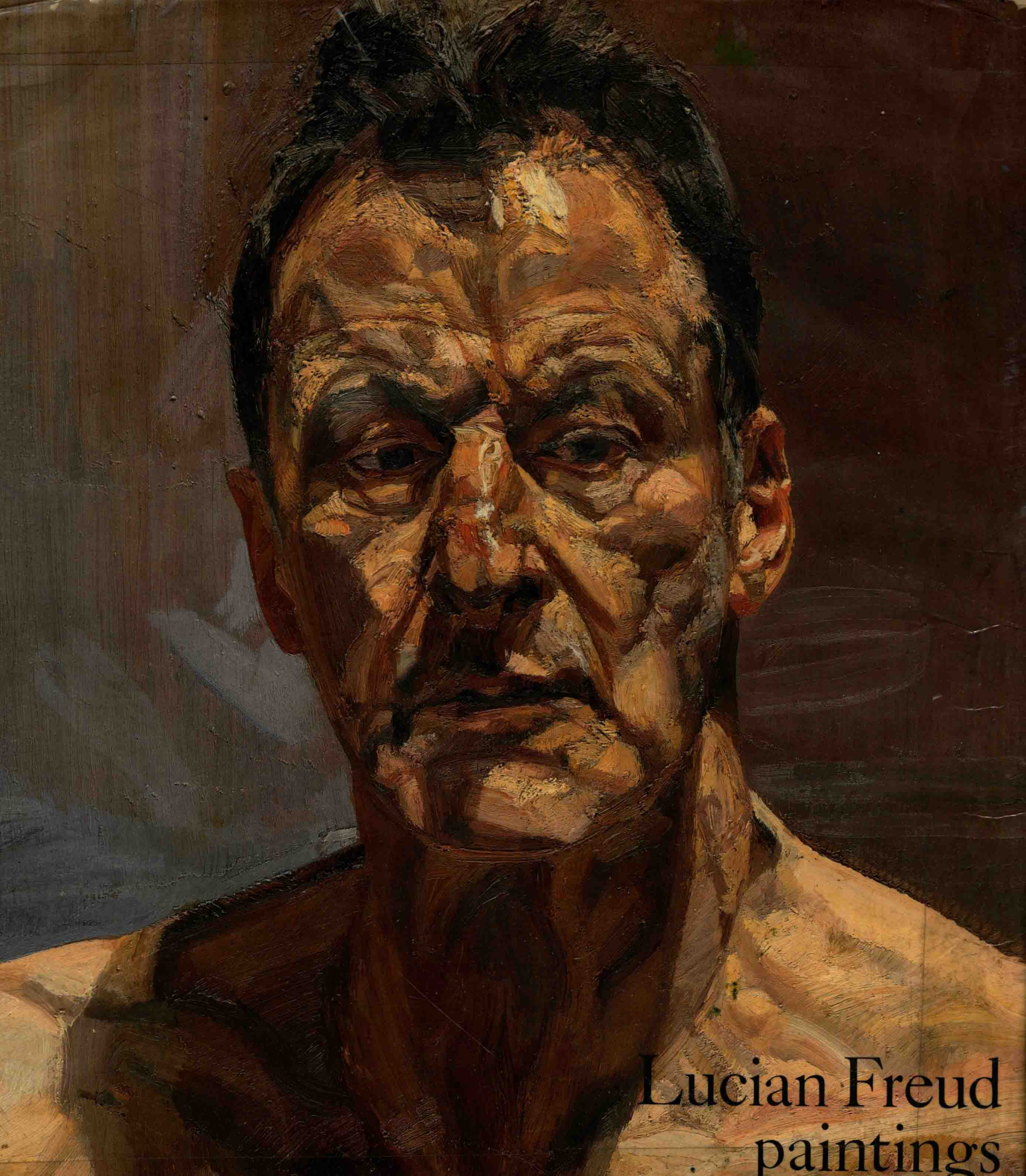

Lucian Freud paintings

Lucian Freud *paintings*

95 illustrations, 88 in color

Robert Hughes

Lucian Freud
paintings

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Robert Hughes On Lucian Freud

All quotations from Lucian Freud come from private conversations with the author

The first painting by a living British artist that I can remember seeing – not just noticing – was a Lucian Freud, hanging in the Tate Gallery more than twenty-five years ago. It was his 1952 portrait of Francis Bacon. A small picture, about the size of a shorthand note-pad, and one whose extreme compression makes it even more compact in memory; one remembers it as a miniature. The thought of 'miniature', with its Gothic overtones, was affirmed by the surface: tight, exact, meticulous and (most eccentrically, when seen in the late fifties, a time of urgent gestures on burlap) painted on a sheet of copper. There seemed to be something Flemish about the even light, the pallor of the flesh, and the uniform cast of the artist's attention. But there, on the edge of familiarity, its likeness to the modes of older portraiture stopped. What a strange, ophidian modernity this small image had, and still retains! One did not need to know it was the head of a living artist to sense that Freud had caught a kind of visual truth, at once sharply focused and evasively inward, that rarely showed itself in painting before the twentieth century.

In 'normal' portraiture, a tacit agreement between painter and subject allows the sitter to mask himself and project this mask – of success, of dignity, of beauty, of role – upon the world. But here the face with its lowered, almond-shaped eyes and eyelids precisely contoured as a beetle's wing-cases is caught in a moment between reflection and self-projection. It is as naked as a hand.

The point is not that the artist has 'penetrated the character' of his sitter, that commonplace requirement of portraiture which is, in fact, only a little more sophisticated than the pleasure people express when the eyes of a subject 'follow them around the room'. Rather, it is that he has seen everything with such evenness, while conveying the utter disjuncture between the artist's gaze and the sitter's lack of response. Everything is there, down to the shadow cast on the forehead by an escaped curl of hair whose strands you can count; but every particular, like the long horizontal S made by the curl of the eyebrow and a shading on the crease between the eyes, seems to obey the strictest impulses of artifice. Here, the fluent continuity of Ingres's form-world seems to have been refracted through the detailed spikiness of northern Renaissance art, but in no antiquarian way: Bacon's pear-shaped face has the silent intensity of a grenade in the millisecond before it goes off.

In the thirty-five years since he painted this, Lucian Freud has become the greatest living realist painter. To grasp what he has done one needs to set aside one or two shibboleths of contemporary culture, ideas meant to distinguish a 'post-modernist' state of mind from others allegedly less up-to-date. The main one is the idea that painting can still enrich itself by incessantly quoting other visual media – film and print, still photography and particularly television, in whose amniotic glare every foetal mind in Europe and America for the last two generations has been left to float. The history of painting's relationship to visual mass media is almost (and in the case of photography, literally) as old as the media themselves, but one does not need to know very much about the history of painting to sense that the expressive powers of the older art have changed, not necessarily for the better, as a result. The difference between, say, Pierre Bonnard using a Kodak snapshot of Marthe Boursin on the terrace at Le Cannet as one of the *données* of a composition, and Andy Warhol repeating the photographed face of Marilyn or Liz 100 times on a single canvas forty years later, is absolute, not relative; one of kind, not of degree. The former takes it for granted that, whatever machines and memory-aids it may use, whatever visual madeleines trigger recollection, painting and its direct conversion of sight into mark are still on top. The latter takes it equally for granted that the 'Big Media' are the primary and given field of an artist's demotic posture. It simply assumes that culture and

nature have reversed themselves, that the image on the television screen or the tabloid page is the one that counts in our visual understanding of the world; that it makes no practical difference whether a painter objects to that or, like Warhol, greets it with hierophantic rapture: there is nothing he can actually do about it, since the small audience of art is powerless against the vaster solicitations and generalizations of mass media.

These media, we learn, are reality, and all culture had better get on board. Or else, the artist can set himself up as a 'diagnostician' of mass culture, reserving the right not to be in it (mingled with a little envy at its star-making power) while devising glosses on it. For this, a carefully primped irony, that cuirasse of art in the early 1980s, is necessary – a distance so affected as to constitute a hopeless impediment to feeling. Nothing is fresh. Or, nothing can be seen to be fresh without exposing author and audience to the charge of naivety, of not understanding one's 'true' and inescapably media-bound cultural circumstances. Mass visual media are the dog; painting, the tail; there is no question which wags which. The intellectually 'respectable' way for painting to confront mass media while retaining some shreds of its old avant-garde credentials is to acknowledge this and then give in to it. 'Only by embracing the intensity of empty value at the core of mass-media representation and the fierce recycling of styles used to twist and pervert every intention,' claimed one recent apologist for this state of affairs, 'only then can the perennial challenge be met of finding and constructing significant meaning in the midst of declining values for images and words.' (Lisa Phillips, *David Salle* catalogue, Whitney Museum, 1987) That use of 'only' is fairly breathtaking but that is what the argument in essence comes down to: and it is on this philistine counsel of despair that a number of big contemporary reputations, from late Warhol to David Salle in America, from Richard Hamilton to Gilbert and George in England, find their footing.

Perhaps we are stuck with the notion that the mass visual media exercise such a broad mandate over human imagination in the late twentieth century that they have their own kind of *Tausendjahrige Reich*. Perhaps the fate of the visual arts, as a consequence, can only be to oscillate between this sort of entropic aetherialization and the lumpy, hot rhetoric of expressionism – suffering, either way, from a mannerist denial of the specific, the keenly somatic and the authentically felt.

But then, perhaps not. Painting is a sublime instrument of dissatisfaction, of dissent from any kind of visual orthodoxy and received idea, not excluding those of late modernist mannerism. No work of art can ever be experienced at first hand by as many people as a network news broadcast or the commercials that grout it. That does not matter. It never has. What does count is the energy and persistence with which painting can embrace not 'empty value' but lived experience of the world; give that experience stable form, measure and structure; and so release it, transformed, into one mind at a time, viewer by viewer, so that it can work as (among other things) a critique of the more 'ideological' and generalized claims of mass media. There is no great work of art, abstract or figurative (and especially none figurative) without an empirical core, a sense that the mind is working on raw material that exists in the world at large, in some degree beyond mere invention. Painting is, one might say, exactly what mass visual media are not: a way of specific engagement, not of general seduction. That is its continuing relevance to us. Everywhere, and at all times, there is a world to be re-formed by the darting subtlety and persistent slowness of the painter's eye. We are never loose from our bodies and the re-embodiment of our experience of that world – its delivery from the merely conceptual, the unfelt, the second-hand or the rhetorically transcendent – is what painting

offers. Hence the present interest (belated enough but better late than never) in the work of Lucian Freud, a man of 64 whose first American retrospective exhibition this is.

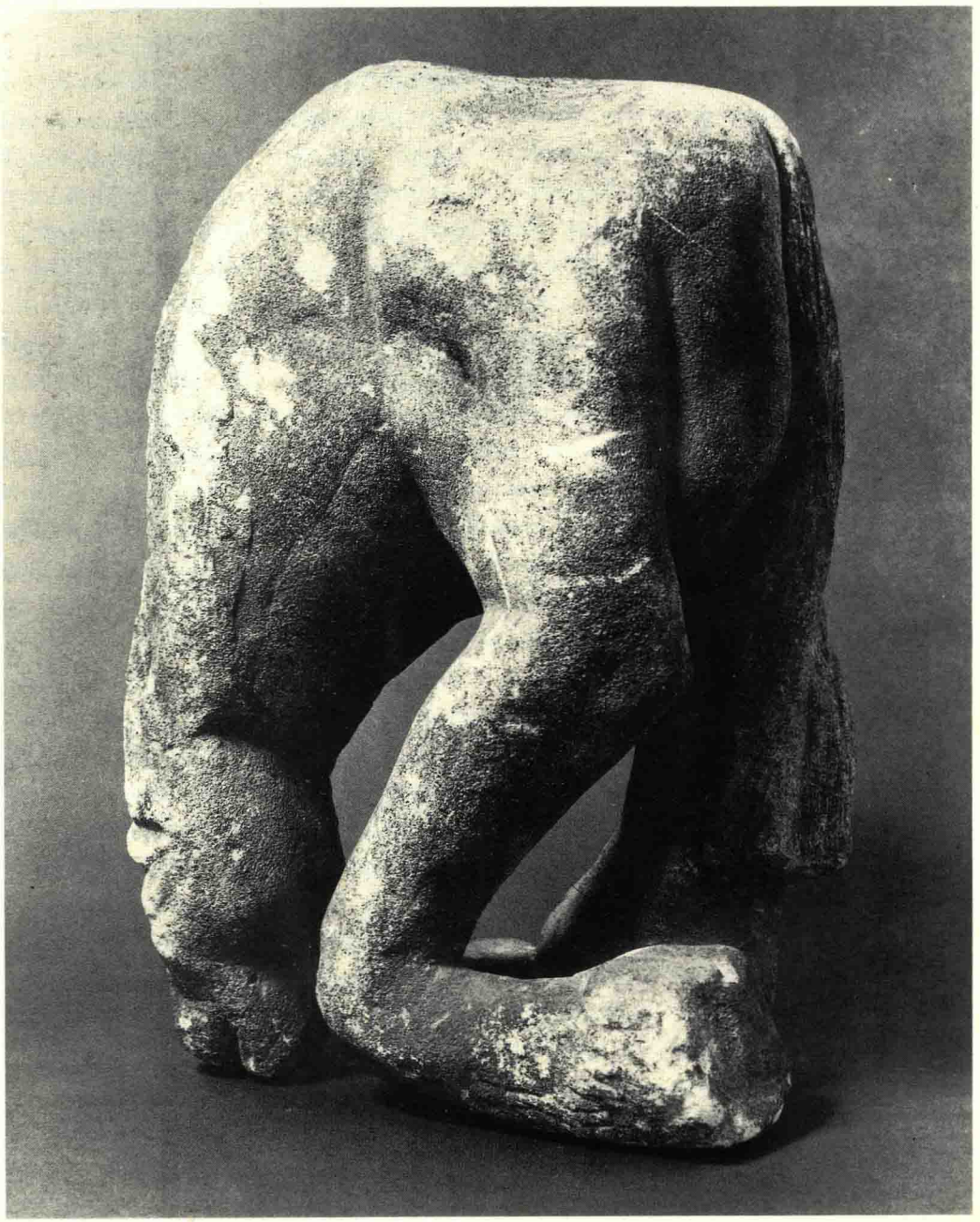
Lucian Freud was born in Berlin, in December 1922. His father, Ernst Freud, the youngest son of Sigmund, was an architect who had painted as a student (but entertained no ideas of being a professional artist). His mother, Lucie Brasch, was the daughter of a well-off grain merchant. Lucian was the second of their three sons. He grew up in an elegant quarter of Berlin near the Tiergarten; the family spent part of each summer on the Baltic, and as a child Lucian was taken to his maternal grandfather's country estate near Kotbus, where his lifelong love of horses was set: one of his earliest memories is of a fire in the stables, the panic, the animals plunging and whinnying. But life in Berlin was protected, cosseted, close, and rendered all the more so by the anxieties of an Austrian Jewish family under the lengthening shadow of Nazism and the street eruptions of Brownshirt gangs. Freud remembers being watched all the time by parents and governesses, escorted each day to the Französisches Gymnasium (by a route that sedulously avoided the sight of the burnt carcass of the Reichstag) – a childhood that prepared him, as no other could, for an adult obsession with solitude and unpredictable movement. To know exactly where one is, and for no one else to know it; to control one's social distances and apportion one's availability to others; to see without being seen, and to slip at will between the layers – these are unnegotiable conditions of Freud's life. 'All the real pleasures were solitary. I hate being watched at work. I can't even read when others are about.'

The family flat had art in it, as one would expect any house belonging to cultivated Jews in the late 1920s to do, but Freud's father was no collector. Freud remembers Hokusai prints, reproductions of Brueghel's *Seasons* and in particular some plates of Dürer watercolours – one depicting a tangle of grass stems, 'dense but not congested', and the other (from the Albertina) of Dürer's famous crouching hare. They seemed very big to him but he can no longer tell whether this was due to their real size or their strong visual impact; however, when he was eight, he combined their motifs in a drawing of a man lying down in tall grass. He also remembers nursery toys that piqued him visually, whose structure made him curious, particularly a jointed wooden horse whose screws and bolts gave him 'a sense of the mechanical attachment of ligaments to bone'. Like all children, Freud started scrawling early; unlike most, he continued with it until, by the time he was twelve, drawing was his constant passion. But its skills he had to learn by himself.

In 1933 Hitler became Chancellor and there was little doubt what the fate of Jews in Berlin would be. Lucian Freud's father came to England to find a suitable school for the children and soon after the family moved to London. (Grandfather Sigmund more obstinately remained in Vienna, until just after the *Anschluss* in 1938, before seeking refuge in England – like the Rabbi Yochanan ben Sakkai, as he later put it, departing for Jabneh to open a school of Torah studies after Titus' destruction of the temple. Though harried by the Gestapo and tormented by cancer of the mouth, he was able to ship his collections, books and papers to London, where he settled in Hampstead. The painter remembers his illustrious grandfather by his jokes, and by the gifts of money.)

School in the new country did not always go smoothly. Lucian Freud was not quite eleven when he arrived in England – he became a naturalized British subject in 1939 – and his parents seem to have assumed (as he did well before his sixteenth birthday) that he would grow

up to be an artist. Theoretically, the school he went to should have made this easier. Dartington Hall, near Totnes in Devon, had been set up by Leonard Elmhirst and his wife, an American heiress of strongly liberal views, as an experiment in training the young to social responsibility by giving them freedom of choice; in the mid-1930s this self-contained community, with its farm and forestry departments, its own stables, textile studio and construction workshops, was as far from the cloistered, philistine, flogging-and-fagging stereotype of an English boarding school as a school could get. Its freedom seemed anarchic and Freud exploited it. Disliking his art teacher, he skipped art classes, spent his whole time riding the school horses, objected to anyone else handling them, and even had fancies about being a jockey. His only known sculpture is a sandstone carving of a horse, done when he was fourteen.



Three-legged horse, 1937
sculpture, sandstone, *c.* 56 cm
Private collection

The refugees, 1941
oil on panel, 50.8 × 61 cm
Private collection

Plucked out of Dartington, he finished his schooling at Bryanston, a more sober but still 'progressive' public school in Dorset. In 1938 the stone horse gained him admission to the Central School of Arts and Crafts, from which in 1939 he moved to a smaller and more atelier-like institution, the East Anglian School of Drawing and Painting, run at Dedham by the painter Cedric Morris. Morris was a self-taught painter and inventive gardener whose original style affected the way Freud worked. One night he accidentally burned the place down, and in 1942 he ran away to sea on a Merchant Navy vessel but was invalided out of service a few months later. Convalescing from his illness, he returned to Morris's tutelage, drawing incessantly.

The affinities of Freud's early paintings and drawings seem German in their linearity, their spikiness, their sense of the alienated single figure and the isolated single detail. As a boy Freud had not looked at much German expressionism, and in England between 1939 and 1945 there was, in any case, none to see. But there is a distinct likeness, accidental or not, between some of Freud's early work and *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting. Freud as a child had seen and liked certain drawings by George Grosz – mask-like faces, indifferent or sly, glimpsed in the street or on the bus – and to these, as an influence on his fledgling essays like *The refugees*, 1941 (not in this exhibition), one should certainly add the work of Otto Dix. Today Freud is apt to dismiss the more ostentatiously neurotic, cocaine-nervy aspects of *Neue Sachlichkeit* – Christian Schad's portraits of freaks and café socialites, for instance – as predictable illustrations. But there is no doubt that part of his reputation as a boy prodigy in London art circles in the war years rested on his single-minded commitment to linear description rather than painterly evocation, and

Boy with a pigeon, 1944
conté and pencil heightened with white, 50 × 33 cm
Private collection

Christian Bérard, 1948
black and white conté, 41 × 44 cm
Private collection

his refusal to let intense personal interests dominate a painting or a drawing. The precocity of the early work, some of which, like *Boy with a pigeon*, 1944, reveals a degree of control extraordinary in an artist of 21, lies in the fierce independence of its delineation. By 1948, his study of Christian Bérard is already among the best European drawing of its time. The habit of young, neo-romantic painters in England in the early 1940s was to generalize and go after painterly effects, in which an evocative nostalgia for place was mingled with a tardy School-of-Paris cuisine; whereas one senses rebellion in the mannered, spiky forms of Freud's drawing. Everything is equally there, and must be equally described. This objectivity, this evenness of attention mingled with a barely veiled anxiety about the otherness of all objects – rooms, faces, plants, furniture – lies at the core of Freud's early work. It gave rise to the impression, among some critics, that Freud had connected himself to Surrealism. A tenuous link, no more than a whisper of feeling, was there; these days, Freud is inclined to discount it altogether:

As a young man I was not obsessed with working in a specific way, even though I felt very little freedom. The rigidity of Surrealism, its rigid dogma of irrationality, seemed unduly limiting. I could never put anything into a picture that wasn't actually there in front of me. That would be a pointless *lie, a mere bit of artfulness.*

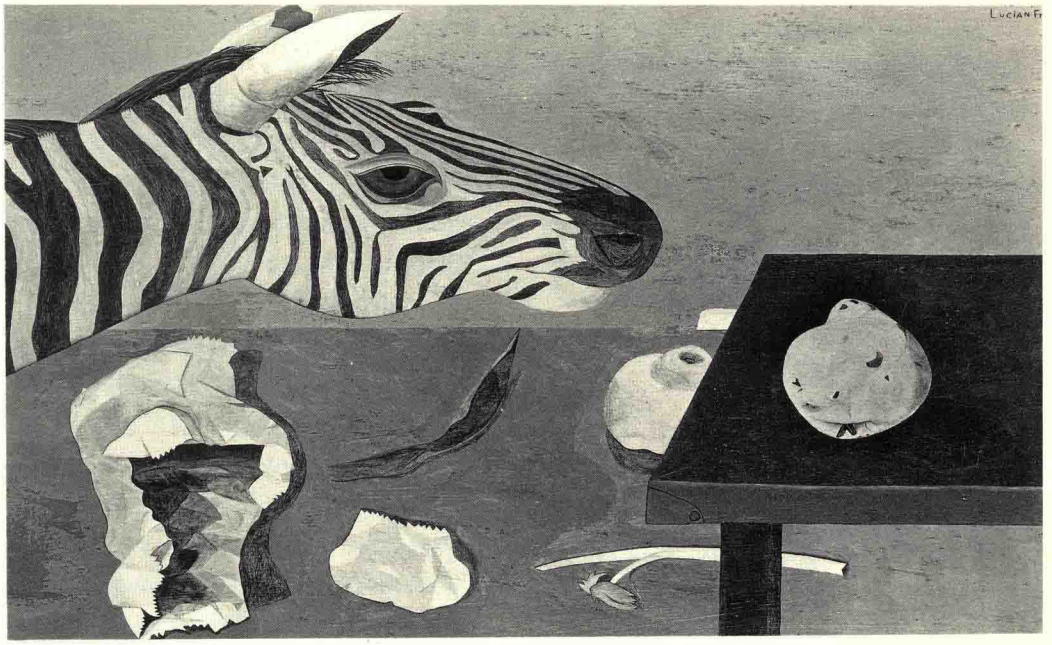
But the touch of Surrealism cannot quite be dismissed; one would be mildly surprised if it were, given Freud's quickness of response and the cultural milieu of wartime London. He had

The painter's room, 1943
oil on canvas, 62.2 × 76.2 cm
Private collection

seen and admired work by Miró and de Chirico. Freud's image of a giant zebra's head poking disconcertingly through the window in *The painter's room*, 1943, or straining towards the still-life in *Quince on a blue table*, is a classic de Chirican trope, the encounter of incompatibles, a homage to Lautréamont's passage about the sewing-machine, the ironing-board and the umbrella. It happened that Freud did have a stuffed zebra's head, that it sat in his studio, and that in the 1940s there was no shortage of English rooms with stuffed trophies on their walls, so that the effigy might have looked less weird then than it seems now. Doubtless this was as close as Freud could come to having a horse in a rented London room. But the head still looms, sad and incongruous, gazing at the scraggy, embrowned indoor palm behind the burst sofa, as though remembering Africa.

Juvenile Freud looks excruciatingly conscious of style: very literal and, at the same time, mannered. It is also tinged with death, since Freud had a yen for organic things that were past movement: dead chickens (autopsy subjects from a local veterinarian, which had perished from 'not too horrific' causes) and dead monkeys supplied by a louche pet-shop owner who also sold snakes, like liquorice, by the foot. The mannerisms, Freud now thinks, came out of his lack of flexibility:

I always felt that my work hadn't much to do with art; my admirations for other art had very little room to show themselves in my work because I hoped that if I concentrated enough the intensity of scrutiny alone would force life into the pictures. I ignored the fact that art, after all, derives from art. Now I realize that this is the case.



Quince on a blue table, 1943/44
oil on canvas, 36.8 × 58.4 cm
Private collection

All the same, the image has some quality of surprise, of confrontation. In conversation, Freud cites a casual-seeming reference from T. S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* (Part II, Scene III, Faber and Faber Ltd and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1939):

> CHARLES
>
> .... I felt safe enough;
> And now I don't feel safe. As if the earth should open
> Right to the centre, as I was about to cross Pall Mall.
> I thought that life could bring no further surprises;
> But I remember now, that I am always surprised
> By the bull-dog in the Burlington Arcade.

The dog in the Burlington Arcade was a stuffed bulldog straining at a leash, which a canine outfitter had placed outside his door to draw customers. Freud remembers seeing it: 'It frightened everyone for about a second. I was really affected by the thought of this.'

That sense of slippage, of the moment in which the world declares its disconcerting alienness, permeates Freud's work and is the warp of its intensity. (The weft, as we shall see, is his privacy about his models as 'people in my life'.) One does not know the name of the young man in *Interior in Paddington*, 1951, but he looks familiar from middle-European painting of the 1920s, this shabby, pale, tight-wound fellow with an unlit cigarette, who wears his raincoat indoors. What rivets one's attention in the painting as *theatre* is the way Freud has distributed the unease, between the curious gesture of the man's right hand – the fingers clasped, hiding or about to lob something, but what? – and the slicing, whipping, minutely observed leaves of the indoor palm, as much a protagonist as the man. This treatment could approach melodrama were it not for its containment by cool pictorial devices: the strict formality of the folds of trouser-leg and gaberdine, the internal rhymes (such as those between the lower folds of

the raincoat and the discreet curve of the iron window-railings, the man in the room and the distant boy in the street, the topknot of the palm and the street-lamp outside); and, above all, the light, which is quiet, clear, enveloping and frontal. It throws no deep shadows. It favours flat shapes and linear, rather than tonally modelled, roundings. It is, in fact, the light emitted by the saint of Freud's imagination and of modernist classicism generally: Ingres.

Ingres had been on Freud's mind ever since he began seriously to paint. To study this perfection in drawing, he recalls, is 'like gazing across a barrier at something unreachable.' What seemed to constitute the 'modernity' of Ingres – the ground from which an artist so long dead could speak to the present – was his detachment, read by Freud as amounting almost to solitude within Ingres's idea of history: his sense of 'the grandeur *and remoteness* of the classical past to which he was appealing.'

Ingres's history painting has the humour of madness. He couldn't draw without inventing. His drawing is evocative in a way that forces us to believe in it. A line, any single line, of his drawings is worth looking at.

Freud does not think of himself as an 'expressive' colourist, and he cites with approval a reply Ingres is supposed to have made when a student asked him what he considered to be most beautiful in art: 'A colour adjacent to another which most closely resembles it.' All Freud wanted to do was draw and go somewhere from there. 'My colour has no symbolic function whatever', he declared some forty years later:

I don't want any colour to be noticeable. I want the colour to be the colour of life, so that you would *notice it as being irregular if it changed. I don't want it to operate in the modernist sense as colour, something independent; I don't want people to say, 'Oh, what was that red or that blue picture of yours, I've forgotten what it was.' Full, saturated colours have an emotional significance that I want to avoid.*

There was no question where Freud stood in the unending squabble between *Rubéniste* and *Poussiniste*; he felt the same kind of conviction that lay behind Blake's objurgations against Reynolds: 'The Man who asserts that there is no Such Thing as Softness in Art, & that every thing in Art is Definite & Determinate, has not been told this by Practise, but by Inspiration & Vision, because Vision is Determinate & Perfect.'

Ingres surfaced especially in Freud's portraits, such as the exquisite sequence on his first wife Kitty Garman, daughter of the sculptor Jacob Epstein, of which the best-known is *Girl with roses*, 1947–8. It is masterly in the smoothness of its transitions, from the detail of hair (in which every strand seems to be in place, with its own stated kink and highlight, nothing skimped) to the finely modulated flatness of the flesh, mapped by a drawing so rigorous and discreet (the lines of eyelashes, the curl of the mouth with its hint of looseness) that detail and stylization cannot be separated. Everything is equally scrutinized, the broken caning of the chair and the exact bloom of light on the dark skirt no less than the rose-petals and the minuscule structure of reflections in those huge, tawny, apprehensive eyes. What other modernist portrait, one asks oneself, has deployed such a consideration of detail amassed and refined to so haunting an erotic tenderness? Surely, none: *Girl with roses*, painted under the spell of Ingres and the Flemish *quattrocento*, but conveying a sense of dislocation – 'It seems impossible that she should not have been trembling', wrote Lawrence Gowing (*Lucian Freud*, 1982, p. 84) – is one of those rare effigies in which nothing seems elided yet everything is