

A Historic Event in the History of Art

The rediscovery of a lost Caravaggio masterpiece in an attic in France

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, called Caravaggio 1571-1610

Judith Beheading Holofernes

Oil on canvas

144 x 173 cm

Judith Beheading Holofernes is the most important painting to be discovered in the last twenty years by one of the greatest masters of European painting: Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio.

It was probably painted in Rome in 1604-05.

Forgotten in the attic of a house outside of Toulouse for more than 150 years, the painting is in an exceptional state of conservation. Estimated at a value of 120 million euros the picture has been classed as a “national treasure”, and as such is subject to a temporary export ban. This 30 month delay allows the national museums time to find a solution to acquire the masterpiece.

In April 2014, the owners of a house in south west France went in to their attic to fix a leak, only to discover a large oil painting depicting Judith beheading Holofernes. Their local auctioneer Marc Labarde recognized the work as Italian seventeenth century, and had it sent to Old Master paintings expert Eric Turquin in Paris. The painting was immediately recognized as a lost Caravaggio.

It was known from a contemporary copy attributed to Louis Finson (Intesa Sanpaolo Bank Collection, exhibited today in the Palais Zavallos, Naples) and by a letter from the painter Frans Pourbus the Younger to the 1st Duc Vincente de Gonzague (25th September 1607) telling him that Finson owned two paintings by Caravaggio that were available for sale, the *Virgin of the Rosary* and *Judith and Holofernes*. The two paintings remained in Finson's hands since they are recorded in his will made up in Amsterdam in 1617, where he gave half of his estate to his business partner, the painter Abraham Vinck. Then the *Judith* disappeared.

The significance of the work cannot be underestimated, as expert Eric Turquin explains “The rediscovery of a masterpiece by Caravaggio is a momentous occasion. *Judith Beheading Holofernes* must be considered the most important painting, by far, to have emerged in the last twenty years by one of the great masters.”

The painting is comparable in many ways to the *Madonna dei Pellegrini* (Church of Saint-Augustine, Rome) which was executed in Rome around 1604-05. It was undoubtedly taken by Caravaggio, along with the *Virgin of the Rosary*, from Rome to Naples in 1606-07. It must be remembered that at this time the artist was fleeing Rome where he was wanted for murder.

The painting depicts Judith, the great biblical heroine severing the head of the Assyrian general Holofernes. The Assyrian army had laid siege to her home, the Jewish city of

Bethulia, and when the inhabitants were on the point of capitulating, Judith, a rich and beautiful widow took her maid and offered herself to the enemy general. She seduced and intoxicated him, and then severed his head, her maid Abra, represented at the center of the composition, collected the head in a sack.

The composition as a whole recalls Caravaggio's earlier treatment of the same subject painted around 1599 in Rome (Galeria Nazionale, Rome). However, the earlier version still holds a tense elegance and insistence on flowing rhythmic curves that have been replaced in the latter by a more concentrated style. The result is a darker, crueller and more naturalistic rendering of the scene, marking a turning point in the artist's work. Judith, with her terrible determined stare looks directly at the viewer, her dress and dark veil seem to arise from outside the picture in a fashion that is completely different from the heroine in the Roman version, in which the figure is clearly defined as she recoils from the violent act. Here she appears to be encouraged by her servant to commit the act: the dialogue between the two women serves as the central drama of the work, Judith's heroism, which in this moment saves her people, serves to heighten the immediate action. Holofernes, who in the Roman painting exudes a noble power in his death throes that is reminiscent of antique statuary, becomes, rather than a glorious general, a vulnerable and common man, who has the sunburnt hands of a soldier, and a face that grimaces in pain, with eyes that are already dead. This weight of naturalism and insistence on displaying every physical detail creates in the picture a dramatic tension which drives the drama to an almost unbearable climax. The extreme contortion of the writhing general finds balance in the draperies, among the most beautiful that Caravaggio painted, they develop and amplify the general rhythms of the composition: large pleats of white cloth contrast with the rich red of Holofernes' tent, the knots of the fabric echoing those made by the hands as they carry out their terrible purpose.

Although the painting has been forgotten in an attic for more than 150 years, it has reached us in an exceptional state of conservation, retaining its intense reds, silky blacks and the white of the coarse linen.

In the 18th century the painting was probably in Spain as an ancestor of the current owners was an officer in Napoleon's army and their family sold an important painting from the Spanish Golden Age with the same provenance some forty years ago. It is undoubtedly the violence of the subject that allowed this painting to be relegated and to drift into obscurity. The painting has now been classed as a "national treasure" and is estimated at 120 million euros. This status suspends the export of the picture for thirty months, a time which must be used by the national museums to find a solution to save this most important of paintings for the nation.

This discovery reminds us of the extraordinary treasures that are still waiting to be identified in France.

Attachment:

In September 1607, the Duke of Mantoue learned from his representative in Naples Ottavio Gentili that some paintings by Caravaggio were available for sale (the Duke had previously acquired for 300 ducats in January of that year the *Death of the Virgin* today in the Louvre). Caravaggio left Naples for Malta in July 1607.

An extract from a letter written in Naples by the painter Frans Pourbus the Younger to Vincent de Gonzaga, 1st Duke of Mantoue on the 25th September 1607 (Archivio del stato di Mantova; Archivi Gonzaga Esterni. XXVI, carteggio di Napoli – corrispondence de Naples -) :
“I have seen here two paintings by Michelangelo de Caravaggio: the first, that represents a rosary, is destined for an altarpiece; it measures 18 hands across and costs 400 ducats; for the other, a painting of average size designed for a bed chamber and representing Judith and Holofernes, they will not sell it to you for less than 300 ducats. I did not want to make an offer without first consulting you and knowing your lordships opinion, but they have promised not to assign it to anyone without first knowing your verdict.”

ANNEX: Biography

Michelangelo MERISI called Caravaggio (Caravaggio 1571- Porto Ercole 1609/1610)

For more than two centuries the artists of the Renaissance had searched for “ideal beauty”, the harmony and balance of forms and perfect bodies (Botticelli, Raphael, Michelangelo) inspired by Greek and Roman models, and cultivated the science of perspective, using it to describe palatial architecture opening out onto vast sun drenched landscapes. Between 1590 and 1610 Caravaggio whipped the slate clean of all that had gone before and initiated a spectacular revolution in painting. His powerful works with their brutal and unrestrained realism, depict common people, sometimes physically unattractive people (in this case the maid), their hands gnarled and their feet dirty often without a background. He placed religious scenes in dingy taverns and used a dead prostitute as a model of the Virgin. He lit them with his signature *chiaroscuro* (dark and light) creating steep contrasts in tone, *tenebrism*. His life was also tormented and violent. Despite having found terrific success in Rome, and being sought after by princes and their fellow nobles, he still had a number of conflicts with justice, lawsuits, and following a duel was accused of murder in 1606. He sought exile at first in Naples in 1606-07, and then Sicily and Malta, all the while being perused by Roman police. In every place that he stayed he inspired a number of young artists fascinated by his style, transgressive and modern even today. By the beginning of the 17th century a caravaggesque style had quickly caught on across Europe, each country with their own representatives: Vouet, Honthorst Gentileschi and his daughter Artemisia, Vélasquez, Rembrandt....