



Is That a Caravaggio? It's All in the Details

Scholars are divided on whether a painting found in an attic is by the Italian painter.

By SCOTT REYBURN

LONDON — Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio (1571-1630), is the most famous Italian painter of the Baroque period, and the art trade is always looking for lost works by this fiercely original and timeless artist. But new attributions provoke fierce debates.

On Thursday, the art dealer Eric Turquin unveiled a spectacularly well-preserved 17th-century canvas of "Judith and Holofernes" that Marc Labarbe, an auctioneer in Toulouse, France, found in the attic of a house there in 2014.

Mr. Turquin has spent the past five years researching this unsigned painting. He is convinced it is a long-lost masterpiece by Caravaggio.

"Look at the execution of the lips, the way the chin and eyelids are painted," said Mr. Turquin, pointing at the face of Judith, challenging the viewer with her gaze as she coolly decapitates Holofernes with his own sword. "It belongs to Caravaggio. How could it be by anyone else?"

The painting will be auctioned by Mr. Labarbe, in collaboration with Mr. Turquin, in Toulouse on June 27.

The hefty pre-sale estimate of 100 million to 150 million euros, about \$115 million to \$170 million, suggests Mr. Turquin and Mr. Labarbe are confident that this is a Caravaggio.

According to Mr. Turquin, the painting is Caravaggio's second depiction of this gory Old Testament subject, showing a beautiful Jewish widow saving her besieged city by tempting an Assyrian general and then killing him in his tent.

The artist's first version was painted in Rome in about 1600 and is now in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica there. A second, in which Judith wears a widow's black dress



"Judith and Holofernes," which was found in an attic in Toulouse, France, in 2014, will be auctioned in June. Right, details in the painting, including the servant's wrinkles and the delicacy of a cuff, caught the attention of experts for opposing reasons.

and her old maid stands to her right, is thought to have been painted in about 1607 in Naples. Caravaggio had fled Rome the previous year after fatally stabbing a man in a brawl.

The second "Judith and Holofernes" had hitherto been known through a high-quality copy attributed to the Franco-Flemish painter Louis Finson, a contemporary admirer of Caravaggio, who is thought to have owned the lost original. The copy is now in the collection of the Intesa Sanpaolo bank in Naples.

In November 2016, the Pinacoteca di Brera museum in Milan hung the Neapolitan bank's "Judith and Holofernes" next to the Toulouse attic find in the exhibition "A Ques-

tion of Attribution." When the show ended in February, art historians and conservators were invited for a study day to evaluate the discovery. What did they think?

Keith Christiansen, chairman of European paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, said in a report that, though the Toulouse picture had "undeniable quality," it contained details that seemed to many scholars "too crude" to be by Caravaggio.

Mr. Christiansen added that the technique of the recently discovered "Judith and Holofernes" was "fully consistent with the work of Caravaggio," except for the concentric wrinkles on the old servant's face, which were painted over a pale ground,



rather than the brown the artist habitually used, which is seen elsewhere in the painting.

Gianni Papi of the University of Florence, who attended the Brera study day, remains convinced the Toulouse picture is by Caravaggio's admirer Finson. Mr. Papi said in an email that there were several elements in the Toulouse painting that did not remind him of the hand of Michelangelo Merisi. The head of the servant was one; the head of Holofernes — "too loaded, with those animal teeth, in my opinion strange for Caravaggio" — was another.

The museum study day was organized by the Brera's director, James Bradburne. Though not a specialist Caravaggio scholar, he is very familiar with the artist's "Supper at Emmaus," from about 1606, in his own museum. Seeing the delicacy of Judith's left cuff in the Toulouse painting instantly reminded him of that Brera picture, Mr. Bradburne said in an interview. "The touch of the brush screamed out Caravaggio," he added.

For others, similarly brilliant details such as the use of powdered gold on the handle of the sword and the tremendously long, confident brush strokes in the left side of the curtain also scream Caravaggio.

Mr. Christiansen said in his Brera report that though no consensus was reached, he and several other scholars concluded that the Toulouse painting was the lost work by Caravaggio, "though possibly with the intervention of a second hand." This in turn suggested that Caravaggio might have shared his Naples workshop with at least one other painter, radically contradicting his reputation as a mad, bad and dangerous-to-know loner.

Though this is fascinating for art historians, it's perhaps not what an auctioneer — or a billionaire collector — wants to hear about a painting valued at more than €100 million. The market demands that geniuses like Caravaggio work alone.

But, as ever with an old master picture, the devil — and the delight — is in the detail.