

The Caravaggio Case
a documentary by Frédéric Biamonti



A film by Les Batelières Productions

Synopsis

The Caravaggio Effect

The irruption of a painting

In early 2016, a rumor spread: **One of Caravaggio's lost paintings** had resurfaced. Discovered by accident in a property in the Toulouse region, it was a representation of Judith beheading Holofernes. This sparked considerable excitement in the art market and among French cultural institutions, not to mention among art lovers. The painting's attribution was the subject of fierce debate among specialists, and the Ministry of Culture decided to impose an export ban. Public curiosity was intense, while the market watched with interest.

There was talk of an asking price of **120 million euros**. In the wake of the recent sale of a canvas by Leonardo da Vinci, Salvator Mundi, which was put on sale with a starting price of 100 million dollars and which sold for 450 million in November 2017, a new record, how much could this "new Caravaggio" fetch? Especially given that it is much bigger and in better condition than the da Vinci.

In the offices of Eric Turquin, the Parisian art expert representing the owners of the painting, they have high hopes that the painting will become either a trophy for a rich collector, or a national treasure for a major museum. In any case, it is a revolutionary work for art historians.

Until November 2018, the painting was forbidden to leave French territory, pending the verdict of the curators of the Louvre, and any subsequent auction.

Through a **gripping investigation**, this film tells the exceptional story of a painting by a grand master, rediscovered after 400 years shrouded in mystery.

Latest news from December 2018: The French State's preemption has now fallen, the Louvre will not purchase the painting. This opens up great international perspectives for the end of our story. In February 2019, a press conference will be held in Paris, in which Eric Turquin, our main expert, will present his scientific and academic discoveries on the painting. To prepare the public auction, a presentation tour will be organized: London in February 2019, New York in May 2019 and Hong Kong in June 2019. The public auction sale will be held in Toulouse in June 2019.

The Principal Characters



Judith

Our leading lady, around whom all the other characters gravitate. We discover her in the strong room above Eric Turquin's offices (see below). The first impression is shocking: She is in the process of beheading a man, staring at us with a defiant look. This is a radically different female character to those usually portrayed in painting. Grace, modesty, delicacy and beauty are all absent. She is more the heroine of a noir novel, a black widow, the high priestess of a barbarous cult. Behind her, an old woman deformed by a monstrous goiter holds a sack, ready to deal with the body. It is a nightmarish scene from a gore movie.

The screaming man is called Holofernes, an Assyrian general who was besieging Judith's city. The beheading is a patriotic act, and Judith is a biblical heroine who kills to save her people.

She is troubled. No one can understand her attitude as she carries out this killing, nor her defiant look. Many of the enigmas in the film arise from the psychological opacity of the killer, which is a far cry from the accepted representations of the age.

What is the meaning of this gaze, her cold-bloodedness, and that blend of direct sensuality (she is showing a great deal of flesh) and timid withdrawal (black dress and widow's veil)? As we probe further, she becomes strangely disturbing.

Eric Turquin

Aged 65, with the physique of a jockey, he is a jovial and theatrical man. He has a solid reputation as an expert in old paintings. Passionate about art and an expert in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, as soon as the painting was discovered, he donned his investigator's hat. Turquin's company specializes in digging up sources, cross-referencing them, separating the true from the fake, to determine whether the painting was indeed by the hand of the master and not one of his students. "This work was probably produced in Rome in 1604-1605," he suggests. "It is in an exceptional state of conservation." He claims this is the greatest discovery for 30 years in France. Although the painting doesn't belong to him, it is nonetheless a personal matter, the focus of his whole career, that of a lifetime. He is so strongly convinced that when talking to him, no doubt is permissible. But once one looks further, the mystery resurfaces.

Having burnt his fingers on several significant precedents (a da Vinci and a Velasquez), he cannot afford to be wrong with this Judith.





Marc Labarbe

An auctioneer since 1995, Marc Labarbe was drawn to this profession after witnessing the spectacle of a shoe auction in Bayonne, southwest France. He sits at his desk like a captain at the helm of his ship, never losing sight of the horizon. Everything is in its place in his office. The sale room is like the stage of a theater, and he often uses a cane to spur on the public. Auctions are never dull when he is in charge. He can orchestrate a sale of Chinese antiquities one day, and the next, sell off parts from a Concorde.

He was immediately intrigued by the discovery of the dusty and damaged painting, and quickly got in touch with Eric Turquin to follow up on his intuition that this was an exceptional work.

Mina Gregori

Aged 94, she has astonishing verve and vitality. A former student of Caravaggio scholar Roberto Longhi, she specialized in the study of Italian painting and is one of the world's leading experts on Caravaggio. "I can recognize a Caravaggio when I see one," she says. She was one of the first people Eric Turquin invited to see this rediscovered Judith. She didn't identify it as by the hand of the master. But some of her recent attributions have been open to criticism, if not incorrect, which leaves some hope.





Keith Christiansen

Former head of European painting at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, he is a specialist in Caravaggio, especially his pictorial technique. He believes in the authenticity of this Judith, which he would like to see in an American museum, possibly the Met. He quit his official function a few months ago, and can now speak freely. For him, the Toulouse Judith is a key painting which has up-ended his reading of Caravaggio, and a work which any museum should be delighted to get its hands on. Some say he is working behind the scenes to secure financing for this spectacular acquisition.

The French State

The French Ministry of Culture discovered the existence of the painting when Eric Turquin requested a permit for the painting to leave French territory. It was an important matter.

There was so much uncertainty that the state wanted to take no risks. The authorities decided to block export until November 2018 to allow time to reach their own conclusions and try to put together the huge sum required for a possible acquisition. If this reaches the sum of 120 million euros, it would be unprecedented for France. Torn between the eagerness to secure the canvas and reticence regarding the price tag, the state is one of the key players in our suspense. The Judith could provide the opportunity to pull off a diplomatic coup on the European stage. Sébastien Allard and Stéphane Loire, respectively director and deputy director of the Louvre's painting department, will deliver their verdict on its authenticity in the fall of 2018. One senses they are caught up in the paradoxes of the Louvre: either they declare in favor of attribution to Caravaggio, or the painting will go abroad.



The strong room



Having spent two years hanging above the bed of Mr and Mrs Turquin, who live over the offices, the insurers insisted on security measures worthy of a James Bond movie. As a result, the third floor of the premises in Rue Saint-Anne (Paris) have been turned into Judith's lair, the rooms cut in two and transformed into a sort of vault. Initial access is through an armored door, which opens into an airlock. The next stage involves entering a secret code, followed by retinal identification. Only three people have access: Eric Turquin and his trusted collaborators, Julie Ducher and Stéphane Pinta. The outside of the room has been covered with security spikes and anti-grip paint to prevent potential thieves scaling the outside of the building. The entire staff have been trained by police to recognize anyone casing the premises, and are briefed to raise the alarm at the slightest doubt. The whole building is equipped with surveillance cameras.

Since it has been hanging there, Judith has received some influential visitors: Bernard Arnault, Thaddaeus Ropac, Pierre Rosenberg, François Pinault, Valérie Giscard D'Estaing, not to mention leading lawyers, bankers, and so on.

The Film

PARIS

A building in a discreet courtyard in Paris's 2nd arrondissement, with a handsome 17th-century staircase, and at the top, the strong room. Hidden away there is the so-called Toulouse Judith, which comes into view as the locked shutters are opened, one by one.

Eric Turquin recounts how the painting was discovered in early 2014. He got the shock of his life, the vertiginous thrill of coming across a masterpiece by chance.

And he goes on to tell us about the two years of investigation that followed, amid great secrecy. All the staff at his office signed confidentiality agreements forbidding them from discussing the picture with anyone outside the firm.

Turquin wanted to take his time and make no mistakes.

The first thing he embarked upon was scientific analysis. The canvas had to be X-rayed to know what lay beneath its harsh brushstrokes. Since no standard machine is big enough to take the painting, the initial analysis was done at the veterinary school at Maison Alfort on the outskirts of Paris, in a machine usually used for horses. The results were edifying, but he had to continue his investigations, so he now turned to experts in the painter. Caravaggio is an artist for whom authentication of his works is never an easy task.

But Turquin had a growing belief that he was dealing with a genuine masterpiece by Caravaggio, despite the immediate and vigorous disagreement on the part of specialists like Mina Gregori. Gregori had already been wrong in the past, and one had to admit, her great age was an important factor.

The lack of unanimity was of no importance for Turquin: "Attribution is only ever a matter of consensus, which I think we will achieve."



FLORENCE

At the Fondation Longhi in Florence, we talk to **Mina Gregori**, leading specialist in Caravaggio.

We are among the guardians of the temple, where the memory is preserved of the great scholar and critic Roberto Longhi, who “reinvented” Caravaggio in the early 1950s, after centuries of neglect and unreliable attributions. Mina Gregori, now 94, is the last surviving disciple of Longhi, bestowing great authority on her when it comes to Caravaggio.

She receives us in her library, surrounded by shelves full of Longhi’s archives. She bases her argument on the first version of Judith Beheading Holofernes, saying she does not believe the authenticity of the Toulouse Judith because she cannot read the painting; it is too complex, too far from the psychological immediacy of Caravaggio’s works. For her, it’s a rebus, an enigma, done by a student, but not the master himself. What makes her so sure? Intuition.

Caravaggio is a problematic artist when it comes to attribution. There is no signature, and there are a great many copies. Art history is not an exact science. The attribution of one painting to a painter is done by a series of clues. This may take years, and sometimes there is never a definitive answer.

Some experts do, however, believe this painting to be authentic, such as Nicola Spinosa, director of the Capodimonte museum in Naples, and a specialist in Caravaggio; and John Gash, from the University of Aberdeen, for whom there is no doubt the painting found in Toulouse is authentic. Keith Christiansen, the former head of European painting at the Metropolitan in New York, is also convinced of the painting’s authenticity.

In any case, this rediscovered Judith has overturned the accepted history of the work in the eyes of critics. It is a disturbing interloper.

We pay a visit to the offices of auctioneer Marc Labarbe.

TOULOUSE

Marc Labarbe greets us in his Toulouse office. He tells us how the painting was discovered in the attic of a nearby property. Following a water leak in 2014, the family was emptying the attic space ahead of remedial work. One of the family members pulled out a dusty, unsigned painting, which may have belonged to one of their forebears who lived in the house and who had fought in Spain in the Napoleonic armies. Having no idea about the possible value of this canvas, he called Marc Labarbe, the charismatic Toulouse auctioneer who had already handled the sale of some antiques for the family. Labarbe dusted off the painting and was struck by the splendor of the scene. He fancied it was Italian, but was unsure.



He decided to consult Eric Turquin, whose expertise he trusted. He sent him a photo on his iPhone. Turquin thought it might be interesting, but to be certain, he must see the painting.

To fully understand the painstaking task of the art expert, we returned to Turquin's offices to take a closer look at the process during what he calls a "sorting day".

In a large room with a glass roof, canvases of all sizes rest against the walls. The paintings that arrived during the week are placed on an easel, or go through the hands of one of the firm's experts. It all happens very fast. In a matter of minutes, an attribution is put forward, the state of the painting is assessed, and an estimate is given. They are mainly small formats and minor masters, nothing comparable to the Judith locked away a few floors above.

A regular guest among Turquin's team for these sorting sessions is Jean-Pierre Cuzin. He speaks very softly, but is listened to attentively. Which is no surprise, given that this discreet man is the former director of the Louvre's painting department, and therefore an authority.

In his company, we would like to see the Judith again and discuss the master's technique.

It is not an easy painting, one that is difficult to like. A mysterious work, it is very hard to link it to the first known Judith by Caravaggio, which hangs in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome. The presence of Caravaggio's hand is indisputable for Cuzin when he looks at the painting in detail, notably the rendering of the fabric, the flesh, and the sword's pommel. And yet, he did not arrive at this certitude readily: He cried "That's not Caravaggio" when he first saw the painting. There are some magnificent parts, but the overall composition is problematic, "a stiff painting, painted slowly with lots of meditation", unlike other later works, sketched out with great speed. It is much more difficult to understand than the first Judith from 1599, whose reproduction is placed in front of this newfound version. The Toulouse Judith may perhaps never be recognized unanimously.



PARIS

THE STRONG
ROOM

The mysteries of Caravaggio's method mean that we need more elements. Still with **Jean-Pierre Cuzin**, we visit the Palazzo Reale in Milan, where an extraordinary exhibition is being held.

MILAN

The exhibition comprises 22 paintings by Caravaggio, alongside the results of some scientific studies that have been carried out in recent years. One can admire the considerable research done in the archives and on the paintings themselves, with the help of technologies such as radiography and infrared reflectography. To illustrate this, behind each painting, a short educational video explains the painter's creative process. Through the incisions, sketches, reworkings, and adjustments, we come to see the picture not as a static postcard, but more as a work-in-progress. This also confirms the fundamental change in technique which occurred in 1600, when he received the commission for three paintings of huge dimensions for the Contarelli chapel in the church of St. Louis of the French.

This all helps to get to know the revolutionary work of the painter more intimately. Jean-Pierre finds allusions to the new Judith everywhere: The detail in a piece of clothing, some fabric, a hand, the gaze addressed at the spectator by a Bacchus, a Madonna, or a musician.

The chronological presentation of the exhibition underlines the incredible variety of styles used by Caravaggio. This is not a linear evolution, but methods of painting that are sometimes contradictory within the same painting, with areas that are highly worked and carefully finished, and other areas that are almost botched. Far from an abstract ideal of beauty, Caravaggio is radically out of step with all the accepted rules of art.

The Toulouse Judith fits into this astonishing process, which explains the ruptures in style it contains.

In what circumstances was it painted? Where and for whom? There is still a long way to go before the full history of this painting has been retraced, but we will return to this.



PANTIN

We will also explore the controversy provoked by the painting's discovery and its possible destiny. Why has this painting stirred up so much desire and contestation, and raised so many questions? We discuss this with **Thaddaeus Ropac**.

A gallery owner with an eye for the avant-garde, one of the first supporters of Basquiat, he was the first visitor to see the new Judith, the day after it was publicly revealed.

We meet him in the industrial halls of his gallery in Pantin. In the middle of the exhibition currently showing, he leafs through the Judith dossier: Photos of the painting, showing different aspects and details.

“Caravaggio had incredible modernity, his chapels are art installations ahead of their time. And he was already playing with the market effect, creating an event with his paintings to bring the spotlight on him. He is the Jean Michel Basquiat of the 1600s, a revolutionary artist who set the art market alight. A bad boy who was skilled at causing a stir and getting into a fight.”

What's more, Caravaggio has not lost his power to generate conflict and dissension. One only has to look at the polemic created by the new Judith.

Ropac's presence so soon after this discovery was made public is an indicator of the fever surrounding this canvas and its history. Caravaggio sends a shockwave through his audience, but also through the financial markets.

We meet **Thierry Ehrmann**, the enigmatic founder of Artprice, which owns the world's biggest art database.

For financiers, works of art are the new el dorado, having become assets in their own right, just like share and bonds. Between 2000 and 2017, the art market has stood up well while stock markets have been buffeted (up 1,400% by volume).

In the past 10 years, banks have invested huge sums and put together between 350 and 400 art funds based largely on post-war icons and contemporary art, with an impressive annual return of 11%. Recent canvases by masters have reached staggering prices at auction: Women of Algiers by



PARIS

Pablo Picasso: 179.4 million dollars; an untitled painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat: 110.5 million dollars; Contrast in Forms by Fernand Léger: 70 million dollars.

Da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* sold on 15 November 2017 for just over 450 million dollars (383 million euros), becoming the most expensive painting in history. For 19 minutes, five people tried to outdo one another, in a series of 53 bids.

The auction house Christie's skillfully orchestrated this sale, which turned into a genuine show. Having exhibited the painting around the world, it was placed as the centerpiece of a sale of contemporary art rather than old masters, a market seen as less attractive for the new billionaires. And yet, this record price surprised everyone. The art market is currently going through a phase of irrational enthusiasm, and the da Vinci rode this wave.

The world's new fortunes are hungry for trophies, which only rarely come up for sale. The Toulouse Judith could well generate a similar bidding frenzy.



At this stage, we want to continue exploring sources to establish the painting's authenticity. And understand how a legend is born.

In the church of St. Louis of the French, the biographer **Gérard-Julien Salvy** recounts the birth of the Caravaggio legend.

Just next to the Piazza Navona, we discover Caravaggio's first masterpiece, the Contarelli chapel. Gérard-Julien Salvy outlines the instantaneous glory he attained in 1600 when the cycle of works dealing with St. Matthew was inaugurated. In a stunning innovation, the space was no longer described; instead, the architecture disappears. It is all about the light flooding in from above, lighting the scene obliquely, fixing the action.

Prior to Caravaggio, no one had dared such a radical simplification.

From one day to the next, this unknown Lombard became the most famous artist in Europe. And also one of the most sought-after by the great collectors of the age, notably the cardinal-nephews of the pope. His price soared as the orders flooded in.

We continue on to the church of Santa Maria del Popolo and the Cerasi chapel.



Salvy talks us through the work: The Crucifixion of St. Peter on one side, the Conversion of St. Paul on the other, and between them, the Assumption of the Virgin by Caravaggio's great rival, Annibale Carracci. It's a similar installation to that discussed by Thaddaeus Ropac: The use of space and sources of light within a box. There is a perfect understanding of the place of the spectator, the paintings having been created to be seen on an angle.

And in a bellicose confrontation with the painting of the time, St. Paul's horse aims its rump towards Carracci's precious Madonna.

Here, Caravaggio rides roughshod over Carracci's grandiloquent painting, as he would pour scorn on other painters of the day. Among his legal wrangles, he was pursued for defamation by Giovanni Baglione, one of his rivals whose work he had publicly ridiculed.

Caravaggio revolutionized the art of the age. His use of chiaroscuro allowed the composition to be simplified, injecting more drama into the scene. The Caravagesque style became the magic formula for a whole generation of painters.

Yet it was Carracci and the other painters from Bologna (Guido Reni, Guercino) who were held in admiration in the centuries that followed. Thirty years after his death, Caravaggio was rejected, considered as an accident of history, a footnote.

Today, he finally has his revenge, for who remembers Annibale Carracci? To the 21st-century art lover, Caravaggio's superiority over his contemporaries is self-evident, his bold style having an immediate impact.

The myth is intact, and the price tags on his works are astronomical. Splendor has its price; it was true in his day, just as it is today.

All these elements are richly illuminating, but there are still shady areas. In the editing room, working on the film, we ponder this between sessions of watching rushes, providing an immersion in images of Caravaggio, books about him, reproductions, and multiple details of Judith.

There is a disturbing clash between early Roman painting, urbane and libertine, with the violence of religious paintings.

He was a painter whose career took off at lightning speed. He was one of the interpreters of popular religious themes, although nothing in his early work foretold this. This minor artist, who turned out smaller works typified by a certain preciousness, became a genius at staging who revolutionized the representation of biblical scenes.



And yet, six years later, when he painted the second Judith, the one found in Toulouse, the same painter had become a fugitive in exile, whilst remaining famous and influential.

His reputation as an artist grew as fast as that of his misdeeds, and his judicial woes kept pace.

Whether this was due to the pressure of success, paranoia, or pathological aggression, opinion is divided. His contemporaries thought he was mentally unstable and had an “extravagant temperament”.

He was admired yet detested, envied and attacked. His paintings were soon rejected by church patrons; he was too radical, too close to the people. But collectors pounced on his rejected works, snapping them up.

We leave the editing suite to images from the Piazza del Popolo in Rome at the end of the day, the crowds, Vespas buzzing past, street vendors. At the end of the square stand the church of Santa Maria.

ROME

We meet with the physician **Claudio Falcucci** from the University of Rome to try and understand the secrets of the painter’s technique, which he has studied and presented at the Palazzo Reale in Milan.

Falcucci developed his own method for the exploration of the painting process. He brings multiple observational and analytical techniques to bear to better distinguish the successive layers which make up a painting: The preparatory layer, the different zones painted or not (Caravaggio left some zones dark in reserve), the glazing, the varnish, the retouching and reworking. Over the years, he has dissected several dozens of Caravaggio’s paintings.

The Toulouse Judith corresponds to his previous analyses: No prior sketch, and a dark preparation layer in which the painter traced some incisions with the handle of the brush to outline the composition.

One thing is certain, the painting from Toulouse is not a copy; it has all the characteristics of an original.

One can detect reworking, which would only exist on an original. One hand has changed position. Judith’s gaze was also modified at the time when the portrait was first done. The servant woman’s face presents a puzzle. It was entirely redone, using the same pigments, but who by? And why?



The violence of the painting also remains an enigma. The artist's fascination for blood raises some profound questions. Still in Rome, we visit the **Palazzo Barberini**, accompanied by **Julie Ducher**.

Julie Ducher is one of the experts at Eric Turquin's company, and has worked with him for 12 years. She had goosebumps and immediately fell in love with the new Judith when she saw it placed almost nonchalantly in the entrance to the firm's offices. Without even daring to say it, she instantaneously knew what stood before her.

We now follow her through a series of sumptuous rooms. This is the extravagant décor of the great families who provided the popes and cardinals for centuries, the principal patrons of Caravaggio. The walls are bedecked with marble, mirrors, and paintings. Here, one finds the first version of Judith and Holofernes. Ducher described how this painting represents a rupture in the painter's career.

Before, there were pretty little paintings, discreetly libertine, full of half-naked youths. Judith was the first really violent painting, which paved the way for more powerful and controversial works. The Barberini Judith marks the true birth of Caravaggio as a painter, and it was a bloody birth.

It also marked a break with all established models, a redefinition of the subject which had never been represented in this way before, the moment the throat is cut and the hemoglobin spills out.

Standing before the Barberini Judith, the spectator can still identify with the killer, who is repulsed by carrying out her act. She leans back in disgust, quite unlike the Toulouse Judith, who is much more radical and chilling. Ducher underlines the change in the painter's style, swifter and more brutal, along with the many similarities in the details.

Between these two Judiths, Caravaggio's life had taken a turn. What had happened?

To understand the enigmatic roots of this errant artist, it would be impossible to not go to Milan, the city of his birth and where he was trained.



MILAN

He was born there twice. Once in 1571, and a second time in 1951 when Longhi resuscitated him at an exhibition which changed the course of art history.

Milan was the starting point of a short career that took the form of a flight ever farther south; Rome, Naples, Sicily, then Malta.

Milan, capital of Lombardi, was at the time under Spanish rule, and under the iron spiritual authority of its archbishop, Charles Borromeo, an ascetic and leading figure of the Counter-Reformation. It was an austere city that had been ravaged by the black death when Caravaggio was just five, an epidemic which killed his father.

That is no doubt where one must look for the sources of this artistic universe that was so radically foreign for its age.

Which images would the young Caravaggio have drawn inspiration from as an apprentice? Those of his master, Simone Peterzano, under whom he worked for three years at the monastery of San Maurizio in San Fedele?

Or possibly the astonishing luminous paintings of brothers Antonio and Bernardo Campi in the church of Sant'Angeli, and San Paolo Converso?

Or should one look elsewhere, to the hyper-realist sculpture of the Sacri Monti, a specialty of Lombardi?

In the mountains of Lombardi, at the Sacro Monto of Varallo, mysticism reigns.

VARALLO

During the painter's childhood, Varallo was the biggest religious art site in the region. Its patron, Charles Borromeo, turned it into an esthetic laboratory of the Counter-Reformation. With Varallo, he was trying to redefine religious art, making it more accessible, more intimate, closer to the people – Christian faith driven by unprecedented emotional power.

This megalomaniac project featured a replica of Jerusalem in the mountains of Lombardi, 45 chapels each containing a scene from the life of Christ, represented in a hyper-realistic style. Life-size sculpted figures dressed in real clothes and with real hair, against a backdrop of frescoes.

This was a place of pilgrimage using spectacular imagery. There is violence in the gestures of the characters, depicted in the heat of the action. The bloody realism immediately evokes Judith and Holofernes: This is the popular imagery that presages Caravaggio's universe, with its brutal and terribly effective reading of sacred texts.



PARIS

Back in **the editing suite**, we wonder whether Caravaggio wasn't in fact an apostle of the Counter-Reformation.

We see images of Varallo on one screen, and on another Eric Turquin insisting that Caravaggio is a profoundly religious painter, steeped in the fervent Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. His interpretation of Judith is a militant painting, which hails the victory of the Catholic church – Judith triumphing over Lutheran heresy embodied by the Assyrian general Holofernes. Possibly true, but this reading works better for the Barberini Judith; it doesn't explain the strange looks on the faces in the Toulouse canvas, he argues.

Above all, Varallo evokes the neo-realist Caravaggio, seeking inspiration in popular art and the street rather than in the idealized forms of the Renaissance. In short, a painter of the people, one who invented a style of his own, a new approach.



Was Caravaggio a roughneck? In Nantes, western France, we meet with **Annick Lemoine** at the Nicolas Régnier exhibition. Annick Lemoine is an historian and curator, a specialist in Caravaggesque painters and their environment.

NANTES

She explains how Caravaggio's influence can be found everywhere in French museums. In the Museum of Art in Nantes, there is a whole room dedicated to Caravaggesque paintings, in particular his great disciple from the Lorraine, Georges de la Tour.

Lemoine recently put together an exhibition of the work of another of his emulators, Nicolas Régnier.

We halt in front of Régnier's version of Judith and Holofernes. Alongside are scenes of drinking, nocturnal encounters with prostitutes, and fights between ruffians and soldiers.

Lemoine discusses the links between Caravaggio and his "disciples". Caravaggio's international renown, spread via Rome's cosmopolitan bohemian scene around 1600, was the focus of a community of painters from across Europe, many great drinkers and hell-raisers, and who all soon latched onto Caravaggio's inventions. In a feverish avant-garde atmosphere



the fierce competition led to one-upmanship in audacity and innovation. It was a forerunner of the Montparnasse of the 1920s, which still resonates today.

By day, life was controlled by the church and pontifical police, but things were much more turbulent at night. Nocturnal Rome was a dangerous place, and a source of the artist's inspiration.

Caravaggio had a fascination for the dark underbelly, the prostitutes, mercenaries waiting to be paid, and vagabonds. He succeeded in bridging this gulf between the commissions by church and the life of the ordinary people in his paintings.

Caravaggio's models were seen as scandalous. He chose whores to represent the Virgin and the female saints.

The woman who posed for the two Judiths is well documented in the archives of the papal police. She was called Filide Melandroni, a prostitute with a reputation as a streetfighter quite prepared to draw a knife on her rivals. Caravaggio chose her as his model out of provocation, turning his back on artistic conventions, especially the sacrosanct study of masterpieces of antiquity. He was thumbing his nose at respected traditions.

But the Toulouse Judith poses another major problem, which is why Mina Gregori has her reserves about its provenance: Where had the painting been for 400 years?

TOULOUSE

We talk to **Marc Labarbe**. He has been trying to trace the painting's whereabouts from information that he has prized out of the owners, who wish to remain anonymous. Labarbe thinks the Judith may have spent a spell in Spain, taken there with the belongings of Count Benavente, viceroy of Naples at the time of Caravaggio's first stay in the city. And the current owners from Toulouse had an ancestor who was an officer in the Napoleonic army in Spain.

But this is just one theory among several, all equally plausible. One thing is certain: All trace of the painting was lost in Naples in 1607 (according to a letter from François Pourbus to the Duke of Mantua).

And that doesn't make matters any easier. This was the most turbulent period in the painter's life. He was on the run, going from one place of exile to another, each time covering his tracks.

This meant a trip to Naples, the last known resting place of our Judith before she disappeared for four centuries.



NAPLES

We join **Julie Ducher** at the Palazzo Zevalos Stigliano, still on the trail of Judith and her double. With her, we go into the headquarters of a bank, through a grand vestibule, and into the boardroom, where we come face-to-face with Judith, exactly the same. Well, in fact, a copy done by the painter and merchant Louis Finson in the early 17th century.

But isn't this irrefutable proof that a painting by Caravaggio existed? It has exactly the same composition, but Finson's copy is clumsy, and of very poor quality in comparison to the newly found Judith. The copies done at the time give an idea of the artist's status then: He had become such a major figure that dealers had his works duplicated before selling them.

But this copy of the Toulouse Judith poses some fresh questions, deepening the mystery around the painting. Both works were apparently painted on two sections cut from the same canvas. The weave is identical, and a seam appears one-third of the way up, a highly unusual feature. Yet more strange, the paintings present very similar retouches on the characters' eyes, as if they had been painted and modified at the same time – as if Caravaggio allowed Finson to work alongside him in his workshop.



This suggestion sent a shockwave among Caravaggio experts, the new Judith calling into question the established notion of the painter's solitude, a man believed to have never had assistants or collaborators in his workshop.

We remain in Naples to probe this yet further.

With **Julie Ducher**, we visit old Naples, and the little church of Pio Monte. Here, we find an imposing and complex painting, the Seven Works of Misery, no doubt painted around the same time as our Judith. The multitude of converging details suggest we are very close to the artist behind the Toulouse Judith.

Ducher wants to show how Caravaggio was received in Naples. He is usually described as a fugitive in dire straits, but the truth was very different. His reputation as an exceptional painter preceded him, and he was welcomed with open arms. He was immediately given some prestigious commissions. He was paid a small fortune for the painting in Pio Monte.

From Naples onwards, Caravaggio was obliged to pull off stunning, bravura works.



Only his reputation allowed him to seek asylum with the powerful, his paintings buying his protection.

He was thus obliged to produce shocking paintings, which would cause a sensation and perpetuate his legend.

The Toulouse Judith was painted in this period. It is a prestigious commission, as evidenced by the care lavished on luxurious details (the sword's pommel is covered in gold), and the client was no doubt an eminent dignitary in Naples, but who?

From his time in Naples onwards, Caravaggio became an increasingly liberated painter. We have to continue tracing his career.



MALTA

In Malta and in Sicily, he was welcomed like a star of modern art. He had free rein to develop his style as he wished, becoming increasingly radical across huge canvases. No one else was painting like him, he was in a class of his own. For the first time, he signed one of his pictures, the biggest he had ever produced (5x4m). It was the Beheading of St John the Baptist in St John's Cathedral in Valetta – another decapitation, and he signed his name in the victim's blood, like an evocation of the fate that awaited him in Rome if the pope's agents captured him.

Back to reflection in **the editing suite**, the ideal place to take a little distance.



PARIS

The two Judiths reveal two very different painters, with seven years between them: One unknown, aspiring to honors in Rome, the other a fugitive at the height of his glory, producing a string of masterpieces while he waited to get back on his feet.

What does the new Judith tell us? Her gaze is a defiant glance from the painter to say: You don't know what I'm capable of. You haven't seen anything yet!

This is the bravado of a Caravaggio at the start of his exile. He is in full possession of his faculties, and is sure that he will be able to return to grace and once again secure prestigious Roman commissions.

But three years later he would die in misery. The Toulouse Judith is a final moment of provocation before his undoing.

In the Sicilian cities of Syracuse and Messina, we attempt to understand the master's evolution during his final years here.

SICILY

In Sicily, Caravaggio's style continues the experimentation begun in Malta.

He painted monumental canvases (4 meters by 3), half-empty, the characters huddled into a corner, as if crushed by the silence of God. These are paintings which exude anxiety, abandonment, overwhelming solitude. One cannot fail to see Caravaggio's terror. A killer on the run, he was being pursued by hitmen of the Tommassoni clan (his victim's family), the pope's henchmen, and the knights of Malta.

In Syracuse and Messina, the paintings have the same strange atmosphere of funereal anxiety which is unique in European art. These are morbid scenes; the death of St. Lucie, the resurrection of Lazarus's cadaver.

Caravaggio was staring death in the face, but what was he expecting? Forgiveness? A miracle? A sign? He was alone, confronted with the silence of God.



All the ingredients were there to give Caravaggio a place of his own in world art history. His painting was out of step with his time; his tragic, turbulent life made him a cursed artist, who was continually reinventing himself and surprising his audience. As an anguished criminal, fluctuating between compassion and rage, he touches an emotional register of unprecedented intensity.

Keith Christiansen, former head of European painting at the Met, is utterly convinced that the Toulouse Judith is authentic. Standing in front of other works by Caravaggio in the Met, he sets out why it would be a key acquisition for the museum. The Met only has two minor Caravaggios, plus a Holy Family of dubious attribution. The work illustrates a turning point in the career of a fundamental painter in the history of Western art. It is also a provocative work, which would draw large crowds. All good reasons to justify a high price tag.

NEW-YORK



The great difficulty with a Caravaggio is where to hang it. What can go alongside it and bear comparison?

MILAN

James Bradburne has pondered this question at length, especially for the first public presentation of our Judith, which put the cat among the pigeons. Canadian-born but naturalized British, the head of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan was the first to invite the rediscovered Judith outside France. He brought the painting to Milan in February 2017 (with exceptional permission from the Ministry of Culture) to compare it to the Caravaggios in the Milanese collections.

It caused a scandal, with threats of resignation from curators at the Brera, who saw this as a major ethical conflict. Their museum was being used to shore up an uncertain attribution, and to boost a work's sale price. This new Judith is an explosive object in the closed universe of old paintings; no sooner was it revealed than it was sending shockwaves through institutions. It revived quarrels between schools and disputes among specialists.

James Bradburne would rather hail the discovery, underlining its rarity, and defends his museum's role to question works: Anything but a sacristy.



At the Louvre, in the Great Gallery, the mood is not the same.

PARIS

The three Caravaggios that hang in the gallery are three key paintings that sum up the painter's development. One painting from his early days, one scandalous work, which was rejected during his great Roman period, and one big portrait from his time in Malta. The Judith of Toulouse would be a perfect complement to this trio, as an example of work from his Neapolitan period.

The curators **Sébastien Allard** and **Stéphane Loire** are uncomfortable in the face of this new Judith, which is impossible to formally identify. Attribution is never easy, it must be established over time. They cite the example of a masterpiece hanging a few steps away, a painting of Perugino at first attributed to Raphael, although this was contested for almost 50 years.

Reading between the lines, it is clear the curators from the Louvre are divided; there is no consensus on the Toulouse Judith within the Department of Paintings.

One can also add the paradox of the price, range for the Louvre if it's 120 million euros,



the equivalent of 15 years of acquisitions for the museum. So who can afford this painting?

The pressure on museums to secure masterpieces is huge.

Some 700 new museums are founded each year worldwide. The growth of this industry is driving up prices and this is only the beginning. The financial arrangement for the purchase of da Vinci's Salvator Mundi was unprecedented: Two investment funds acting in cooperation in conjunction with museums. The work can thus be resold or loaned for several years to major museums who can exhibit it by turns. Several museums in Asia and two major museums in the Gulf are said to have shown a keen interest.

The economic model makes sense. One top-quality work can motivate visitors to travel to another continent, and the cash-flow from ticket sales is immediate. For the host country, exhibiting these works is a display of power.



Paris, Toulouse, London or New York

The countdown continues, while we eagerly await the outcome of this affair.

The tension mounts as the expiry of the export embargo approaches: On 16 November 2018, this will be lifted, and the “national treasure” that has been locked down for 30 months will be offered for sale.

At Eric Turquin's offices, potential buyers are starting to show up. This involves some delicate positioning, since no one wants to appear too interested, for fear of driving up the price. They examine it, speculate on its provenance, hesitate. Four years of buzz has resulted in a huge file of international press cuttings compiled by the firm's archivists.

In the Drouot auction house, it is business as usual. The experts of the cabinet Turquin, Julie Ducher and Stéphane Pinta, oversee the sale. In any ordinary auction, there are always some feverish moments when things take off, like a foretaste of an impending tornado.

At the end of November 2018, the official end of the 30-month embargo, Judith will at last be able to leave – unless the Louvre has made a pre-emptive offer. Everyone is waiting for Sébastien Allard's press conference. He's expected to decline.

THE
SALE



In Turquin's office, preparations are underway for the sale: Choice of venue, Paris, London, New York, or Toulouse – the preference of local auctioneer Marc Labarbe, who would love to see the bigwigs from the museum world along with the top global buyers in the city. The news media have been showing greater interest since the Louvre's announcement. Curiosity is reaching a peak, with journalist's mentioning the precedent of the Salvator Mundi.

Judith emerges from the strong room for the last time. Eric Turquin has seen some paintings come and go in his 40-year career, but he is nonetheless emotional. This is no ordinary painting. He shows us the spot where he first hung the Judith when it arrived, above his own bed.

Packaging, beefed-up security, transport; everything has to be carefully planned for the public exhibition ahead of the auction. Judith is no doubt about to leave France.

The day of the auction is here (probably early 2019): The bids mount, the adrenalin pumps, Eric Turquin and his team are nervous. The emotion is at a peak, but will it be disappointment or triumph? Did Judith succeed in beating records?



ROME

To conclude this incredible story, we go to Rome to see the last great self-portrait of Caravaggio. He appears in the guise of Goliath in the painting in the Borghese gallery. He looks exhausted, crushed, pitiful. Having just slain him, David looks at him with compassion.

During his time in exile, Caravaggio tried to change his fate through his paintings. He painted this David and Goliath for cardinal Scipion Borghese, a powerful nephew of the pope renowned as an avid collector.

The painting was a gift to buy the cardinal's favor, that he might intervene with his uncle and grant a pardon for the artist. In vain.

Caravaggio struggled until the end, between his dreams as a painter and his inner demons. He died alone and penniless 400 years ago. Today, he is worth hundreds of millions.



To capture the modernity of Caravaggio and his contemporary resonance, we want to interview the following people. In editing, we will decide on the pertinence and space to give to these sequences. They are an important element, but events in the coming months will determine where they fit in.

Sequences to include

At Martin Scorsese's place

The downfall of a Scorsesian hero

Caravaggio is a character straight out of a Scorsese movie: Brutal, arrogant, and paying no heed to warnings. Like the protagonists in *Goodfellas*, *Casino* and *the Wolf of Wall Street*, he sins by excess self-confidence.

His hubris takes him from one mistake to the next, precipitating his downfall. He approaches life like roulette. During his brief stay in Malta, he was welcomed with honors, made a knight, and shortly after thrown in a cell for disobedience. He escaped and made a triumphant return in Sicily, receiving more spectacular commissions, then made a disastrous return to à Naples where his enemies lay in wait and maimed him.

It was a worn-out Caravaggio, barely recovered, who took on one final challenge, a return to Rome where his protectors had obtained a pardon for him.

But he died on the journey of malaria or dysentery, having missed his last chance for redemption. For Scorsese, Caravaggio's work is a great source of inspiration, both in its form and its morality. He has the same taste for chiaroscuro, his characters come from the street (like those from the Little Italy neighborhood in his debut film, *Mean Streets*), and his sense of fate is intensely Catholic, between blame and redemption. In this respect, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was an edifying example that we will touch on with him.

I am looking forward to seeing him faced with the Toulouse Judith, and hearing his interpretation of this newly-found painting.

In the workshop of C215 Judith in the *banlieue*

To illustrate the modernity of Caravaggio, we find the Barberini Judith in the shadow of the tower blocks of Vitry sur Seine outside Paris. Graffiti artist Christian Guémy (alias C215) has made this Judith one of his signature works. Reproduced using a stencil, he has applied it to various surfaces in his day-to-day environment: A construction site fence, a warehouse wall, a metal door.

The street artist discusses Caravaggio's graphic impact. He was a master of composition, with an unrivaled sense of visual storytelling. The act is depicted in the raw, with an almost photographic rendering, like a crime caught in a flashbulb.

But before serving as a template for a graffiti artist in the Paris region, Caravaggio inspired a whole generation of painters throughout Europe.

Ernest Pignon-Ernest's studio in Ivry Caravaggio's spiritual home

The artist tells us why he thinks Naples is the true capital of Caravaggism. His work is a perfect fit with a local culture based on violence, huge social contrasts, and faith mingled with superstition.

He shows some film of his Caravaggesque drawings posted in Spaccanapoli, the street running through the heart of old Naples.

He recounts the most notorious episode in Caravaggio's life. During a night of festivities in Rome, he killed a man from a powerful local clan in a brawl. He faced a possible death sentence. In Rome at the time, that meant public decapitation.

He fled, seeking refuge first with his aristocratic protectors, before putting himself beyond the reach of papal justice in Naples, a city then under Spanish rule. This was the start of four years of exile until his death.

In Caravaggio's day, Naples had a population of some 300,000 and was the second biggest city in Europe after Paris, and three times bigger than Rome. It was a seething city of luxury and poverty, aglow with popular piety. This made it an ideal environment to inspire Caravaggio. It also became the place where he had the most disciples and devoted imitators for more than a century. And it was there where he painted the second Judith.

Director's Note

This is a rare and precious opportunity for a documentary. We will be able to follow close-up the preparations for the auction of the century, along with the brouhaha provoked in the art world by this new Judith, from Toulouse to Paris, Milan to Naples, and Rome to New York.

Our investigation will set out to answer questions on three themes:

- On the "Caravaggio effect" today: Why does the artist currently have such high status and why do his works command such exorbitant prices? Why is the art market wild about him, whereas he was scorned and practically forgotten for three centuries? What makes his vision so close to our own? Why is he considered one of the inventors of modernity?
- On the painting itself: What does it really show? Why do some consider its technique revolutionary? Is it a Caravaggio or not? What are the keys to attribution? An immersion in experts' procedures, combining scientific analysis, historical elements, and intuition.
- On Caravaggio himself: The mystery surrounding this painting leads us to examine the shady side of the painter's life. His was a life that has been widely written about, mythologized and subjected to contradictory interpretations, though all agree it was turbulent. Caravaggio's work traces the journey of a cursed artist and loveable rogue, who was continually oscillating between the palaces of princes and the gutter, glory and opprobrium, provocation and religious fervor. The Toulouse Judith encapsulates the most tumultuous moment in this insane existence.

The investigation unfolds today, in a constant back-and-forth between contemporary settings and the places Caravaggio frequented. Those decoding his modernity are some leading figures on the artistic scene of today, whether filmmaker, street artist, or gallery owner. We will strive as far as possible to look upon Caravaggio from today's vantage point, as if he'd finished his canvases yesterday.

My questions about this work will be the guiding thread through the close-knit universe of Caravaggio aficionados. Experts and curators, scholars with outstanding reputations, enthusiastic self-taught amateurs, and art dealers with a keen nose, what they all have in common is a passion for painters. The irruption of a new Caravaggio rouses in them the same feverish desire of a gold rush. Behind their love of art, there is a fascination for

the way the market manufactures myths, bestowing value on artists, or else reducing their worth. Caravaggio's oeuvre has seen it all: Consecration, crazy prices, total neglect, rehabilitation, and perhaps soon a record sale.

Our Judith lies at a key point in Caravaggio's life. He was at the time on the run and in the middle of both artistic evolution and spiritual upheaval. The painting takes us into his world, with his models and studio, and is the testimony of a genius of provocation, a declaration of war on establishment art. Through this proud yet violent Judith, the figure of Caravaggio emerges, a radical non-conformist exercising absolute freedom.

All of Caravaggio's works will be filmed in situ, in the churches, palaces, and art galleries where they hang.

We won't use camera tripods, but rather short-focus lenses, to capture the characters in action during their work or as they travel. We will use back-lighting, contrast, and nocturnal filming in all the cities we visit.

The editing will favor short, snappy sequences. The journey from one location to another will be filmed and play a part in the narrative.

The visits to the new Judith in the strong room will be a recurrent theme: The curiosity the work engenders is enormous, and historians, dealers, curators and collectors all beat a path to its door and discuss the painting with Turquin and his staff.

Another element of the film will be moments of immersion in the painter's images, speculation on the accidents of his life and his career, all shown in the editing suite on screens through slow-motion images; books being leafed through, reproductions of Caravaggio's work sorted by similarity or significant details. This is all part of the puzzle to put this Judith in its rightful place among Caravaggio's work.

Shots of the interviews being filmed inserted into the finished interview will reveal the mechanism. The investigation is a work in progress, and the spectator is a witness to its unfolding.

Frédéric Biamonti

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