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“To annihilate itself as medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?” - Roland Barthes

I will be doing a comparative analysis of two painter's works that were both esteemed and admired in their life time and continue to hold our attention – Leonardo da Vinci, “Annunciation” (image 1) and Francis Bacon, “Painting 1946” (image 2). I had the opportunity to see both of these paintings in the flesh - “Annunciation” in the spring of 2006 and “Painting 1946” in the summer of 2009. I chose these two works because despite how different they may seem, personally they share a moment I have been unable to explain. The moment when I viewed these works they struck me and gave me an experience I wish to understand. I am hoping by writing about them I may find out more of why these two paintings seem to have made an impression on me.

The aesthetic differences between these two paintings and painters are prominent. A few examples of these differences include their skill, subject matter and historical context. Leonardo was a protégé; highly skilled and technical in the execution of his work on panel. Francis Bacon was self-taught and his work shows a deskilling of technique– his paintings would crumble away if it were not for the museums preserving them. There is also such a contrast in hue and palette in the

two paintings. In “Annunciation,” da Vinci created a rich glow of light from within, while Bacon’s “Painting 1946” is filled with mute or matte colors imitating surface. The subject matter is another clear dissimilarity; one is a biblical scene and the other an unconscious meat market. The difference in historical and cultural context of both works is also understandable given their respective time periods during the High Renaissance vs. Post WWII Modernism. It is very easy to research and see the polar ends of these two works described, while what they share in common is not so evident.

When analyzing how these painting may relate or connect to one another, agreements I observed include their sense of space, composition layout and narratives. The atmospheric depth of the paintings are both seen, granted Leonardo’s is deep into the mountains while Bacon’s space is not as deep but still present. The technique of layering and overlapping subjects creates depth as well. The use of one point perspective gives space and the viewer can see the orthogonal lines from each. Specifically, the table and walls behind Mary in “Annunciation,” along with the rug in “Painting 1946,” help to push the picture plane back.

Along with the use of depth, the two compositions also hold a weight and balance of symmetry. “Annunciation” has Angel Gabriel and Virgin Mary across from one another balancing and anchoring the composition to the ground. Furthermore “Painting 1946” is symmetrical when split vertically down the center of the image, and the dark figures in the center pronounce a deep void pulling us in.

Finally, while their subject matter may be very different from one another, they both have a strong sense of narrative. Leonardo's "Annunciation" has a very specific narrative that can be traced and connected to biblical story lines. Although Bacon's "Painting 1946" narrative is meant to be somewhat unclear and open for interpretation, it is still felt from the scene that the creator is portraying a very specific viewpoint or story.

Despite locating some visual comparisons that connect the two works, the most prominent similarity between the two paintings is the feeling they evoked in me when I saw them in person, standing in front of them, being in the present of now. I was not thinking about what they were or what I should know or feel about them. I gave up and allowed myself to experience the work for what they are and not the idea of them. The two pieces hold an enigmatic presence, and I felt the weight of the work in me. Was it something intrinsically in the work or was it something I projected on to it? This is an unexplainable alchemy of paint where the work transcends the medium.

Overall, while the two paintings span across the story of art history and are starkly different in so many ways, they both accomplish what I believe to be the ultimate goal in creative work, which is allowing the viewer to move beyond the surface and experience a personal reaction. While this does not appear to be a quantifiable experience, explained by choices of color or placement, it is one that I believe all creators and viewers of art can relate to.



Image 1: Leonardo da Vinci, "Annunciation," oil and tempera on panel, 39"x 85"  
created 1472-1475, location Uffizi, Florence, Italy

Web:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/93/Leonardo\\_da\\_Vinci\\_-\\_Annunciazione\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/93/Leonardo_da_Vinci_-_Annunciazione_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)



Image 2: Francis Bacon, "Painting 1946," oil on linen, 78"x 52" created 1946, location Museum of Modern Art collection, New York,

Web: <https://shop.francis-bacon.com/shop/painting-1946/>

Bathes, Roland. "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography"