



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Picasso ? Bacon: What It Feels Like to Be Human

Albertina, 17.09.2026 [ENA]

Picasso – Bacon: What It Feels Like to Be Human is a formidable and intellectually resonant exhibition: not simply a dialogue between two titans of twentieth-century painting, but an investigation into how the human figure became the site of modernity's deepest anxieties, desires, and contradictions. The exhibition opened at the Vienna's Albertina on 18 September 2026.

The exhibition brings together around 70 key works from international museums and private collections, placing Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon in a charged visual confrontation. The exhibition's central premise is elegantly simple yet art-historically rich. Picasso was the revolutionary master whose reconfiguration of the body transformed the visual language of the early twentieth century; Bacon, emerging in the shadow of that achievement, made Picasso's formal discoveries the departure point for a far more existentially bruised post-war vision. Bacon was profoundly affected by Picasso's work and reportedly decided to become a painter after encountering it.

Throughout his career, he wrestled with this immense artistic predecessor—at once adopting, resisting, and seeking to surpass him. The Albertina's exhibition makes this complicated inheritance visible. Picasso is not presented as a distant historical monument, nor Bacon as a mere follower. Instead, the show allows both artists to appear as relentless investigators of the human image. Their work shares an appetite for distortion, fragmentation, and physical intensity, yet their artistic temperaments remain radically different. Picasso's transformations often possess speed, invention, eroticism, wit, and a protean delight in visual possibility.

Bacon, by contrast, subjects the figure to a darker theatre of isolation: bodies seem pressed into confined interiors, caught between flesh and paint, desire and dread. The most compelling achievement of this comparison is its emphasis on the body. For both painters, the figure is never simply an object of representation. It is a volatile field upon which psychological, sexual, historical, and metaphysical forces become visible. Picasso's bodies are fractured, rearranged, and reimaged with astonishing formal freedom. Bacon's are twisted, blurred, screamed into existence, or dissolved in brushwork that gives paint the frightening vitality of living tissue.

This is why the exhibition's subtitle, What It Feels Like to Be Human, is so apt. The phrase refuses a serene or idealised understanding of humanity. It points instead to embodiment: to the sensations of pain, hunger, fear, exposure, ecstasy, and mortality. The selected thematic correspondences—crucifixions, screams,

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bullfighting, nudes, and the “tears of Eros”—allow the visitor to trace how both artists returned repeatedly to the drama of the body under pressure.

In Picasso’s work, the Minotaur, the wounded horse, the violated or desired female figure, and the cruciform body are recurring signs of a world in which myth and modern catastrophe overlap. Bacon, working after the devastations of the Second World War, strips these motifs of narrative consolation. His bodies inhabit a modern void: they are observed, displayed, contorted, and often trapped within geometrically ambiguous spaces. Where Picasso invents endlessly, Bacon intensifies obsessively.

The exhibition’s curatorial strength lies in its refusal to reduce the relationship to a simple story of influence. Picasso never absorbed Bacon’s work in the way Bacon absorbed Picasso’s; nevertheless, the elder artist followed Bacon’s career with attention. The exhibition therefore addresses a more subtle exchange—one based on recognition, rivalry, and the enduring problem of what it means to paint the figure after the collapse of classical ideals.

With Michael Peppiatt as guest curator and Gunhild Bauer as co-curator, the Albertina has assembled a presentation that promises both scholarly clarity and emotional impact. The decision to juxtapose works rather than arrange them as separate monographic narratives is crucial. It encourages the viewer to look comparatively: to notice the echo of a contoured torso, the visual shock of a distorted face, the persistent return of mouths, heads, limbs, and vulnerable flesh. Such encounters make artistic history feel active rather than settled.

This exhibition is also a fitting statement for the Albertina, whose anniversary year lends particular weight to a project of this scale. The museum presents the show from 18 September 2026 to 31 January 2027, offering visitors a rare opportunity to encounter these two masters in sustained proximity. Ultimately, Picasso – Bacon: What It Feels Like to Be Human succeeds because it identifies the profound seriousness beneath both artists’ visual violence. These paintings do not distort the body in order to abandon reality; they distort it in order to reach a more urgent truth. Picasso and Bacon remind us that the human form is not stable, harmonious, or complete. It is fragile, desiring, wounded, inventive, and perpetually becoming.

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