

A-HED

Buyer Makes a Big Bet His New Caravaggio Is Really by Caravaggio

Experts are split over the authenticity of the long-lost work, but an anonymous buyer is a believer

By Kelly Crow

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Michelangelo Merisi, the artist known as Caravaggio, always drew trouble.

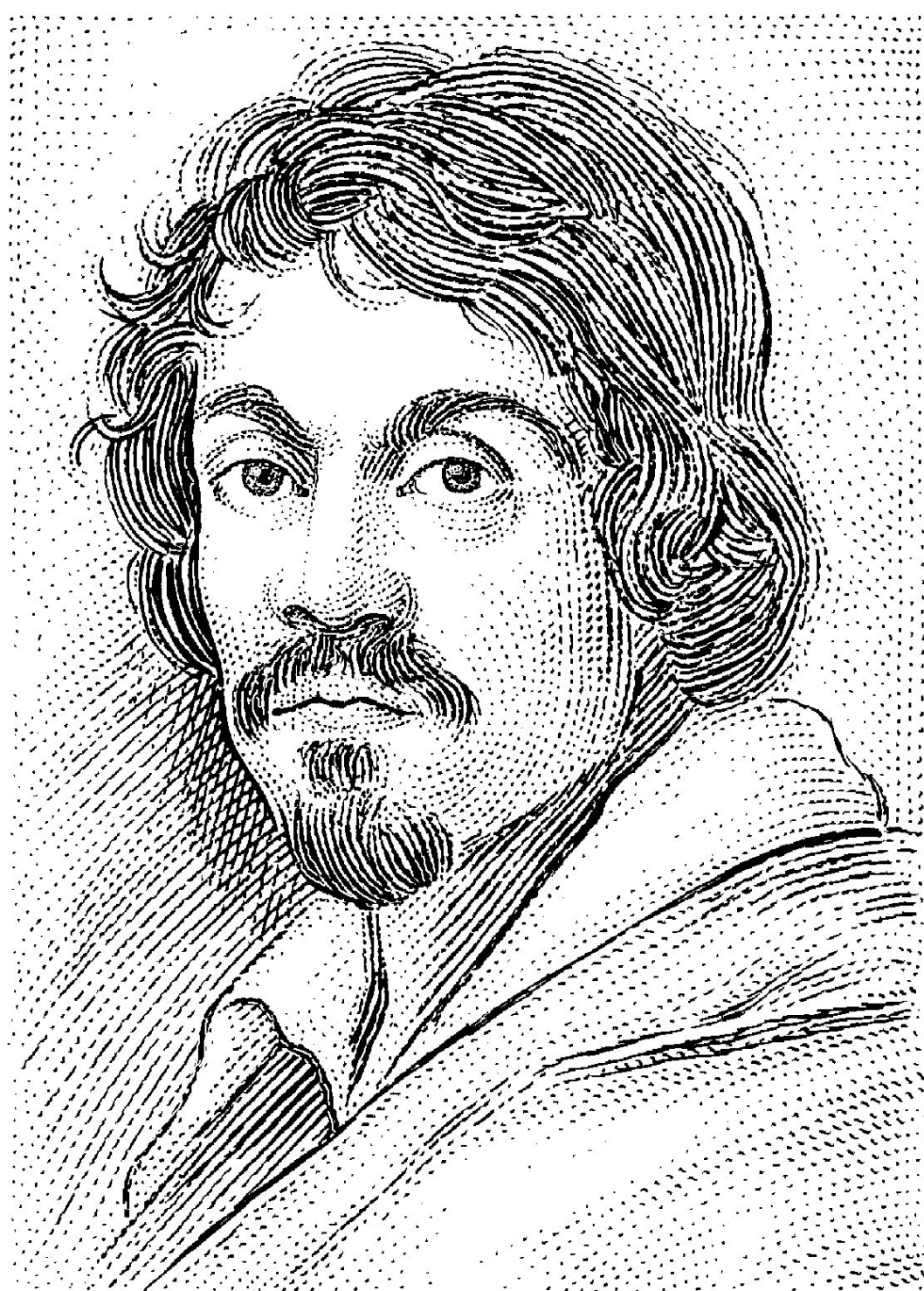
The highly anticipated public auction Thursday of a painting credited to the Italian master, who fled Rome after killing a man, was scratched when a buyer cut ahead of bidders to get it first.

Keep your chin up.

Even though experts are split over the authenticity of the long-lost work from 1606, “Judith and Holofernes,” the anonymous buyer seemingly had no doubt.

“He made an offer we couldn’t refuse,” said Eric Turquin, an appraiser and auctioneer in Paris who advised on the deal. The final price late Monday was “exceptionally more” than the starting bid of \$34 million, he said.

The price tag reflects the enduring appeal of Caravaggio, a notorious hothead whose dramatic style of painting heroes and saints like everyday people



upended the art world during his career. He died in 1610 at age 38. Four hundred years later, his work still causes a stir.

“When a new Caravaggio comes up, it’s always a controversy because he’s a passionate, violent artist,” said Guillaume Kientz, European art curator at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and one of those who believe the painting is for real. “No one can see his work and keep cool.”

The work, said to have been found in a Toulouse attic, takes a scene from the apocryphal book of Judith, the namesake widow. She saves the Jewish people by seducing and then beheading Holofernes, the general of a besieging army.

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In the macabre denouement depicted by Caravaggio, Judith, dressed in black, wields the sword and glances at the

viewer—eyes burning, brow furrowed—as the bloodied general writhes beneath her, neck gapping. Between them, a wrinkled servant looks toward Judith.

All but five of the 68 paintings believed done by Caravaggio are in museums and churches in Europe and the U.S. Part of this week’s art-world fuss was because no Caravaggio has come to auction in at least 40 years—if it is indeed his work.

The trouble is that many of Caravaggio's followers imitated the master's gritty or gorgeous figures bathed in stark, slanted light. Pieces painted in his style have sold at auction for as much as \$707,000, according to Artnet, the auction database.

"Judith and Holofernes" began its journey from dusty attic to global celebrity five years ago. Marc Labarbe, a little-known auctioneer in Toulouse, got a call from a local family who said they had spotted the dusty canvas behind a mattress. The owner was renovating the attic into an apartment for his daughter.

Nobody knows how the painting got there, but the family's Toulouse roots go back centuries, according to Mr. Labarbe.

Mr. Labarbe specializes in auctioning aeronautical memorabilia—parts from the supersonic Concorde, for instance. He examined the painting and guessed it was from the 17th century. He sought a second opinion from Mr. Turquin, who specializes in old masters.

Mr. Turquin said after one look at Judith's face, he realized he had "stumbled onto the impossible, a Caravaggio." He and his team spent two years studying the painting in secret, taking X-rays of the canvas to detect clues beneath the surface. Tests confirmed that paint pigments matched what Caravaggio used.



A closeup of Judith in the painting "Judith and Holofernes." PHOTO: CABINET TURQUIN

Caravaggio is believed to have painted at least two versions of the Judith story. The first, dating from around 1598, hangs in the National Gallery of Ancient Art in Rome. The second, Mr. Turquin said, was discussed in letters between Italian noblemen and art dealers in Naples in the early 1600s.

Caravaggio had painted it shortly after he killed a man in Rome and fled to Naples

in 1606. Maybe he was asking too much, nearly 300 ducats, because it didn't sell right away.

Adding to the mystery, one of Caravaggio's 17th-century art dealers in Naples at the time, Louis

Finson, also was an artist. His estate included a “Judith and Holofernes” that some experts believe might have been the unsold Caravaggio. Finson himself painted a copy, which now belongs to a bank in Naples.

Mr. Turquin spent the past three years showing the Toulouse painting to dozens of curators and Caravaggio scholars. Several experts in Italy ruled the painting was a copy, possibly by Finson.

Others have argued that the work is legitimate, including Keith Christiansen, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and David Stone, an art history professor at the University of Delaware.

Mr. Stone said he studied the Toulouse painting and the Finson copy side by side and believes the one found in the attic is genuine. “There’s just a quality to Judith’s face, an intelligence in her expression that’s clearly Caravaggio,” he said. “Judith looks like a raccoon in the copy.”



The Toulouse attic where the painting was found. PHOTO: MARC LABARBE

Mr. Stone said he was persuaded by X-ray and infrared tests that revealed the painter of the Toulouse painting altered the direction of Judith’s gaze.

“You can be confident it’s not a copy when the painter changes the directions of the subject’s eyes,” he said.

Attention now shifts from the painting to pinpointing the identity of its buyer—a well-known collector

of contemporary art and old masters, according to Mr. Turquin. The Caravaggio will reside in a “major public museum,” he said, which apparently rules out trophy-art hunters in Asia and the Middle East, who are disinclined to share.

Mr. Labarbe said he spent more than \$2 million preparing for the auction at a Toulouse concert hall. This spring he sent the painting to New York, London and other cities, where he estimated more than 10,000 people viewed it.

He and Mr. Turquin had planned a feast in Toulouse after Thursday’s sale for the roughly 2,000 people, mostly locals, who were expected to attend.

The celebration, Mr. Turquin said, will go on as planned.

Corrections & Amplifications

Most of the artist Caravaggio's paintings are in museums and churches in Europe and the U.S. A Page One article Wednesday about a painting attributed to Caravaggio said most of his paintings are in museums, leaving out the mention of churches.

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