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PRESS RELEASE

## Francis Bacon's 'Pope with Owls' to Lead Phillips' Evening Sale of 20th Century & Contemporary Art

To be Offered for the First Time at Auction on 17 November, Estimated at \$35-45 Million



**Francis Bacon**  
'Pope with Owls', circa 1958  
Estimate: \$35-45 Million

NEW YORK – 28 OCTOBER 2021 – On 17 November, Phillips will offer Francis Bacon's 'Pope with Owls' as the star lot of the New York Evening Sale of 20th Century & Contemporary Art. Executed circa 1958, the work arrives for the first time at auction with an estimate of \$35-45 million, having been held in the same prestigious private American collection for nearly four decades.

Jean-Paul Engelen, Deputy Chairman and Worldwide Co-Head of 20th Century & Contemporary Art, said, "We are thrilled to present 'Pope with Owls' as the highlight of the fall season at Phillips. In the late 1950s, Bacon spent a great deal of time in Tangiers, an exotic escape from conservative London for artists, writers and adventurers. For Bacon, it was a period of great inspiration and creativity. His longest stay in Morocco – fourteen months – was filled with incredible high and lows and it was during this time that the present Pope painting was created. An exceptional example from the artist's most iconic series, the work elevates Bacon, rightfully placing him among the greatest names in the art historical canon."

Forming part of Francis Bacon's celebrated papal portrait series which spanned over two decades, 'Pope with Owls' is positioned at a critical juncture in the evolution of the artist's interrogations into one of the most recognizable subjects in his oeuvre. The work takes as its reference the canonical portrait of Pope Innocent X by Diego Velázquez, an image which acted as a touchstone for the artist's explorations into the rendering of flesh and psychological deconstruction between 1949 and 1971. The Papal paintings have gained art historical significance not only for Bacon's masterful execution but also for their subversion of the old master source.

Extending from the darker papal paintings of the 1950s, 'Pope with Owls' acts as a crucial step in the development of Bacon's engagement with the subject, with his iterations on the subject becoming increasingly disfigured over the course of the 1950s. Not only does the work still engender the haunting agony of his the "Popes" from his first impulses engaging with the subject matter, it also moves towards the violently brilliant scarlet palette and full-length figure which would go on to define his "Popes" of 1961 through the subsequent decade.

Bacon's gravitation toward a more baroque palette may be credited to the time he spent in Tangier, Morocco, visiting his long-term lover Peter Lacy—a man with whom he had a tumultuous relationship that haunted his output throughout the 1950s. It has been argued that the impetus to experiment with a more vivid color palette was precipitated by the bright Moroccan light. Here the deep purples act as a chromatic backdrop to the richer red, undertones that Bacon has built up in successive layers of light and shadow.

These gestural lines evolve into the vigorous sweeps of Bacon's dry-bristle brush used to execute the white robes of the papal dress. Their very materiality, descending into a haunting green void, engenders the space to oscillate between tangibility and flatness. This shift from the inky gloom of the 1950s *Popes* anticipates the color which Bacon would use often as a background for much of his best work in the early 1960s.

During this time in Tangier, Bacon also explored imagery of animals for his upcoming show at Galerie Rive Droite, Paris. The presence of the two watchful owls in the present work, proffers an unsettling mien to the composition, capturing the gaze of the spectator as if to bear witness. As Martin Harrison explains in Bacon's *Catalogue Raisonné*, of the nocturnal bird's position in Bacon's iconography, "he had linked them (always latterly, in pairs) with Popes as dark antagonists." \*

Underscoring the historical significance of this painting, the two other known versions of 'Pope with Owls' are currently housed in San Francisco's SF MoMA and Brussels' Royal Museums of Fine Arts.

'Pope with Owls' will go on tour to Hong Kong from 29-30 October before returning to New York for the exhibition at 432 Park Avenue from 8-17 November. The auction on 17 November will mark the first Evening Sale of 20th Century & Contemporary Art to welcome in-person bidding at the company's new headquarters.

**Auction:** 17 November 2021

**Auction viewing in New York:** 8-17 November

**Location:** 432 Park Avenue, New York

**Click here for more information:** <https://www.phillips.com/auctions/auction/NY010721>

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\* (Martin Harrison, *Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné, 1958-1971, vol. III, London, 2016, p. 736*).

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*\*Estimates do not include buyer's premium; prices achieved include the hammer price plus buyer's premium.*

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