

Lucian Freud

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BRITAIN

Notes for Teachers

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TATE

Lucian Freud

The artist's reputation

Aged eighty this year, Lucian Freud, painter of portraits, nudes and some still lifes, continues to pursue a demanding schedule of work. It is now more than a decade since he was first acclaimed by the critic and historian Robert Hughes as 'the greatest living realist painter' and similar accolades have proliferated ever since. For example the press release for this exhibition tells us that he has 'redefined portraiture'. Students should bear these claims in mind as they view the exhibition and try to decide for themselves why Freud's work should be so highly valued. For their assessment to be meaningful, they need to consider the social and historical background to his painting, described in these pages, as well as comparing it with work by other artists on view at Tate Britain, Tate Modern and the National Portrait Gallery. This booklet is intended mainly for teachers of secondary students although primary teachers could adapt some of its themes. It includes two interviews, one with Sue Tilley who has modelled for the artist and the other with Mary Horlock, one of the curators of the exhibition.

This exhibition focuses on portraits and nudes.

Think about these two genres.

- **What do you expect of a portrait? Why do you think it is such a popular genre?**

There is a long tradition in art of male artists painting beautiful naked women. You can find examples in the National Gallery, by Titian for instance.

- **What makes Lucian Freud's nudes different?**

Find paintings outside these two categories, images of plants and a picture of an armchair.

- **Are these also portraits of a kind and, if so, what do they tell us?**

Historical and Social Context

Growing up in the shadow of war, Berlin and England

Born in 1922, Lucian Freud grew up in Berlin in a large flat with his brothers Stephen and Clement (the former Liberal MP, broadcaster and cookery writer) in a wealthy household which included a cook, a maid and a nanny. His father was an architect while his grandfather was the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Lucian was ten when his family left for England where they settled in late summer 1933 and he has commented ironically that he is grateful to Hitler for forcing his family to come here. His most important training as an artist came from Arthur Lett-Haines and Cedric Morris who ran the East Anglian School of Drawing and Painting at Dedham in Essex (see Freud's *Portrait of Cedric Morris* 1940 in room 2 of the exhibition). Some of Freud's pleasure in the rich texture of paint may come from the work of Morris (one of whose works hangs in the Tate Britain Members Room).

Working in Paris, 1946, privations and renewal

At the end of the Second World War, many artists who had felt confined in London during the war years, made their escape abroad. Lucian Freud went to Greece with the artist John Craxton in 1946. He also went to Paris (at that time the centre of the art world), because he felt that there, art was more valued and artists accorded more respect than in London. Although the war was over and privations gradually lessened, it was a period of recovery in which people were still marked by what they had gone through and this is evident in much of the art and writing of the time. Freud settled in the Hotel d'Isly in St Germain des Prés, near what is now the Place JP Sartre-S de Beauvoir, and around the corner from the Café de Flore where the two philosophers socialised and worked at their writing. Whether he saw them there is not recorded. In part of her autobiography, *La Force des Choses (Force of Circumstance)*, de Beauvoir noted meeting Freud much later when she and Sartre visited London in 1951. They met at the Gargoyle, which she described as one of the private clubs which were the only places available to nightbirds at the time.

Post-war austerity

In an earlier part of her autobiography, *La Force de l'Age (The Prime of Life)*, Simone de Beauvoir described the hardship of life in Paris, both in wartime and immediately after. In wartime letters, she and her friends always described what they ate because a real meal was hard to come by and they were often near to starvation. People lived on vegetables and a meal could consist of no more than two potatoes. De Beauvoir was reduced to scrubbing maggots out of a present of meat and boiling it for a long time so that it was edible, and she tells how a request for a white coffee in the Café de Flore was received with howls of incredulous laughter because only substitute coffee was available.

After the Liberation the renewed availability of simple foods was celebrated in French painting. Jean Hélion told how he had dreamed of bread and flesh and smoke when he was in a prisoner of war camp in Germany and those are the things he painted once he was free. André Fougeron painted his wife in *Return from the Market* 1953 (on display at Tate Modern), clasping a large crusty loaf across her chest while leeks and a bottle of wine stick out from her shopping bag. These items enliven a bare kitchen with a basic sink and a table covered with a checked cloth.



Compare the woman and her shopping in Fougeron's painting with the man and his plant in Freud's.

- How do the people feel?
- Do the objects help express the mood?
- What emblems of your life would you include in a self-portrait?

Life may have been a little easier in England than in France and food does not feature in Freud's work but the emotional intensity and tense anxious expressions of his sitters in the 1940s and early 1950s can be linked to the general spirit of the times. That it was a period of austerity is clear from his *Interior in Paddington* 1951. In that painting, the young man, wearing the grey gaberdine which was almost a uniform for men then, confronts the viewer in a similarly insistent way to Madame Fougeron. He gazes past us, fist clenched, at some vision of inner dread. (The atom bombs exploded at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, had forced people to consider the possibility of mass destruction). He communicates his anxiety to us, making us witness to the tension of people's lives at that time. As in Fougeron's painting of his wife, Freud's detailed description of objects contributes considerably to the creation of the mood of austerity in which each object had its weight. As we gaze at the interior in which the young man stands, we are made to focus on the rumpled carpet and the unhealthy plant in its cracked pot as if they too could unlock meaning. It is clear that the palm is as much an emblem of isolation and loneliness as the man. The picture was painted in the same year that John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* was published, a terrifying account of plants taking over the universe. *Interior in Paddington* is the largest of Freud's paintings of the period; he was only able to paint on that scale because the Arts Council had supplied him with the canvas to paint it for exhibition at the Festival of Britain of 1951.

Interior in Paddington 1951

National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (Walker Art Gallery)



Freud's emphasis on line

In Freud's work up till the late 1950s, line plays a very important role in defining mood. Clear outlining can be used to isolate and create an atmosphere of tension, a sense of being on edge. It was used in that way in some early Pre-Raphaelite work, for instance in Millais's *Ophelia*, where the clarity of focus brings the spectator right up to the scene, brought up short by the discovery of the young woman drowning. Curator Jean Clair has vividly described the peculiar quality of Freud's line as being sharpness and harshness, an attack by line striking like a serpent defending itself, with precise and deadly accuracy. Critics have seen a connection – which the artist rejects – between his use of line and that of German artists like Christian Schad (two of whose portraits are currently on display in the same room as Freud's *Naked Portrait 1972/3* in the *Nude, Action, Body* suite at Tate Modern). Freud acknowledges, however, that he admires the quality of line in the nineteenth-century neo-classical artist J D Ingres, who described drawing as the probity of art, as well as in Edgar Degas.



- Select a painting with a strong emphasis on line (for example *Girl with a Kitten 1947*; *Girl with Roses 1947–8*; *Girl with a White Dog 1950–1*).
- What is the atmosphere in your chosen painting? How does the quality of line contribute to it? To find out, you could try making a copy using a broad crayon and substituting smudgy outlines and overlapping marks for sharp outlines. How does this change the mood?

War seemed to drain the world of colour. Greys and browns predominated. Even the red carpet in *Interior in Paddington* has a sullen dullness to it.

- Find evidence of the bleached out greyness in paintings of the 1940s and 1950s. Imagine how the sitters would be dressed today and what the interiors might be like now. Think of all the ways in which colour has entered our lives since the war (television, hair dye, food packaging).

Existentialism: possible connections between Giacometti and Freud's working methods

In Paris, Freud had been introduced to Pablo Picasso and to Alberto Giacometti. In the catalogue to this exhibition, William Feaver draws a parallel between Giacometti's solitary isolated upright figures, some of which you can see at Tate Modern, and the desolate young man in Freud's *Interior in Paddington*. There is also a connection between the working methods of Giacometti and Freud. Both of them have wanted to work at night with their sitter present at all times in front of them. Robert Hughes described Freud as 'noctambular by choice, and by disposition.' As a result of this procedure, the sitter's fatigue is often reflected in the art work. (See for example *Naked Girl Asleep II* 1968, *Naked Man with his Friend* 1978/80 and *Standing by the Rags* 1988–9, see page 11.) The artists' preference for night-time working may be a deliberate strategy: in utter exhaustion all sitters are reduced to a common denominator, their basic human condition.

Giacometti became associated with Existentialism through his friendship with the philosophers and writers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. According to Sartre, the facts of human nature determine man's qualities, his purpose, and his 'essence'. Through their minute study of the factual appearance of individuals Giacometti and Freud try to express something fundamental to all human beings. Simone de Beauvoir wrote about Giacometti in *La Force de L'Age*, that his intelligence was of the type that clings to reality in order to draw its true meaning from it. He was never content with approximations, she said, or simply to go by what others said. He went straight up to things and laid siege to them with infinite patience. This could equally well be a description of Freud's practice. Indeed the artist wrote in 1959 that 'the subject must be kept under the closest observation: if this is done, day and night, the subject – he, she or it – will eventually reveal the *all*.' Although their art works look very different, Giacometti and Freud's prolonged observation is the same.

Naked Man with his Friend 1978/80. Private Collection
Photo: Courtesy of Ivor Braka Ltd



La Blessure (The Wound)

Man not only has nothing left: there is nothing left of him but this I.

Francis Ponge, *Cahiers d'Art* 1951.

This quotation could be read as the poet's reaction to the experience of war. It could also stand as a definition of the essential quality of Giacometti's portraiture: to reveal the sitter's basic self. When the playwright and friend of Sartre, Jean Genet, wrote about Giacometti, the Swiss artist felt that Genet had come closer to understanding his work than anyone else. Genet wrote: *There is no other origin to beauty than the wound, specific and different for each individual, concealed or flaunted, which each person keeps preserved within him and to which he retreats when he needs to withdraw from the world to experience a temporary but profound solitude... The art of Giacometti seems to me to have as its aim to reveal the secret wound common not only to each being but even to each thing, in order to illuminate it.* Again these words could apply equally well to Lucian Freud. Like Giacometti he only works with subjects he knows well. *Girl with a Kitten* 1947, *Girl with Roses* 1947/8 and *Girl with a White Dog* 1950–1 all depict Freud's first wife, Kitty Garman, while *Hotel Bedroom* 1954 (see front cover) shows his second wife Caroline Blackwood. He also painted artist friends such as Francis Bacon (see drawing, 1951, in room 2) and John Minton (see portrait, 1952, in room 3). The artists' practice of confronting their sitters over many hours seems to be an attempt to understand the particular nature of that person's wound. In many of the works, the sitter was gazing intensely at the artist while being painted and now seems to look at us as we view the painting.

Choose one of the Freud paintings listed above.

- **Imagine you are the painter. The sitter is looking at you. How do you interpret her/his expression? What is the atmosphere between you?**
- **In *Girl with a White Dog*, the dog's behaviour may help you interpret how the woman feels and the nature of her inner wound. How do you think the woman and the dog feel about one another/the artist?**

London from 1947 and the change from a linear to a painterly style

Back in London, Lucian Freud was invited by William Coldstream to teach at the Slade School of Art where Coldstream had been appointed Professor in 1949. The Slade at that time was associated with skill in drawing and this is probably why Freud was invited to teach there. Helen Lessore, who showed his work at her Beaux-Arts Gallery, had described his earlier paintings as 'a desperate desire to rescue something from decay and oblivion, to preserve the memory of it, as nearly as possible exactly as it appeared in life, in some hard, definite, imperishable image.' Line was the tool he used for creating this kind of image. Coldstream's approach in his portraits and paintings of nudes was as rigorous as Freud's but his methods were quite different. To create a portrait true to the sitter's physical appearance, he relied on extremely careful measurement. Using his brush handle he measured relationships between different parts of the body. His markings were allowed to show on the canvas like points on a map tracing a route taken. 'Once I start painting,' Coldstream said, 'I am occupied mainly with putting things in the right place.' Like Freud, Coldstream required long and repeated sittings by the model.

The appearance of Freud's paintings changed dramatically in 1958 when he stopped using sable and adopted hog-hair brushes. These made clear-cut outlining impossible and a new painterliness evolved. One reason for the change in technique may have been Freud's friendship with Francis Bacon which began in 1945 and continued until the late 1970s. When Bacon painted a portrait of Freud it was a very loose resemblance, being based on a snapshot of the writer Franz Kafka, and yet Freud was able to recognise himself in it. He saw that Bacon's inspired guesses could create a likeness by the use of what William Feaver describes as 'painterly swipes.' In a sense, Freud's move from a linear technique to more painterly effects allowed him to reach a compromise between the detachment of Coldstream and the verve of Bacon. Bacon had said 'There is an area of the nervous system to which the texture of paint communicates more violently than anything else.'

Freud continued this line of thought when he said ‘As far as I am concerned, the paint is the person. I want it to work for me just as flesh does.’ Yet Freud is never as far removed from the physical appearance of the model as Bacon. The paint texture adds to the physicality of the person represented. According to his model Sue Tilley, the artist’s break with Bacon in the late 1970s occurred because Freud came to admire the work of Frank Auerbach over and above that of Bacon. Certainly each artist had become critical of the other. Whereas Bacon criticised Freud for making work that was ‘realistic without being real,’ Freud was not impressed by Bacon’s harnessing of accidents; he noticed in one portrait that Francis Bacon had painted his own legs on Freud’s body!



- Compare a painting in Freud’s linear style with one the late 1950s/early 1960s painted with a hog-hair brush (rooms 3–5). How is the face/body different? Which is more three-dimensional? Which seems more ‘real’ to you? How could you describe the changed atmosphere which comes with the new painterly texture?
- Compare Freud’s painterly style with that of Bacon in room 24 of the collection displays. What similarities can you find? How much freer is Bacon in his record of reality?
- Try drawing a fragment of a person (a cheek, a nose, or the area round the lips) with the sharp precision of Freud’s earlier work. Now paint the same area with a broad brush. Compare effects, noting the different qualities of realism afforded by the two methods.

The School of London

In 1976, R B Kitaj organised an exhibition called *The Human Clay* in which he used the term School of London to describe a group of painters working in a figurative manner and engaged in an intense scrutiny of their subject. They included Francis Bacon, Leon Kossoff, Frank Auerbach, Michael Andrews and Lucian Freud. Their work is currently displayed in room 30.

- Look carefully at *Standing by the Rags* 1988–9 in room 7 or 8 of the exhibition. How close do you think the artist was to the model when he painted her? What was his eye level? What do you notice about the size of her feet, her head? How is she posed? Is she standing completely upright? What is the effect of all the discarded painters' rags heaped behind her? Compare this painting to another called *Lying by the Rags* 1989–91.
- Lucian Freud uses a lead-based paint called Cremnitz white with which he produces the crumbly passages of paint. How real does the flesh look?
- What is your reaction to the painting? Do you feel comfortable looking at it?
- Now compare Freud's painting of the body with figures by Michael Andrews, R B Kitaj and Francis Bacon in room 30. What differences do you notice? In which work is the figure most three-dimensional and the flesh most flesh-like?

Is Lucian Freud the greatest living realist painter?

Now that you know some of the background against which Freud's work developed and some of the ideas motivating it, do you think the critics' hype is justified? To help you decide, let us consider his painting within the context of his two favoured genres, portraits and nudes.

Trends in British Portraiture in the collection displays

Portrait painting features strongly in the curriculum. This exhibition should help you to think in depth about portraits, what purpose they serve and how the relationship between painter and model is likely to affect the final product.

There is a hierarchy among portraitists. On the one hand there are the professionals who paint people for a living. On the other hand there are artists who may choose, among other subjects, to paint portraits. The professionals continue a long tradition in English art which you can trace back in Tate Britain as far as Nicholas Hilliard's *Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I* c1575 in room 2. In this tradition, the client imposes conditions on the artist. These have to be accepted if the painter wants to be paid. Queen Elizabeth I was an extreme example of this trend. She consigned to the royal ovens images of herself which she did not like and she commanded Hilliard not to include shadows on her face which would have implied mortality and diminished the effect of almost superhuman power. This is why her face is an imperious but unrealistic mask. There is little impression in it of living flesh. By contrast, when Lucian Freud recently painted Queen Elizabeth II (the painting is not included in the exhibition) he had no such constraints. He painted the monarch as he saw her, an ageing woman wearing a crown.

- **Look at a range of commissioned portraits from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries at Tate Britain (rooms 4, 6, 15, 17, 20, 27 and 28). Guess what orders the sitters or patrons might have given the artist. Which portraits seem most convincingly natural?**

A new trend in portrait painting developed in the nineteenth century with the Pre-Raphaelites who used their friends rather than paid sitters as models for literary subjects. Look for example at Elizabeth Siddal acting the part of Ophelia (J E Millais *Ophelia* 1851–2, room 9), but also celebrated after her death by her husband, D G Rossetti, in *Beata Beatrix* 1860–70, room 15. The advantage of painting friends was that because the artists knew the sitters very well, their models looked both more natural and more convincingly real than those in earlier portraits.

Now look at Gwen John's *Chloë Boughton-Leigh* 1904–8 in room 17. Because the sitter was a friend of the artist, she could be utterly relaxed in her company and so, as viewers, we feel that we have been admitted into the intimacy of a private moment of contemplation.

- **Are there any portraits by Lucian Freud comparable to this work by Gwen John, where the sitter just happens to be posing while absorbed in her own private thoughts?**

Lucian Freud painted many portraits of his mother in the last years of her life. They are displayed in rooms 5 and 6 of the exhibition.



- Do you feel that Freud has come as close to understanding his mother as Gwen John did her friend Chloë?
- Now, as a contrast, look at a twentieth-century commissioned portrait, Graham Sutherland's *Portrait of Charles Clore* 1965–75, in the Clore Gallery foyer. Does Sutherland's portrait give you any sense of the nature of the inner man? Originally, when he first turned to portraiture from landscape painting, Sutherland invigorated the faces of his sitters by investing them with qualities of landscape. Do you feel that this painting reveals anything about the temperament of the man? How does the painting of flesh in the head and hands compare with the solid rounded effects achieved by Freud? Does Charles Clore look as real as Freud's sitters? Do you think the Sutherland is a good portrait?

Likeness or Reality

In order to focus on Freud's work as a portraitist, you should also visit the National Portrait Gallery to see a range of contemporary commissioned portraits, many of them by artists unrepresented in the Tate Collection. The National Portrait Gallery buys art works primarily because they are good representations of people with historical significance. The status of the sitter is often reflected in body language. Look out for examples of body language which seem to state: I am an important politician/businessman/charismatic entertainer. When the sitter's status is the most important feature of a portrait, you may feel there is nothing to learn about the person, only about the mask that has been adopted. In such portraits, the artist can only go so far in the frankness of their presentation – if it is too unflattering, the sitter will reject it. In fact looking at such pictures shows just how difficult it is to make a successful portrait. It is only with a sitter as flamboyant as Queen Elizabeth I that a mere mask can really involve the viewer.

In *La Nausée (Nausea)*, J P Sartre describes the hero examining his face in the mirror. Is it ugly or beautiful, he wonders? People have told him that it is ugly but that is not how he sees it himself. In fact it seems shocking to him that people should attach such value judgements to a face when they would never think of describing a rock or the ground as ugly or beautiful. We accept natural objects for the way they are. It is only when considering ourselves that we apply value judgements. Like Sartre's hero, what Freud appears to consider one of the most important features of his work is the solid reality of the object or person. As you will discover when you read Sue Tilley's testimony, Lucian Freud insists that his models be utterly natural, as close to their original appearance as a rock or unworked land. Freud paints friends or models who know that flattery will play no part in their portrayal. Art historian Roger Bruynate described him as 'stripping away the mask of decorum behind which sitters conventionally pose.'

- **Try and find another painter whose figures are as solid and three-dimensional, where the figures have the qualities of a real body with its weight and presence in space. Can you do so? Is this where Freud's uniqueness as a painter lies?**

Nudes

We tend to think of the nude as a different category from the portrait, yet is it really? A nude is also an individual. To paint, one requires the presence of a model and the work will display the individuality of the specific person. Yet in Lucian Freud's painting at least there is a distinction between the two genres. Whereas in the clothed portraits (of his mother, for example) we are made most conscious of the individual person, the nudes force us to consider our shared human condition, that of being imprisoned within a body, see for example, *Painter and Model* 1986–7. Often the painted body seems to be pushed up against us, its head smaller and more distant, its distinctive facial features less noticeable. Or it appears to be stretched out on a slippery slope in danger of sliding down in a heap at our feet. Such tactics force us to contemplate flesh as much as personality.

Lucian Freud has pointed out that whereas we are familiar with our faces from seeing them reflected in mirrors every day, it is only occasionally that we view our bodies. We are more distanced from them – and this particularly in England where a certain prudery about nudity has persisted. Lucian Freud's nudes combine intimacy with distance, attraction with repulsion. In this, his work builds on a tradition of clear-sighted recording established by Gwen John in her *Nude Girl* 1909–10 and by Stanley Spencer in his *Double Nude Portrait: the Artist and his second Wife* 1937. American art-historian Robert Rosenblum wrote in 1987 'It is odd to realise that British twentieth-century art, perhaps more than that of any other nation, has dealt in countless and candid ways with the widest variety of sexual experience... Both Stanley Spencer and, decades later, Lucian Freud have subverted every Western tradition of the ideal nude by recording the awkward truths of undressed human beings, genitals, sagging breasts and all, in postures that suggest the kind of close-up, bedroom intimacy that few artists would consider worthy to put on canvas'.

So now, what do you think, is Freud the greatest realist among those artists you have seen?

- **Is there any other artist whose figures are so compellingly real?**
- **Do you leave the exhibition feeling that you have learnt something about the human condition?**
- **Do you feel you know more about yourself by looking at these images of other people?**
- **If you don't think he's the greatest, who is, and why do you think so?**

An insider's view

When you visit an exhibition you view the end of a long process which extends over many years. The pictures have been painted, in this case over many decades; the gallery has offered an artist of great repute an exhibition; and curators have been appointed to assemble and catalogue the work and to write an introductory essay. The two interviews that follow highlight two stages in this process; the input of the artist's model in the creation of the painting and the role of the curator.

Lucian Freud's work begins with the selection of a model. The interview with Sue Tilley, one such model, offers a fascinating insight into the process of being painted and the interaction of painter and model. The Freud exhibition has an outside curator, William Feaver, who is also Freud's biographer. He has worked with a Tate curator, Mary Horlock, as well as with the artist to put the show together. Mary explains her involvement in this process.

Painter and Model 1986–7. Private Collection
Photo: John Riddy



The process of painting a nude: Sue Tilley's testimony

How did you meet Lucian Freud?

Well my friend Leigh Bowery was working for Lucian and it kind of changed his life and opened his eyes to a lot of things. He said working for Lucian Freud was like going to university. 'I don't know why you work at the job centre, you could do better,' he said. 'I'm going to get Lucian to paint you.' And he was very bossy, a great control freak, he thought he could control Lucian, so if he spent ages putting this idea into Lucian's head, he would think it was his own idea. He arranged for us to go out for dinner and so I met the artist. It wasn't until a year after that he finally decided he was going to paint me. He got Leigh to ask me if I'd go along and be painted and so I did, I was very, very frightened. Before I went Leigh came to call for me and made me strip off naked in my own house so that I could get used to it. He said that Lucian was the most scary man, I mustn't speak, I mustn't criticise, that I would have to do exactly what he said and I mustn't argue. I was very frightened – he put the fear of God into me – what Lucian said went and I wasn't allowed to say anything at all which I found out was to be very different in the end but that's what he told me. I was nervous because I'm not a great nudist.

Did Freud turn out to be as scary as Leigh Bowery had suggested?

Yes! Well the first time I met him was when I went for the dinner, he was hilarious, and just kept telling these jokes just, I suppose, to put me at ease. But Leigh had painted such a terrifying picture of him that I was petrified. But as I got to know him better I realised that he wasn't so scary.

What happened when you went to pose for him?

Lucian said that he had made a special dinner. Leigh told me you have dinner before you start work. There was such a strong smell of garlic I wondered what on earth it was. Then he gave us a plate and there was a huge garlic bulb, the size of an apple, roasted. I thought 'I can't eat this, I'll be sick, I can't possibly eat this.' But I'm not allowed to say anything. Luckily Leigh said to Lucian I can't possibly eat this so we were spared.

So after the meal, how did the painting session go?

We went into the studio and Lucian asked me to lie on the floor. It was a really, really uncomfortable position. I was lying on bare wooden floorboards with all my limbs akimbo and there was a very cold draught coming under the door. I was thinking to myself 'I can't possibly do this, I will die of agony'. But I was petrified to say anything because of what Leigh had told me and I wanted to do it because it was such a great honour to be painted by Lucian. When Lucian left the room I told Leigh I was freezing and what could I do about it. He told me that I couldn't say anything and I would just have to put up with it. It was a nightmare.

So there was no question of your choosing your own position?

No, not really because I thought you weren't allowed, you didn't have any input. But then I realised that Leigh was lying and I didn't have to agree slavishly with everything the artist said. Leigh twisted it round that you had to do exactly as you were told and you weren't allowed to complain but I found that I could say 'I don't want to do this.' Freud painted four pictures in the end. After the first picture there was a break of about a year because I was on holiday and I was very brown and he couldn't paint me when I was tanned so I had to wait till it had gone. For the second one a settee was bought specially – I was thrilled when I saw this settee, you can imagine. I thought 'Oh bliss, not the floor.' For the third picture I got myself into a really comfortable position laying on my front with my head buried into the settee. 'Well this is going to be great' but then Lucian decided he didn't want to paint my bottom, he wanted to paint my front so I had to turn round, a bit disappointing. But whatever position you're in, if you stay in it too long, it's uncomfortable.

Did he explain to you why he chose the poses he did?

Not really, I think he wanted the composition to look right on the canvas. He won't use photos. He can only paint what he sees. He won't make it up so you have to have your arm in the right position. Sometimes you'd be asleep and this hand would come moving your bosoms around. Even if he's working on the background you have to be there. There's a lot of things that he won't do or can't do.

What about your appearance, could you choose your hairstyle and make-up?

No. He can't bear anything that's not natural. I wasn't allowed to dye my hair. I wasn't allowed to wear make-up. He had make-up remover and nail varnish remover in the bathroom and if he saw it on you, he'd go mad, 'Get that stuff off your toes,' he'd say. I also had a tattoo on my arm, he didn't like it, it used to disturb him, so he mixed up flesh-coloured paint and then painted it over so that he didn't have to look at it. He likes mousy hair and stretch marks! If you have a pimple he includes it. All these marks allow him to introduce different colours into the work. So he hated make-up and vanity and things like that. Freud says that people have the wrong idea of what beauty is. He said 'They should christen libraries beauty parlours because beauty is in your mind. The more you read and the more you learn, it makes you more beautiful.' One day he was reading the *Express* paper and he saw this letter to Marje Proops, the problem lady, from a woman complaining about her stretch marks. Lucian wrote to the paper saying 'Dear Madam, don't worry, there is nothing more attractive in a woman than stretch marks.'

Were you posing on your own in the first painting?

No, it was originally going to be a picture of three people, Leigh, myself and a friend called Nicola. But Leigh had to go to Scotland to be in a play so he could not fully commit himself. So Lucian put his dog, Pluto, in Leigh's place. Lucian often uses Pluto in his paintings, it is very convenient because he lives there and he doesn't have to be paid. So it was myself, Nicola and the dog. I was happier when Leigh wasn't there as it made the atmosphere easier. He couldn't moan at me if he wasn't there and make fun of everything I said. For the other three pictures I was on my own which I preferred as Nicola wasn't there to report to Leigh. However Leigh was still posing for Lucian on his own and I know that they used to talk about what I had said and done. Mind you, I'm sure Leigh made most of it up.

Does Freud always paint at night?

No. He works in shifts. The first picture was an evening picture so he had to wait for the dark. In the middle of winter he would start about six thirty and finish about one o'clock. The light had to be just the same at every session so I had to arrive ready to start at exactly the right time in the evening. I was on the evening shift but there would be another model working in the daytime. In the day there's a huge skylight, the whole roof is glass, and you work under it. He can't work on a day painting at night and he can't work on a night painting in the day.

Was he using a very strong light? I have heard he uses a 500 watt bulb.

He did.

Did you mind the fact that it was so bright, was it uncomfortable?

It didn't worry me. I never really thought about it.

How long did you have to pose at a time and how long did it take to paint the picture?

Sometimes I would manage about an hour and a half without a break. When I was tired I would have a little fidget so that Lucian would realise I wanted to stop. It was a great relief if you heard the phone go or someone came to the door because that meant a break. There were always papers or magazines to read during the breaks. I got quite up on current affairs myself. I came to his studio two or three times a week – sometimes it was a bit more – for nine months which is how long it took to complete a painting.

Did he talk to you while he worked?

Sometimes he was very, very chatty or else sometimes he would be in a mood and he wouldn't speak. He used to take offence at the most peculiar things that I couldn't really see were offensive. I loved it, it was very interesting because he knows so much. He reads about seven newspapers a day so he knows all about current affairs. You can talk to him about everything but he also talks about sex, oh personal business, his children, one of my favourites was film stars he'd met in the past, but usually it was the same fascinating story about meeting Judy Garland and Greta Garbo and Cecil Beaton. He's the most hilarious man you could possibly meet.

Did he try to get to know you as a person as well as studying your appearance?

Yes. He was very keen to know about you and all your business. He met my mum and dad because it was me, the whole personality, that interested him. He wanted to know what parents I had. He can't work from photos because it's not you. I think that's why he doesn't paint for strangers.

Did you view the whole experience as pleasurable or as more of an ordeal?

If it was horrible I wouldn't have done it. Sometimes I looked forward to going and having a nice chat. He was so chatty. You'd always be treated well and he paid me, not very much but it helped. There was always nice food, gorgeous food, everything fresh from first class confectioners, bakers and so on. He didn't really like it that I didn't eat meat because he was always eating little birds, woodcocks and things.

Are you still posing for him?

No. I finished about four or five years ago, I can't remember. It came to the point that he said he could paint me with his eyes closed. All the time he has to challenge himself by doing new things, new people, so I was finished with. I kind of got my life back, being allowed to go on holiday. For two years I didn't really have any holidays. As soon as it was over I could dye my hair back.

What do you think about the paintings he made of you?

The first painting I absolutely hate, it's repulsive. That anyone could even look at it is beyond my comprehension. I quite like the second and third and the fourth one is okay. I like the background of the fourth one but I don't like me in it. I hope they don't look like me. I hope I am more cheery looking in real life!

The curator's role: an interview with Mary Horlock

This is an exhibition of a living artist and in some ways it must make your job more difficult because he has his ideas, you have yours.

They may not always coincide. Can you explain how the choice of paintings is made. How much is it the decision of the artist, how much of the curator?

When you curate a show of any artist's work you have to form some very firm and clear ideas about the works that need to be included and what the overall feel of the show should be – the balance between early and later work, the relationship of sketches and prints to actual paintings etc. Obviously you have to work very closely with the artist, and this is really an amazing opportunity, because your own ideas about their work will need to stand up to close scrutiny and who better to question your decisions and either affirm or challenge them than your subject! Of course it is often the case that you will not always be able to agree about certain things, but to establish a dialogue is very important in these things. You have to see it as a collaboration, where both parties are allowed to express their ideas and opinions. I think having two sets of eyes working is good because it often means there is a balance, a consensus is reached. It will make the final selection more rounded, ultimately.

Again, are decisions about the layout – which work hangs beside which – collaborative?

Well, I think in this case Freud is going to have some very clear ideas about how the exhibition will be hung. He has already said so. There are a lot of works in this show and so the hang will be quite dense, and this is a conscious decision. If you look at a lot of Freud's portraits, you can see how he often uses awkward vantage points. He focuses on his subjects at close range, and a very intense experience is relayed through his paintings... the hang will reflect this. Also the early work is smaller and so these works can be crowded together a bit, but the later works are larger in scale and so need more room. It was a conscious choice to use small rooms as well, so you have a very immediate experience of the works, you are maybe thrown up against them. I think we all agreed this would be really interesting.

Great claims have been made for Freud. The press release describes him as 'arguably the greatest living realist painter.' Can you explain what it is about his work that makes him so revered? He is said to be an artist of 'unique distinction' who has 'redefined portraiture'.

Can you explain how he is thought to have redefined it?

It was the esteemed art critic Robert Hughes who called Freud 'the greatest living realist painter' and I think he stands up to such a claim. Freud's unflinching scrutiny of his subjects, the intensity of his gaze, is mirrored by the intensity of the painterly expression he uses. When he paints someone he is not just recording their features, it goes much deeper than this. Freud commented that 'as far as I am concerned, the paint is the person. I want it to work for me just as flesh does.' He never poses his models as this would falsify the painting by imposing his will, and so Freud's nudes, for example, are not idealised or arranged. The painter Frank Auerbach, whom Freud has also painted, backs this up when he says of Freud's work, 'The subject is raw, not cooked to become digestible as art, not covered in gravy of ostentation tone or colour, not arranged on the plate as a 'composition''. Since the 1960s Freud has developed such a distinct, expressive technique, the paint surface is coarse and textured and this gives his subjects even more presence. The way he sees and renders naked flesh is very powerful. It can be quite disturbing too, but the way it stirs up such emotions in the viewer is testimony to its strength. And this goes some way to explaining why and how Freud is seen to have 'redefined portraiture'. His 'portraits' and 'naked portraits' convey both the physical and the psychological.

Can you comment on the distinction that seems to exist between professional portraitists represented by the National Portrait Gallery and artists at Tate Britain? Could some of Freud's portraits such as Leigh Bowery, for example, equally well be displayed at the National Portrait Gallery? Why in fact is Freud categorised as an artist rather than a portraitist? Has it to do with his range of subject matter (more than just portraits) and the fact that he does not seek out portrait commissions?

Since the late 1930s Freud has, with only a few exceptions, painted pictures of human beings, but they are rarely commissioned pieces of work (not even the portrait of the Queen was a commission). When he paints people, he strives to expose the very core of their being, and he is also conveying what his relationship is to them. He paints the people close to him, his family and his friends, people he knows and trusts. He needs their trust and co-operation at all times and says so explicitly. If he chooses to paint someone he does not know very well, then he has to get to know them. You might have to sit for him fifty times or more (and more often than not through the night), and so a very intense relationship is built up. Also, consider how in a great many of his portraits his sitters are not named, and the works are simply titled 'Head of a Big Man' or 'Woman in a White Shirt' so we cannot recognise who the person might be in any conventional way, that is clearly not a priority. I don't think there is anything conventional about Freud's method of depiction.

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Hotel Bedroom 1954

The Beaverbrook Foundation,
The Beaverbrook Art Gallery



Reflection (Self-Portrait) 1981–2. Private Collection
Photo: John Riddy