wirth-Miller's borrowings.

In the 1940s and 1950s Wirth-Miller often painted his landscapes *en plein air*, 'sketching and painting landscapes and individual trees by the estuary',⁶² and thus had little need for photographic source material to inspire a motif. Although most of the identified items from Wirth-Miller's studio available for analysis date from this time, they cannot have provided much inspiration for landscape painting. Instead, the material seems

predominantly to date from the period when Bacon and Wirth-Miller were working most closely alongside each other and it seems reasonable to suggest that it was during this time, in the early 1950s, that Wirth-Miller was creatively closest to Bacon.

In the early 1950s the two artists did not only share common interests regarding the type of material that they collected, but for a couple of years they also shared similar motifs. Although Wirth-Miller's early works featured portraits, figures and still lifes,⁶³ he had soon found

1952, plate 79, illustration of Rembrandt's *Self-portrait at the easel* (1660), and O. Keepnews and B. Grauer Jr.: *A Pictorial History of Jazz*, London 1955, pp.79–80.

56 RM98F1A:117: fragment of a page, mounted on cardboard, showing a drawing, from G.W. Bridgman: *Bridgman's Complete Guide to Drawing from Life*, New York 1952, p.31.

57 M. Harrison: 'Latent images', in L.

Sisley, ed.: exh. cat. *Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty*, Dublin (Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane), 2009–10, pp.70–87, at p.71.

58 CR, no.73-04; RM98F11:91: page, folded, attached to support, inserted in plastic bag, from E. Muybridge: *The Human Figure in Motion*, London 1901 (possibly), plate 63, 'Pugilist. Striking a blow', see K. Günther: *Francis Bacon: Metamorphoses*, London 2011, p.16.

59 CR, no.46-04; RM98F136:17: supplement for E. Fuchs: *Illustrierte Sittengeschichte, II: 'Die Galante Zeit'*, Munich 1909: 'Die Gärtnerin: Galanter französischer Farbstich von Moret nach Aug. de Saint-Aubin', see Günther, *op. cit.* (note 56), p.7.

60 CR, no.56-01, the source for which was Charles Laughton as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), see Günther, *op. cit.* (note 42), p.249.

61 RM98F105:64: D.C. Somervell: *100 Years in Pictures. A Panorama of History in the Making*, London 1951, p.26, '1936 Nazi Rally at Nuremberg'.

62 Turner, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.36 and 145. This refers to Wirth-Miller working with the painter John Minton (1917–57), whom he befriended in 1941 at the latest.

63 Daniel Chapman, quoted in Buckman, *op. cit.* (note 6).

his main subject: the British landscape, and later the Essex countryside in particular, and in 1944 he was included in the group show *British Landscape Painting* at the Lefevre Gallery, London.⁶⁴ But in 1954 he deviated from his usual subject-matter. In his first solo show *Paintings. Studies of a Dog in Movement* at the Beaux Arts Gallery, London, Wirth-Miller exhibited fourteen paintings of a dog, all painted in 1953.⁶⁵ Several more dog paintings in various degrees of completion were found in the Store House after 2010.⁶⁶ Centred on the canvas and taking up almost all of its space, solitary light-coloured dogs are placed on sparse, sombre backgrounds, sometimes evocative of grasslands, a pavement or a street. In several, for example *Dog* (Estate of Francis Bacon), the subjects are built up from sharp, angular brushstrokes that barely fill the space within the outlines of the subject. This brushwork is an ingenious way of conveying movement, giving the illusion of body parts revolving around and sliding against each other. In other paintings, such as *Study of a dog in movement: walking; plinth* (c.1953–54; private collection), found in the studio after Wirth-Miller's death, the depiction of the body is interrupted

by vertical omissions. In others, such as *Study for 'Dog in movement'* (Fig.10), the anatomy is blurred and barely distinguishable. As a consequence, the dogs lack corporeality and, together with their colour composition, the paint application gives them the ghostly look of a supernatural emanation, a flickering, unreal appearance full of internal energy.

The exhibition took place two years after Bacon had begun a group of very similar dog paintings, starting in 1952 with three works all titled *Dog*,⁶⁷ followed by *Man with dog* (1953; Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo)⁶⁸ and two paintings from 1954 titled *Study of a dog* (National Gallery of Art, Washington) and *A performing dog* (private collection).⁶⁹ Wirth-Miller must have been familiar with all but the last two when painting his series, especially since Bacon's *Man with dog* had been shown at the Hanover Gallery in the summer of 1954, and *Dog* was exhibited there in the winter of 1952–53.⁷⁰ As discussed above, Wirth Miller may even have contributed to one of these canvases. It was a moment when his work showed clear influence from Bacon: for example the unfinished painting of a suited man walking mentioned above alludes to Bacon's *Men in blue* series painted in 1954. The obvious parallels between the two groups of dog paintings stems in addition from the fact that both artists borrowed the form of the dog from a Muybridge series documenting the motion of a mastiff.⁷¹ This source, used by Wirth-Miller in *Study for Dog in Movement* (MB Art Foundation, Monaco) was found among his studio material (Fig.6).⁷² For his dog paintings Wirth-Miller also adopted

14. Francis Bacon working material, torn-out page, folded, attached to support and inserted in plastic bag, of 'Pugilist. Striking a blow' from E. Muybridge: *The Human Figure in Motion*, London 1901 (possibly), plate 63. (© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2023; photograph Perry Ogden; Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane).

15. Detail of Fig.14, showing the folded page and two merged frames.



distinctive stylistic devices of Bacon's. The smearing of the animal's face in *Dog* is not unlike Bacon smudging of the face in *Dog* (1952; Tate), a technique also evident in other works of this period, such as *Study of figure in a landscape* (1952; Phillips Collection, Washington).⁷³ In addition Wirth-Miller used what Bacon called 'shuttering'⁷⁴ – the interruption of anatomy by vertical omissions – producing an effect reminiscent of a number of Bacon's paintings, such as *Study after Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X*.⁷⁵

The colour scheme of Wirth-Miller's dog paintings, in which bright figures are set against a dark grey, blue or black background, is also consistent with Bacon's preferred hues from 1953 onwards, as is exemplified by *Study of a nude* (1952–53; Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich).⁷⁶ The purple and black in combination with large areas of unpainted canvas in Wirth-Miller's *Study for Dog in Movement* (MB Art Foundation) is reminiscent of Bacon's *Study of a baboon* (1953; Museum of Modern Art, New York)⁷⁷ and the studies of a pope of the same period. On some occasions, Wirth-Miller even emulated Bacon's hand. In *Study of a dog in movement: walking; plinth*, he merely provided an indication of a foreleg with a free brushstroke, imitating Bacon's way of hinting at elements of figures in such paintings as *Sphinx II* (1953; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven).⁷⁸

Yet although Wirth-Miller's dog paintings are so close to Bacon's that a comparison is inevitable, Bacon's dogs are, for instance, much smaller in relation to the canvas, creating room for more complex and

meaningful backgrounds. All of Bacon's dog paintings of 1952 emphasised the figure by placing it in the centre of an octagonal constellation on the ground; in addition *Man with dog* incorporates a second, albeit shadowy figure. Furthermore, whereas Wirth-Miller made use of a wide variety of poses taken from several different Muybridge sequences, the subjects in Bacon's *Dog* (1952; Tate), *Dog* (1952; private collection), *Man with dog* (1953; Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo) and probably, albeit with slight alterations, *Dog* (1952; private collection), all derive from the same Muybridge photograph (Fig.11).⁷⁹ In general, Wirth-Miller studied the Muybridge sources more diligently and remained closer to them. This is exemplified by the way that in contrast to Bacon's paintings, where the dogs' heads resemble those of a greyhound, Wirth-Miller kept the bulky head of Muybridge's mastiff. In their overall design, and especially in the rendering of the animals, his paintings are more deliberate, planned and sometimes laboured, whereas Bacon's works harbour his explosive imagination, spontaneity and ability to surprise, along with his characteristic expressive and gestural paint work.

After he had created his series of dog paintings, Wirth-Miller returned to landscape painting, as exemplified by his solo show *East Anglian Landscapes* at the Beaux Arts Gallery in 1956, which consisted of paintings of the Essex countryside. Although some colour photographs of landscapes, probably from later decades, were found at the Store House no direct references to them in Wirth-Miller's paintings have yet been established.⁸⁰

A comparison of the use Wirth-Miller and Bacon made in their work of the photographic material they collected in their studios opens up important new insights into the painters' artistic relationship and helps to delineate its extent. Their diverging ideas of how to handle their studio collections, what to borrow from them and whether or not to alter subjects in the images they collected, are both enlightening and exemplary in terms of the different ways painters have worked with photography. The obvious parallels in these aspects of their art make comparisons both sensible and fruitful. However, for many other aspects of Wirth-Miller's work, it may be worth eventually shifting the emphasis away from Bacon. There is still much to be explored about him as an artist in his own right. For example, as the exhibition at Firstsite demonstrated, a considerable amount of his work is not conclusively dated and the variety of style in his paintings suggests that an equally wide range of influences remains to be explored. It will be exciting to see what comes to light when Bacon is taken out of the equation.



16. *Study from the Human Body (Man Turning on Light)*, 1973, by Francis Bacon. 1973. Oil and alkyd paint on canvas, 200.6 by 148.4 cm. (© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2023; photograph Perry Ogden; private collection).

64 A. Wilson: 'A study of the objectification of the bestial', in Birch *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp.12–18, at p.12, and illustrations of Wirth-Miller paintings in the show 'The Landscapes', date range from 1939–78, in *ibid.*, pp.54–116.

65 See exh. cat. *Paintings: Studies of a Dog in Movement*, London (Beaux Arts Gallery) 1954. It is unillustrated but lists the paintings as: 1 *Running*, 2 *Jumping Down*, 3 *Turning*, 4 *Landing*, 5 *Walking Forward*, 6 *Breaking into a Run*, 7 *Jumping Over*, 8 *Walking Forward*, 9 *Walking*, 10 *Walking*, 11 *Running*, 12 *Leaping*, 13 *Walking*, 14 *Running*. Andrew Wilson thought they were all painted in 1953, see A. Wilson: 'Always the viewer', in J. Birch *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.18–24, at p.19.

66 For example 'Study of a dog in movement: walking' (c.1953–54) and 'Study of a dog in movement: walking; plinth' (c.1953–54), illustrated in Birch *et al.*, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.31 and 35; see also Turner, *op. cit.* (note 1), plates between p.184 and 185.

67 CR, nos.52–03 (Tate), 52–16 (private

collection) and 52–17 (private collection). 68 CR, nos.53–06.

69 CR, nos.54–13 and 54–19.

70 Exh. cat. *Francis Bacon*, London (Hanover Gallery), 1952/53, and exh. cat. *Francis Bacon: Paintings*, London (Hanover Gallery) 1954 (CR, no.52–17).

71 E. Muybridge: *Animal Locomotion*, Philadelphia 1887, plate 704, 'Dog; walking; mastiff. Dread'.

72 MBA Item 543: fragment of page, mounted on cardboard, E. Muybridge, *Animals in Motion*, London 1899, p.63, single frame from series 'The Walk', 'Some phases in the walk of a dog from series 14'.

73 CR, nos 52–03 and 52–12.

74 Bacon quoted in Sylvester, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.243.

75 CR, no.53–02.

76 CR, no.53–01.

77 CR, no.53–17.

78 CR, no.53–16.

79 CR, nos.52–03, 52–16, 53–06 and 52–17.

80 Turner, *op. cit.* (note 1), plates between p.184 and 185, labelled 'source photography for landscapes'.