

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

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The Telegraph

**A "centrepiece of the whole of 20th-century art":
rediscovered Francis Bacon piece to be auctioned at
Christie's**



Francis Bacon, Head with Raised Arm (1955), oil on canvas (24in X 20in) CREDIT: COURTESY OF CHRISTIE'S

- [Colin Gleadell](#)

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A rediscovered painting by Francis Bacon is to be shown for the first time in over 50 years at next month's contemporary art sales in London. The 1955 painting of Pope Pius XI seated on a golden throne, his hand raised in some enigmatic gesture, was last exhibited in 1962 and sold the following year in Turin. Since then it has been locked away in a very private collection.

Even the extensive, 10-year research conducted by art historian, Martin Harrison for the *catalogue raisonné* of all the artist's works, published last year, could not uncover its whereabouts and lists the painting, *Head with Raised Arm*, as 'location unknown.' It is the only one of Bacon's 584 paintings which Harrison could not locate. Christie's is withholding the identity of the seller, but speculation will be centred around the descendants of Italian collectors, such as film producer, Carlo Ponti, or car manufacturer, Gianni Agnelli, who bought examples of Bacon's work in Turin at that time.

Bacon's Papal portraits are considered his finest achievements. They are, writes his biographer, Michael Peppiatt, "not only the centrepiece of all his paintings of the 1950s, but a centrepiece of the whole of 20th-century art."

They began after he saw a reproduction of Velazquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* in 1946 and became obsessed with it, attracted by the idea that an all-powerful religious leader could also be a tragic figure, terrified by the human situation.

Amazingly, he never saw the original, but bought a photograph of it to work from. One of the series, a 76-inch tall *Study for Innocent X*, sold in 2007 for a then record £26.6 million. The buyer was thought to be shipping heir, Philip Niarchos.

The rediscovered painting measures just 26 by 20 inches, which accounts for the lower £10 million estimate, but is rare - one of only two known Papal paintings of that size. And, while most of Bacon's 50 Pope paintings are inspired by Velazquez, only nine relate to the incumbent Pope, Pius XI. Bacon had a photograph of Pius being carried on his throne through St Peter's pinned to his studio wall next to images of wartime dictators.

While his Velazquez inspired paintings are rent with the anguish of a scream, his Pius paintings express a more repressed anxiety. When this was painted, Pius was extremely ill, suffering terrible nightmares and hallucinations. Hardly surprising for a pontiff who had to negotiate Nazism, speak out against persecution and protect the Vatican at the same time.

The Post War & Contemporary Art auction will be held at Christie's London (8 King Street, St. James's, SW1Y 6QT) on October 6th at 7pm.