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## Freud's Obese Nudes, Bohemian Cohorts Star in London Show: Martin Gayford

By Martin Gayford - Feb 6, 2012

Sometimes, only after an artist has died can you see their work as a whole. That's certainly the case with [Lucian Freud](#).

Six months after his death last July comes a magnificent exhibition, "Lucian Freud Portraits," at the [National Portrait Gallery](#) in London. Finally, the entire trajectory of his epic career is clear.

It turns out that, appropriately enough for such an unusual man and artist, his life had a highly idiosyncratic trajectory. Freud, who was born in 1922, was both a brilliantly precocious youth and a late bloomer. As you walk through this retrospective, it becomes clear that he carried on gaining power as a painter well into old age.

The first work in the exhibition is dated 1940, the last was left not quite finished on his easel. His achievement was -- simply in terms of stamina -- tremendous: seven decades of intense looking and translating what he saw into brush strokes on canvas and marks on paper.

Much more than sheer application was involved. From his youth, Freud possessed a unique sensibility, a way of looking at people and the world around him with greater intimacy and intensity than others had. He seemed able to depict a face or a body as if no one had done so before, and reveal fresh textures, surfaces and forms in the most familiar sights.

### Technical Nudes

The limitation of the show to portraits is a minor restriction in Freud's case since he defined portraiture broadly. A nude was, in his view, a "naked portrait." Whether a sitter was wearing clothes or not was a mere "technicality."

This selection excludes his occasional animal, still life, and urban-landscape subjects, which you could argue were also portraits of a sort, since Freud was capable of finding individuality in a floorboard or an egg. Still, the focus on human models gives a sweep and clarity to the whole.

There are wonderful images scattered throughout. In a way, Freud never did anything better than his drawing of the artist Christian Berard of 1948, flabby, muffled in his dressing gown. The wary, thoughtful face of his second wife Caroline Blackwood is unforgettable in "Girl in Bed" (1952), as is the collapsed despair of the artist John Minton from the same year.

Every decade brought its masterpieces: the rubicund, melancholy features of the bohemian Soho photographer, John Deacon (1962-64) and the lined forehead of Frank Auerbach (1975- 76), an emblem for that painter's determination and intellectual power.

## Extra Large

In the early 1990s, as Freud passed 70, his work seemed to go up a notch in scale and ambition. His pictures of the performance artist Leigh Bowery were remarkable; even more so were the ones of his next regular model, Sue Tilley, such as "Benefits Supervisor Sleeping" (1995). Her XL body was the starting point for some of the most forceful representations of human weight and volume in the history of art.

That was a high point, yet Freud's ability to convey the qualities of human flesh in oil paint seemed only to increase as he approached 80 in his later nudes and such pictures as his unsparing investigation of his own aging, "Self-Portrait, Reflection" (2002).

In the last gallery, I had the odd experience of encountering my younger self in a portrait of 2004, which is looking hard across the room at [David Hockney](#) (2002). The final picture, "Portrait of the Hound" -- a nude of Freud's assistant David Dawson with his dog -- gives the impression that the artist was not so much fading away as suddenly departing in mid-flow, which is what happened.

"Lucian Freud Portraits" opens Feb. 9 at the [National Portrait Gallery](#), London, and runs through May 28. The exhibition is sponsored by Bank of America Merrill Lynch. Information: <http://www.npg.org.uk>.

(Martin Gayford is chief art critic for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. He is the author of "Man With a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud." The opinions expressed are his own.)

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