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French family stumbles on long lost €120m
Caravaggio while mending leaky roof



Painting thought to be Caravaggio's long lost Judith Beheading Holofernes CREDIT: STUDIO SEBERT

- [Henry Samuel](#), PARIS

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A leaky roof led a French family to stumble across a painting thought to be a long lost Caravaggio worth €120 million (£96 million).

The exceptionally well-preserved tableau had remained hidden in the attic of their home outside Toulouse, southwestern France, untouched for more than 150 years since an ancestor brought it back to France from his campaigns abroad as an officer of Napoleon's army.

Experts have already dubbed the incredible find a "momentous occasion" in European art history and the "most important painting by far" to have emerged by one of the great masters in modern times.

"The whole painting was covered in a misty white, which was grime. So I took a bit of cotton and water and rubbed the dirt off the maid's face"

Auctioneer Marc Labarde

Judith Beheading Holofernes, thought to be painted by Caravaggio - real name Michelangelo Merisi - in Rome around 1604-1605, was presented to the world on Tuesday morning in a Paris gallery.

"This particular lighting, this energy typical of Caravaggio without corrections, with a sure hand and the pictorial material make this painting an original," said art expert and gallery owner Eric Turquin.

Experts concur there is no way it could be a copy given the bold, spontaneous brushstrokes known as "alla brava" in Italian – Caravaggio never sketched first - and the fact that the painter made some clear corrections to hands, something that a careful copier would not do.

Caravaggio painted two versions of the biblical scene in which Judith beheads the Assyrian general Holofernes to defend her beleaguered city. The first version, painted in Rome, is currently on display at the National Gallery of Ancient Art, at Palazzo Barberini.

However, the second version, which was painted in Naples, went missing without a trace 400 years ago – until, if it proves genuine, a family on the outskirts of Toulouse unearthed the painting in an attic they didn't even know existed until they forced open a door while inspecting a leak in April 2014.

Their local auctioneer, Marc Labarde, recognised the work as Italian 17th century.

The right-side had a water stain due to the leak, but was in fact in excellent condition. "The whole painting was covered in a misty white, which was grime. So I took a bit of cotton and water and rubbed the dirt off the maid's face," he recalled.

He sent a photo to Mr Turquin, an expert in Old Masters, who instantly thought it could be a great painting.

After two years of analysis, Mr Turquin admitted that there would be “more controversies than expertise” and “no consensus” over its provenance, with one Caravaggio specialist, Mina Gregori, already questioning its authenticity.

But the painting is of sufficient interest in the eyes of the Louvre for the French culture ministry to pronounce it a “national treasure”, meaning it cannot be exported for 30 months while French museums consider whether to stump up the funds to buy it.

“This recently rediscovered work of great artistic value, which could be identified as a lost composition of Caravaggio, known so far by indirect evidence, merits being retained in the territory as a very important milestone in the work of Caravaggio, while its attribution is researched,” wrote the ministry.

The mysterious second version was mentioned by the Flemish painter Frans Pourbus the Younger in a letter penned in 1607 in which he claimed to have seen the famous work in the studio of the painter Louis Finson. Finson mentions the painting, along with another, the Virgin of the Rosary, in his 1617 will. That was the last anyone heard of the tableau.

The Turquin gallery said the work was a “darker, crueller and more naturalistic rendering of the scene” than the other known version hanging in Rome. Judith, with her “terrible determined stare looks directly at the viewer” while her maid, Abra, appears to encourage her to commit the act.

Unlike in the Rome version, the soldier comes across as a “vulnerable and common man” rather than a glorious general, with “the sunburnt hands of a soldier, and face that grimaces in pain, with eyes that are already dead”.

Experts believe that the painting was probably in Spain in the 18th century 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 40 years ago.

“It is undoubtedly the violence of the subject that allowed this painting to be relegated and to drift into obscurity,” said the gallery. “This is not the sort of picture you would hang in your living room,” said Mr Turquin.

While the gallery has estimated the price at 120 million, it said that it would likely fetch far more if auctioned given the rarity of Caravaggio paintings.

Mr Turquin said: “When two Rembrandts are bought for 80 million, they are sensational paintings, but Rembrandt is far less rare. The catalogue of Rembrandt is between 350 to 400 paintings, while that of Caravaggio is between 50 and 60. If you miss a Rembrandt, it’s a shame but you can hope to have another opportunity to buy one. If you miss a Caravaggio, you can rule out having another chance.”