

For Immediate Release

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BACON'S POPE

Francis Bacon's tribute to Velazquez's Pope Innocent X

To be offered at Christie's in February 2006

Post War and Contemporary Art, Evening Sale

Christie's King Street

8 February 2006

London – *Study from Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velazquez* by Francis Bacon will be offered at Christie's in London in the evening sale of *Post-War and Contemporary Art* on 8 February 2006 (estimate on request). Francis Bacon's *Pope* series of paintings are considered to be one of his most celebrated and iconic subjects and this portrait, dating from 1959, marks a turning point in the development of what would come to be recognised as Bacon's signature style.

Francis Bacon was obsessed by Velazquez's painting of Pope Innocent X. He thought it "one of the greatest portraits that has ever been made" and it was to inspire a number of his pictures from 1950 onwards. "I was haunted by that work, by the reproductions that I saw of it. It's such an extraordinary portrait that I wanted to do something based on it....I was quite overcome by it and I felt compelled to do what I did. I felt overwhelmed by that image."

As in the original painting by Velazquez, the Pope is seated centre stage. However, although Bacon has distorted and disturbed the features of the Pope, the pontiff remains highly recognisable, even down to his sideways glance. Bacon changed the colour of the background, replacing the plush claret-coloured velvet of the original with the green that would form the background of almost all his paintings of this period. *Study from Portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velazquez* marks a turning point in the development of Bacon's style; the thinner, raw brushwork of his earlier paintings replaced by sumptuous, painterly swirls as seen in Innocent X's face.

Bacon made a concerted effort to buy book after book containing illustrations of Velazquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X, and yet when he had the opportunity to view the portrait in Rome, he chose not to do so. Instead, he deliberately limited his knowledge of the work to the small reproductions that he so compulsively acquired. He felt almost unwillingly drawn to this picture, to the subject's quiet authority and to the authority of Velazquez's masterly handling. However, like Bacon's other *Pope* paintings, this work is an attack on religion, on Catholicism, on power, on his father, on the Old Masters and even on his own limitations.

When Velazquez painted his portrait of the Pope, Innocent X was considered all-powerful and infallible. Bacon was intrigued by this and by the change that had taken place in the role of religion. His painting set out to remove the veneer of extra powers and mystic surrounding the pontiff. Creating a direct assault on his papal authority, Bacon shows the Pope denuded of his assurances, of his certainty of divine powers, showing instead the ugly realities of his existence in today's world. Here, the Pope appears tense and terrified, a weak and vulnerable figure, glancing sideways out into the world as though discerning a threat. At the same time, by stripping the Pope of his authority, Bacon captures the vulnerability of the human condition and the fragility of life. It is for this reason that some of Bacon's other depictions of the Pope are shown screaming, having been forced into revelation, robbed of the comforting curtain of their beliefs.

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Images available on request

Visit Christie's on the Web at www.christies.com

Notes to Editors:

Christie's leads the international Post-War and Contemporary Art market and also has a long tradition of selling and achieving the best results of art by Francis Bacon at auction. In November 2005, Christie's New York established a new record price for any work at auction by Francis Bacon with *Study for a Pope I* selling for \$10.1 million.

Public Viewing:

Location: Christie's South Kensington, 85 Old Brompton Road, London SW7 3LD
Date: Friday 3 – Wednesday 8 February 2006
Tel no: 020 7930 6074