

## Caravaggio's other 'Judith and Holofernes'

By John Gash

The discovery in 2014 in a house in Toulouse of a painting of *Judith beheading Holofernes* in the style of Caravaggio [Fig. 1, plus Figs. 1a, b & c] has unleashed a groundswell of academic and popular interest and divided scholarly opinion - so much so that the French state placed a three-year export embargo on it, which expired on 16 November 2018, in order to further assess the problem. While some consider it an original by Caravaggio, the only positive counter-suggestion has been to identify it as a work of the Flemish artist, Louis Finson (before 1580-1617), resident in Naples at the time of Caravaggio's first and second visits there, in 1606-07 and 1609-10. Alternatively, those who are not fully satisfied with the idea of Caravaggio's authorship, have wondered whether it might be a very good copy of a lost work or, more intriguingly, an original Caravaggio that was either finished, or slightly altered, by another hand. To these one might add the possibility of a partial collaboration, for although Caravaggio is conventionally considered to have painted alone, without assistants, we now know that Cecco del Caravaggio (Francesco Buoneri) at least was a studio assistant of his in Rome in 1605 (and perhaps beyond), albeit as a teenager, while no less an authority than Walter Friedlaender felt that the *Madonna of the Rosary* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, probably painted, or at least finished, in Naples in 1606-07, betrayed the evidence of collaborators.<sup>1</sup> More recently, John Spike has argued that the

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<sup>1</sup> Maurizio Marini: 'Un estrema residenza e un ignoto aiuto del Caravaggio in Roma', *Antologia di Belle Arti*, 19-20, pp.176-180. The 'aiuto' is merely referred to as 'Francesco garzone' (Archivio del Vicariato di Roma, Stato delle anime della Parrocchia di san Nicola dei Prefetti (vicolo di San Biagio), 6 June 1605. Gianni Papi later convincingly suggested that this Francesco was Francesco Buoneri, and that he in turn was the mysterious 'Cecco del Caravaggio': G. Papi: *Cecco del Caravaggio*, Soncino 2001, p.51. Walter Friedlaender, in *Caravaggio Studies*, Princeton 1955, pp.198-202, sees several aspects of the *Madonna of the Rosary*, including the faces of the Virgin and donor, as well as the 'weak and mechanical' curtain, as being the work of an assistant, conceivably Finson. In more recent years the date of the *Madonna of the Rosary* has been pushed back by

surrounding figures in the Vicenza (ex-Prato) *Crowning with Thorns* were the work of assistants.<sup>2</sup> So we should not perhaps be as impervious to the notion of studio participation in Caravaggio's later paintings as the orthodox view of his singlehanded activity would have it.

The privately owned *Judith and Holofernes*, which is currently with the Galerie Eric Turquin, Paris, illustrates the moment recounted in the apocryphal biblical Book of Judith in which the Israelite widow saves her nation by slaying with his own sword the invading Assyrian general, Holofernes, whom she had first enticed with her beauty. It was exhibited publicly alongside five other paintings by Caravaggio and his followers, including a replica of it in the Banca Intesa, Naples [Fig. 2], in the third of the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan's *Dialogo* series (7 November 2016 – 5 February 2017).<sup>3</sup> There have since been two colloquia on the work, at the Brera on 6 February 2017 and the Musée du Louvre on 13 June 2017, as well as several newspaper interviews with specialists on either side of the argument.<sup>4</sup> In the Louvre

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some authorities to c. 1601. See the carefully argued and thought-provoking analysis in Wolfgang Prohaska and Gudrun Swoboda: *Caravaggio und der internationale Caravaggismus* (Sammlungskataloge der Gemäldegalerie: Rom 1). Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Milan 2010, pp.71-84. However, most writers still convincingly favour a late Roman or first Neapolitan moment (c.1605-07).

<sup>2</sup> John Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York 2010, pp. 156-61 (Caravaggio and studio assistants).

<sup>3</sup> The show was made possible by the far-sighted policy of the Brera's director, James Bradburne, who has initiated a series of small displays revolving round masterworks in the Gallery as a focus for both scholarly and public discussion. Its book-catalogue, revolving round Caravaggio's second version of the *Supper at Emmaus* in the Brera, but including the Toulouse picture and its copy in the Banca Intesa, as well as two paintings by Louis Finson and a third, anonymous one, is *Attorno a Caravaggio: Una questione di attribuzione*, Dialogo a cura di Nicola Spinosa, Catalogo a cura di James M. Bradburne (Milan 2016). The decision to exhibit a private picture as a possible original by Caravaggio was not without controversy at the Brera, and precipitated the resignation of an advisor. However, both the captions and the catalogue were scrupulous in distancing the gallery from any endorsement of the attribution, underlining instead its role as a facilitator of debate.

<sup>4</sup> Although several scholars now support the Toulouse *Judith's* attribution to Caravaggio (at least in large part), its most forceful public advocates have been Nicola Spinosa and Keith Christiansen. Christiansen's balanced and detailed summary of the talks and discussion on the picture at the Brera colloquium of specialists and restorers is available on the Pinacoteca di Brera website: THIRD DIALOGUE. Caravaggio Readings and Re-Readings: *Study Day at Brera* by Keith Christiansen: <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/dialogo/third-dialogue-caravaggio-readings-and-re-readings/>. An attribution to Finson has been voiced by Gianni Papi, who considered it the prime original painting, by Finson himself, of another replica in the collection of the Neapolitan bank, Intesa di San Paolo, which Papi also considered a later repeat by Finson of the Toulouse picture [Fig. 2]. See an interview with Carole Blumenfeld in *Le Journal des Arts* –no. 468 – 25 November 2016 for Papi's view and also those [at that time] of others. Papi's scepticism about whether the Banca Intesa

colloquium the Toulouse picture was hung side-by-side with the Louvre's three undisputed Caravaggios (*The Fortuneteller*; *The Death of the Virgin*; and the *Portrait of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt with his Page*) as well as Caravaggio's horizontal *Flagellation of Christ*, probably from his first Neapolitan period, specially brought over for the occasion from the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen [Fig. 3]. Apart from some particular similarities which will be enumerated later, it should be noted that the concept and mise-en-page of the five canvases seemed close.

The initial possibility that the Toulouse *Judith* might be an original by Caravaggio, rather than a work by one of his many followers, is twofold. Firstly, the second, technically inferior, version of the painting, in the Banca Intesa, has been known for quite some time and has been thought by many scholars, starting with Leone de Castris and Ferdinando Bologna, to be a copy of a lost original of this subject,<sup>5</sup> which documents state that Caravaggio had painted in Naples on his first visit to the city. This written documentary strand to the argument is in itself very enticing, located as it is in two letters written from Naples in September 1607 to Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga of Mantua. The first, from Ottavio Gentili, agent of the duke, who had come to Naples explicitly to buy pictures for the ducal collection in the wake of the death of the highly cultivated Matteo di Capua, Principe di Conca (c.1568-

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picture was a copy of the lost Caravaggio rather than merely a free invention of Finson's after it, is further discussed in G. Papi: *Caravaggio. 'La Crocifissione di sant'Andrea' Back-Vega/The Back-Vega 'Crucifixion of St Andrew'*, Milan 2016, p.26. My own preference for attributing the Toulouse canvas to Caravaggio is recorded in a subsequent interview with Carole Blumenfeld in *Le Journal des Arts*, 21/06/2017. Before the Toulouse *Judith* came to light, a very interesting exhibition catalogue presented the Banca Intesa version as either a copy of a lost Caravaggio by Finson, or an original picture by Finson in a Caravaggesque style: *'Giuditta decapita Oloferne': Louis Finson interprete di Caravaggio*, edited by Giovanna Capitelli, Antonio Ernesto Denunzio, Giuseppe Porzio and Maria Cristina Terzaghi (Intesa Sanpaolo, Naples 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Gert Jan van der Sman in *ibid.*, p.13; Leone de Castris in *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, exh. cat., Naples 1984, vol. I, pp.36-39; Ferdinando Bologna: *L'Incredulità del Caravaggio*, Turin 1992, pp.334-6, and in *Caravaggio: l'ultimo tempo 1606-10*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Nicola Spinosa, Naples/London 2004-05, pp.166-67, no. 26.

29 April 1607)<sup>6</sup>, though not necessarily only from his heirs, states that Frans Pourbus, Vincenzo's Flemish court portraitist, who was also in Naples at that time to help track down pictures, "ha visto ancora qualche cosa di buono di Michelangelo Caravaggio che ha fatto qui che si venderanno..." (note the plural).<sup>7</sup> This reference to more than one picture by Caravaggio "done here", i.e. in Naples, is elucidated by a further letter to Vincenzo from Pourbus himself, dated 25 September 1607, stating that "...Ho visto qui doi quadri belliss(i)mi di mano di M[ichel] Angelo da Caravaggio: l'uno è d'un rosario et era fatto per un ancona et è grande da 18 palmi et non vogliono manco di 400 ducati; l'altro è un quadro mezzano [middle-sized] da camera di mezze figure et è un Oliferno con Giudita, et non lo dariano a manco di 300 ducati. Non ho voluto fare alcuna proferta non sapendo l'intentione di V[ostra] A [l]tezza, me hanno pero promesso di non darli via sin tanto che saranno avvisati del piacere di V[ostra] A [l]tezza..."<sup>8</sup> The 'rosario', it has long been agreed, was *The Madonna of the Rosary* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), which was taken north in the following years, together with the *Judith and Holofernes*, by Finson and his Flemish painter friend in Naples, Abraham Vinck (c.1575/80-1619), who both also acted as art dealers. Indeed Vinck is described in a letter from the painter-merchant in Naples, Giacomo di Castro, to don Antonio Ruffo of Messina on 22 July 1673 as having been "amicissimo" (very friendly) with Caravaggio as well as with Finson, thereby opening up the possibility that the

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the intellectual circles in Naples that were centred round the court of Matteo di Capua at the time of Caravaggio's activity there, see, most recently, the University of Reading Ph.D. thesis by Thomas Denman: *Caravaggio in Naples: His Practice, Influence and Patronage Network*, 2017. They included the poet and man of letters, Giovan Battista Manso (1567-1645), who had been instrumental in commissioning Caravaggio to paint *The Seven Works of Mercy* for the Pio Monte della Misericordia in the autumn of 1606.

<sup>7</sup> Stefania Macioce: *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: Fonti e Documenti 1532-1724*, Rome 2003, p.230. "qualche cosa" is grammatically singular but can be conceptually plural; "si venderanno" is definitely plural = "they will be sold."

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p.231.

two Flemish artists may even have shared a studio with Caravaggio and conceivably have collaborated with him.<sup>9</sup> Finson's half ownership in both works was bequeathed by him to Vinck in Amsterdam on 19 September 1617 and the *Madonna of the Rosary* sold soon afterwards by Vinck to the Dominican church of St. Paul in Antwerp.<sup>10</sup> But the trail of the *Holofernes with Judith* has long gone cold. It was seemingly not bought by the Duke of Mantua. Perhaps the very high asking price of 300 ducati for a half-length, which would indicate a work of high quality, was a deterrent. The two pictures that they later took north must have been acquired in some way by Finson and Vinck themselves, but whether from one or more seller, or directly from Caravaggio, is unclear. A *Judith* by Caravaggio, together with a *Madonna of the Rosary* by him, listed in the Paris collection of the abbé François Quesnel in 1697 may well have been copies, in that they echo the same combination of pictures owned by Finson and Vinck, and we know that their *Madonna of the Rosary* was by then long ensconced in Antwerp.<sup>11</sup>

Caravaggio had painted an earlier version of *Judith decapitating Holofernes* for the Genoese banker in Rome, Ottavio Costa, possibly c.1602, when a document refers to Caravaggio working for him **[Fig. 4]**.<sup>12</sup> The more stylish concept and delicate technique of that picture

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<sup>9</sup> Vincenzo Ruffo, 'Galleria Ruffo nel secolo XVII in Messina (con lettere di pittori ed altri documenti inediti)', *Bollettino d'arte*, X, 1916, p.302; Wolfgang Prohaska: 'Untersuchungen zur Rosenkranzmadonna Caravaggios', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, vol. 76, May 1980, pp.111-32; Mia Cinotti: *Michelangelo Merisi detto il Caravaggio*, Bergamo 1983, p.551.

<sup>10</sup> Macioce, *op.cit.* at note 7, p.284 and pp296-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Inventaire des tableaux de François Quesnel (1697)*, in *Nouvelles archives de l'art français*, 3e série, VIII, 1892, p.91.

<sup>12</sup> The picture has tended to be dated earlier, c. 1597--98, or, more recently, c.1600, on stylistic grounds and the newly discovered 1602 reference had consequently been linked with another picture that Caravaggio had painted for Costa, the *Saint John the Baptist* in the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City. However, there is now debate about the earlier date for the *Judith*, and a late Roman date for the Kansas City *Baptist* may be more appropriate, as indeed it was previously thought to be on stylistic grounds (see, for example, Alfred Moir: *Caravaggio*, New York 1989, p.102 (as c.1605), and Maurizio Marini: *Caravaggio. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio <<pictor praestantissimus>*, Rome, 1987, p.212 (as 1603-04)). Furthermore, is 1602 for the Costa *Judith and Holofernes* so different from the most recently revised proposal of 1600, for which latter see Cristina Terzaghi in *Caravage à Rome: Amis et Ennemis*, exhibition catalogue, Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris, 2018, p.85?

would also seem to exclude it from being done in Naples and it is, therefore, extremely unlikely to have been bought by Costa from Naples in 1607. Nevertheless, despite very good written evidence of Caravaggio having painted a second *Judith and Holofernes* in Naples, the acid test must be both the style and technique of the Toulouse picture, together with any other circumstantial factors that may help to reinforce its ascription to Caravaggio.

Scientific tests carried out by Claudio Falcucci and others confirm the Toulouse *Judith's* status as an early, very likely seicento, product.<sup>13</sup> All of the pigments are ones used in the seventeenth century, and a protective coating on the back of the canvas is consistent with ones used in Naples in the early seicento, or, alternatively, might have been applied at the time of the picture's subsequent relining in the first half of the nineteenth century when the canvas, consisting of two parts sewn together, was relined and put on a new stretcher in France.<sup>14</sup> Generally in excellent condition, apart from some water damage on the top right-hand side, which may have very slightly diluted the intensity of the red of the tent, the picture was only lightly cleaned after its discovery, and several areas of discoloured old

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<sup>13</sup> These tests, by Claudio Falcucci, as well as others by the Laboratorio di restauro della Pinacoteca di Brera and L'Università degli Studi di Milano, were referred to in the talks at the Brera study day; but a full diagnostic analysis was later carried out for the owners by Claudio Falcucci, whose report runs to several pages. It is available on request from the Galerie Turquin, Paris.

<sup>14</sup> Falcucci report: **Extract 1:** "La tavolozza, indagata principalmente in modo non distruttivo mediante l'analisi di fluorescenza dei raggi X, è costituita da cinabro e lacche rosse per la tenda (curtain) e per gli schizzi di sangue (rispettivamente chiari e scuri) che sgorgano dalla ferita del collo di Oloferne, bianco di piombo pressoché puro per il bianco del lenzuolo, ocra per il manto della vecchia. La veste di Giuditta, attualmente nera, contiene un pigmento a base di rame, verosimilmente azzurro (a giudicare dall'osservazione microscopica della superficie), che doveva conferire al velluto una tonalità blu scura piuttosto che del colore attuale, forse frutto dell'alterazione del pigmento. Alterazioni dei materiali pittorici devono aver interessato anche il sacco tenuto in mano della vecchia che, attualmente bruno, doveva in origine essere di colore verdastro, essendo dipinto con un pigmento verde a base di rame, verosimilmente del tipo dell'aceto di rame (Copper Acetate/Verdigris). Si segna inoltre la presenza di oro, utilizzato in conchiglia per la decorazione dell'elsa della spada." **Extract 2:** "Le due tele che, cucite assieme, costituiscono il supporto del dipinto, presentano tramatura differente, come evidenziato dall'indagine radiografica. Quest'ultima non ha permesso di definire completamente le loro caratteristiche, a causa dell'interferenza causata dall'applicazione, sul retro del supporto, di un materiale radiopaco che limita la leggibilità del intreccio del filato. Tale materiale potrebbe essere tanto stato applicato durante l'intervento di reintelo, quanto imputabile ad una stesura di protezione del retro della tela originale, eseguita al momento della preparazione e con lo stesso impasto utilizzato per questa, secondo una prassi molto diffusa a Napoli nel primo Seicento."

varnish remained.<sup>15</sup> However, it was fully cleaned at the end of 2018, and what was already a highly plausible attribution on technical grounds has been reinforced by the newly clarified dazzling beauty of finish.

The Toulouse *Judith and Holofernes* draws upon the earlier, Costa, version, but there are also striking differences that produce a more intense effect, characteristic of Caravaggio's later production: the pose of the writhing victim, Holofernes, is substantially similar, though he is now a slighter (and by implication weaker) figure, but Judith has been transformed from a youthful and somewhat hesitant widow, only able to act with divine assistance, into a heroic mature woman determined, and even vengeful, in her pursuit of righteousness as she looks out challengingly at the viewer. The whole mood of the narrative is further transformed by a reorganization of space, as the frieze-like fore-grounded action of the Costa version gives way to a more complex articulation of perspective with the three figures set at different depths and enveloped in a fluctuating chiaroscuro that evokes the flickering torchlight in Holofernes' tent. The process is anchored by bringing the elderly maidservant, Abra, into the middle of the composition, now in direct rapport with Judith, where her bemused yet supportive gaze enhances the dramatic resolve. Some viewers think that the painting is too grotesque for Caravaggio, especially with regard to the faces of Holofernes and Abra, and Abra's doubly swollen thyroid gland. Indeed the splayed pink highlights round Holofernes' eyes and the packed concentric wrinkles on Abra's face, to which we shall return, do require explanation [Figs. 1e & f]. But I wonder whether we are in danger of perpetuating an overly aestheticized view of the artist – and also an overly familiar one. Indeed, if one accepts the controversial *Toothpuller* (Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti), which

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<sup>15</sup> Information from Eric Turquin.

several scholars now, do,<sup>16</sup> one could argue that the late Caravaggio was by no means averse to grotesquery and caricature. One might also refer to earlier works, including the equally grotesque head of Abra in the Costa version of *Judith and Holofernes*, although that is indeed beautifully structured. Furthermore, *The Toothpuller* has other telling analogies with the Toulouse *Judith and Holofernes*, both in its spatial articulation and chiaroscuro and in the fact that it, too, is confirmed as an original Caravaggio in an early Medici inventory. Caravaggio's imperatives, after all, were realism and drama, however arrived at, even if, in his later years 'on the road', he would sometimes achieve this through inventive reformulations of his earlier designs, as Roberto Longhi recognized. Furthermore, the concentrated intensity and technical confidence of the Toulouse *Judith* are difficult to see as incompatible with his authorship. Its vigorous brushwork, especially evident in the long red strokes on the left hand side of the tent [Fig.1d], is very much in keeping with his rapidly spontaneous mature and later technique, as are the execution of the bed sheet and the various hands of the figures. Certainly there is little evidence in it of the style and handling of Louis Finson, of whom the Provençal polymath Nicolas-Claude de Peiresc aptly wrote in 1614 that "his figures are rigid and heavy."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is likely that the Banca Intesa copy is

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<sup>16</sup> E.g. from Mina Gregori: *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Come nascono i Capolavori*, exh. catalogue, Florence-Rome 1991-2, pp.328-47; and in *Caravaggio e caravaggeschi a Firenze*, exh. catalogue, ed. Gianni Papi, Florence 2010, pp. 122-5; Keith Christiansen in *Pittori della realtà/Painters of Reality: the Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy*, exh. catalogue, ed. Andrea Bayer, Cremona-New York 2004, pp.175-6; Gianni Papi in *Gherardo delle Notti: quadri bizzarrissimi e cene allegre*, exhibition catalogue, ed. G. Papi, Florence 2015, pp.130-1; J. Patrice Marandel in *Caravaggio and his Legacy*, exhibition catalogue, ed. J. Patrice Marandel, Los Angeles-Hartford 2012-13, pp.44-5; and Gert Jan van der Sman in *Caravaggio and the Painters of the North*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Gert Jan van der Sman, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid 2016, pp.184-5. For my own proposal that it may date from Caravaggio's time in Malta in 1607-08, see J. Gash: 'Caravaggio's Maltese Inspiration', *Melita Historica*, vol. XII, no. 3 (1998), pp.253-266.

<sup>17</sup> E. Larsen: *Seventeenth Century Flemish Painting*, Freren 1985, p.260; Giovanna Capitelli: 'Louis Finson', in *I Caravaggeschi. Percorsi e protagonisti*, ed. Alessandro Zuccari, Milan 2010, vol. 2, p.377.



Finson's, not least by comparison with his *Four Elements* of c.1611 (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston).<sup>18</sup>

Scientific analysis supplements the evidence of the eye to confirm that the technique in many passages of the Toulouse picture is consistent with that of Caravaggio.<sup>19</sup> X-radiography **[Fig5a]**, macro-photography, infra-red reflectography **[Fig. 5b]**, ultra-violet photography and x-ray fluorescence reveal both under-drawing with the brush and a number of incised lines, both of which tie in with Caravaggio's established pictorial processes.<sup>20</sup> There are also some striking *pentimenti*, not ones simply tied to contours, thereby suggesting that the picture is not a copy of a prototype, unlike the deployment of a certain amount of *pentimenti* round the edges of figures that can sometimes indicate the hesitancy of a copyist.<sup>21</sup> *Inter alia*, the x-radiographs indicate significant reworking of the faces of both Judith and Abra **[Fig. 5a & c]**. Furthermore, infra-red reflectography shows traces of brush drawing on the *imprimatura* which defines the contours of the faces of both Judith and Abra. **[Fig.5d ]** In the case of Abra, other lines also indicate the first drawn positions and forms of the nose, eyes and mouth, joining up to completely define the physiognomy.<sup>22</sup> This is especially interesting in that it tells us that the basic type and *concetto* had been fully intended by the artist, and the highly geometric pattern of the wrinkles on the final surface, almost reminiscent of an engraving by Claude Mellan, that

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<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Keith Christiansen for this convincing comparison.

<sup>19</sup> The most recent and comprehensive descriptions of Caravaggio's pictorial techniques and processes are contained in *Dentro Caravaggio*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Rossella Vodret, Milan 2017, reviewed in this Magazine by J. Gash, December 2017, pp.1015-16; and *Caravaggio's Works in Rome: Technique and Style*, ed. Rossella Vodret, Milan 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Incisions are visible on close inspection of the surface, e.g., among several on Judith, on the back of her left hand, and underneath her left eyebrow, while a longer one is revealed by the x-radiograph along the upper profile of Holofernes' right arm.

<sup>21</sup> See note 30.

<sup>22</sup> Some of these *abbozzo* lines are in red, a colour favoured by Caravaggio for this process in other paintings.

have caused most doubt about the attribution of the painting to Caravaggio, do not undermine the notion that the pose and type of Abra were part of the painting's original conception. And indeed, since the latest cleaning, these lines are less graphic and more painterly. Beyond that, Falcucci's analysis of the infra-red reflectogram shows that, in the face of Abra, instead of using the ground as a middle tone and then painting in the highlights (a technique used by Caravaggio in his mature works and also evident throughout the rest of this picture), the artist (or conceivably another) has applied glazes over the ground and also over some already executed highlights, before adding (or reinforcing) the highlights of the wrinkles with additional strokes.<sup>23</sup> Whether such procedures indicate the intervention of another hand, either assisting Caravaggio at the time of painting, or subsequently reinforcing or completing a slightly unfinished, or damaged, picture, is the crucial question. However, it would also make sense if Caravaggio had merely held this area "in reserve" to paint last of all. Indeed, it is at this stage worth reiterating a point made by Keith Christiansen in his digest of the proceedings of the Brera Study Day: the fact that the pommel of Judith's sword **[Fig.1g]** is decorated with *oro di conchiglia* (powdered gold

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<sup>23</sup> Falcucci report **Extract 3**: "Differente appare la situazione relativa alla figura della vecchia. Se la sommità del turbante presenta un profilo a risparmio simile a quello osservato vicino al petto di Giuditta e lungo l'avambraccio di Oloferne, l'incarnato del volto appare dipinto in modo radicalmente differente da quelli degli altri due personaggi. Il mezzotono, anziché essere ottenuto lasciando a vista la preparazione, è dipinto velando in parte la preparazione, in parte le luci già dipinte. Sopra alla stesura delle luci e sopra a questa velatura che ricostruisce l'ombra, sono poi applicate le secche pennellate che definiscono le luci delle rughe. Proprio da una di queste rughe è stato prelevato un campione da sottoporre a stratigrafia su sezione lucida (campione c17/017), che ha mostrato per lo strato più superficiale (quello della pennellata della ruga) una composizione leggermente differente da quella dell'incarnato sottostante: entrambi sono a base di bianco di piombo e terre, ma la fluorescenza indotta da radiazione ultravioletta dello strato più superficiale appare più intensa e aranciata rispetto a quella dello strato sottostante, a indicare verso sommità un diverso tipo di legante o almeno un differente rapporto pigmento/legante, oltre a contenere un pigmento di colore rosso vivo, assente nello strato sottostante. Queste osservazioni, associate al fatto che durante le operazioni di campionamento il frammento si sia sfaldato proprio in corrispondenza della linea di separazione tra l'incarnato chiaro di base e la pennellata della ruga (a dimostrare una scarsa coesione tra questi due strati), potrebbero avvalorare l'ipotesi di un rimaneggiamento dell'incarnato del volto della serva, forse originariamente privo delle rughe e con gli occhi da ipertiroidia mostrati dalla radiografia, poi modificato per caratterizzarlo come quello di una vecchia, ma senza più il primitivo e inquietante aspetto dello sguardo."

derived from gold leaf, as also confirmed by Falcucci in his most recent report), an opulent material that Caravaggio had used once before on Vincenzo Giustiniani's *Victorious Cupid* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) and would soon use again on his *Sleeping Cupid* for Francesco dell'Antella in Malta (Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence), would indicate that the work was fully finished, since shell gold would only usually have been applied on completion of the work. One might add that a yellowish pigment, *giallorino* [giallo di piombo e stagno] is deployed instead on the hilt of the sword in the Banca Intesa version, thereby pinpointing the qualitative gulf between the two versions.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, when the Toulouse painting was taken out into the Brera courtyard at the end of the Study Day, Abra's wrinkles looked relatively unobtrusive under natural light, as they do indeed to this day, especially after the recent cleaning.

Another technical peculiarity is that the Toulouse and Banca Intesa versions come from comparable bales of canvas, made up of two differently textured parts sewn horizontally at the level of Holofernes' left ear, raising the possibility that they emanate from the same studio, or at least time and place.<sup>25</sup> The X-radiographs of the Toulouse version too show that Abra's eyes were much larger and rounder originally, perhaps emphasizing a model's hyperthyroidism related to her swollen goitre [Fig. 5c], which the artist subsequently decided to tone down, presumably for a combination of expressive and aesthetic reasons.<sup>26</sup> However, it has not so far been noted that the large eyes of the original brush drawing may in fact strengthen the case for Caravaggio's authorship of the Toulouse picture, since this larger scale for the *abbozzo* of the eyes is equally present in the case of the eyes of Goliath in Caravaggio's earlier *David with the Head of Goliath* (c.1601-03) in the Prado

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<sup>24</sup> See Claudio Falcucci and Claudia Maura in '*Giuditta decapita Oloferne*', *op. cit.* at note 4, p.77.

<sup>25</sup> See note 14, **Extract 2**.

<sup>26</sup> Falcucci report **Extract 4**: "La modifica più evidente, per la serva, è comunque quella individuata in radiografia e relativa agli occhi, originariamente sbarrati e quasi fuori dalle orbite, perfettamente coerenti con la malattia tiroidea che si manifesta nel gozzo, ma che nella redazione oggi visibile lasciano spazio ad un più rassicurante sguardo indirizzato verso Giuditta." See also note 23, **extract 3**.

[Figs. 5 e & f].<sup>27</sup> This may be indicative of Caravaggio's painting procedures, working rapidly from bolder to more precise, or merely a sign of his changing thought processes about characterization and effect as he developed a subject.

However, one aspect of the relationship between the Toulouse and Banca Intesa versions that was posited at the Brera Study Day needs to be qualified. In Christiansen's resumé of Vodret's and Falcucci's talks it was stated that X-radiographs suggested that the Banca Intesa painter was aware of two, subsequently modified, features underneath the final surface of the Toulouse canvas, thereby implying that his copy was made in the same bottega simultaneously with the creation of the Toulouse picture: Abra's initially larger eyes, already referred to in connection with the Toulouse x-radiograph, and the claim that Judith's gaze was originally directed towards Holofernes rather than the viewer, as in Caravaggio's Costa version. In fact, however, there is no x-radiograph of the Banca Intesa version,<sup>28</sup> while the Infra-Red of the Banca Intesa canvas shows no sign of Abra's eyes having been significantly larger or of Judith's gaze having ever been configured other than in its current direction: out towards the viewer.<sup>29</sup> It is only when we consider the x-radiograph and the Infra-Red of the Toulouse canvas that we can see what Falcucci means in his recent report about the gaze originally having been conceived as glancing towards Holofernes, for there is an indication that the pupils of both Judith's eyes may have at first been placed more to the left as we view the picture, while the reworking of her face evident in the x-radiograph may possibly indicate that it was originally conceived in profile rather than three-quarter view.<sup>30</sup> But whether this was part of a real

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<sup>27</sup> This point has not been previously raised and is not mentioned in Falcucci's report. The x-radiograph of Goliath's head is illustrated in *Come dipingeva il Caravaggio. Atti della Giornata di Studio*, ed. Mina Gregori, Milan 1996, p.137. The autograph status of the Prado *David* was once disputed but is now almost universally accepted.

<sup>28</sup> Information kindly supplied by Antonio Ernesto Denunzio.

<sup>29</sup> See illustration of the Infrared Reflectogram in '*Giuditta decapita Oloferne*': *Louis Finson interprete di Caravaggio*, edited by Giovanna Capitelli et. al, *op. cit.* at note 4, p.78.

<sup>30</sup> Falcucci report **Extract 5**: "Anche la figura di Giuditta ha subito numerosi ripensamenti, tanto nel volto quanto nell'abbigliamento: lo sguardo, ora indirizzato verso lo spettatore, era originariamente diretto verso Oloferne e l'espressione della donna doveva apparire più concentrata nell'azione, come suggeriscono gli occhi socchiusi mostrati dalla riflettografia IR e le originarie pupille, più in basso e a destra delle attuali, rilevate dalla

*primo pensiero* about direction or merely a sign of the rapidity of the first abbozzo is unclear. Either way, these indicators of revision point decisively towards the Banca Intesa version being a copy and the Toulouse painting an original creation.

Stylistically the Toulouse *Judith* has a great deal in common with works done by Caravaggio throughout his career, but especially during his time in Naples and Malta. If at first glance the face of Judith might seem a more mature version of *St. Catherine of Alexandria* (1597-8, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid), perhaps pointing to an aesthetic preference as regards female beauty (and Judith's face was meant to be extremely beautiful according to the Book of Judith), there are more correspondences of composition, handling and morphology with these later creations. It is difficult to believe that the expressive face of Abra, with her toothless mouth that anticipates the *Portrait of a Knight of Malta* (Antonio Martelli), that Caravaggio painted in 1608 (Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti), was not conceived, and at least initially sketched in, by Caravaggio himself, as the technical evidence discussed above would suggest. Though some find Abra's double goitre in the Toulouse picture excessively histrionic, one must bear in mind that goitre, a swelling of the thyroid gland caused by lack of iodine in the water and food chain, was common in the mountains round Naples. Caravaggio had painted a single goitre on the old woman in the Cleveland *Crucifixion of Saint Andrew* (1607), and perhaps he here wanted to polemically push the realism one stage further. On the other hand, one should not minimise the importance for Caravaggio of painting directly from the model ("dal naturale"): the swollen neck of the Toulouse Abra comes very close to actual goitres that I have seen, though it has also been

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radiografia; la manica sinistra, ora stretta fino al polsino, viene mostrata dalla riflettografia come aperta per quasi tutto l'avambraccio e a lasciare scoperto, a metà di questo, un elemento circolare – forse un bracciale – successivamente in parte riutilizzato per definire una piega del tessuto."

suggested to me by a doctor that the second goitre on the Toulouse and Naples figures of Abra may not in fact be goitre but an additional tumour.<sup>31</sup> The final appearance of her face is susceptible of differing interpretations. There is a fair amount of paint loss on it, especially round the nose, so it is possible that there may not have been some repainting and reinforcement at a later stage. One might note too that such lengthy, geometrically conceived, wrinkles are also in evidence on the brow of the executioner in the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, painted in Malta in 1608 (Oratory of the Co-Cathedral of St. John, Valletta [Fig.6]), and in a similar painterly form on the brow of the *St. Francis in Meditation* (Museo Civico, Cremona), that I take to be a late work of c.1607-09.. As for the more orangey appearance of Abra's face, this may well have been due to a different binder, or different balance between binder and pigment, in the finally applied layers, as Falcucci proposes in his report. If that final execution was by Caravaggio himself, could this more luminous colour have also been Caravaggio's means of building up the golden tones of her face on the surface layer, rather than the technique of a separate artist, perhaps as a way of indicating the implied reflections of torchlight in the tent on a figure emerging from the shadows? Certainly, too, the artist has used various tonal ploys to heighten the chiaroscuro, and by extension the implication of different registers of lighting, especially in the figure of Judith and her surrounding area, which are more subtly yet precisely contrasted, as if she is under a direct heavenly light source against the shadowed tent, adding, on the right hand side of the picture, to a stronger sense of three-dimensionality. Furthermore the different tonalities of the flesh tones of the three figures are probably intended to convey their respective distances from the light sources.

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<sup>31</sup> David Galton.

Despite the continued scepticism of some, my own reading of the surface technique of the picture, and of its style, ties it closely to works that Caravaggio executed between his last year in Rome (1605-06) and his stay in Malta of 1607-08. In other words it was probably painted in Naples between September 1606 and July 1607, as the documents would imply. Nevertheless, given elements of continuity in the approach of all artists, it is not surprising to discern here interesting reformulations of ideas from his earlier inventions – as when he ingeniously hooks the boldly brushed red drape behind Judith over the branch of a tree, at top right, to indicate an improvised tent, just as he had sketched in trees in the background of the Dublin *Taking of Christ* (1602-03); or in the marvellously exuberant Baroque knot on the curtain on the left, an inflated version of the eloquent knot on *Saint John the Baptist's* drapery in the brooding picture in Kansas City - a brooding not totally divorced either from Judith's in the Toulouse canvas. Even the economical arcs used to place Judith's breasts echo, in their provocative precision, those of the forward-leaning Virgin Mary in the *Madonna dei Palafrenieri* (1605-06, Borghese Gallery, Rome). The lateral movement across the picture from right to left has affinities with the version of *The Flagellation of Christ* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen [Fig. 3], as does the richly worked texture of the bed sheet, close to that of Christ's loincloth. This was especially evident when the two works were juxtaposed in the Long Gallery of the Louvre at the colloquium on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June. And although there have been disagreements about the date of the *Flagellation*, the likelihood that it hails from Caravaggio's first Neapolitan period is enhanced by the clear, though free, derivation from it of Fabrizio Santafede's *Flagellation*, versions of which exist in a Neapolitan private collection and in the Villa Paino, Palermo.<sup>32</sup> The way the highlight on

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<sup>32</sup> Ferdinando Bologna: *Battistello Caracciolo e il Primo Naturalismo a Napoli*, exhibition catalogue, Naples 1991, fig. 4, p.19.

Christ's eye is executed too is another feature consistent with the ocular highlights in the Toulouse painting, while two further details underscore the proximity of the two pictures: the handling of the colour of Judith's and Christ's lower lips and the black spaces above them, and the way in which the frayed cotton threads that terminate the tassel on Abra's left collar [Fig. 1i] are mimicked by the frayed threads that balloon out of the right-hand torturer's right shoulder in the Rouen *Flagellation*.

That other, more certainly Neapolitan-period, *Flagellation* by Caravaggio, in Capodimonte [Fig.7], also has distinct similarities with the shoulder and upper right arm of Holofernes in the comparable features of Christ, as suggested to me by Keith Christiansen. Equally reminiscent of the Toulouse depiction of Judith herself is the way in which the page boy in the Louvre *Portrait of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt*, done in Malta, probably in late 1607 [Fig.8], so maybe only months after the *Judith*, looks out at the viewer, the set of his nose and head also of a kind. The ugly figure of Holofernes may at first glance raise some questions, but the technical analysis of the x-radiograph shows that it was rapidly, and instinctively, realized 'on the hoof', readjusting and compressing the foreshortening [Fig. 5h],<sup>33</sup> and the broad sweep of the modelling on the cheek has affinities with that on the face of the right-hand torturer in The Vienna *Crowning with Thorns*, owned by Vincenzo Giustiniani, and probably done for him between 1603 and 1605 in Rome, or, as others think, painted in Naples and subsequently acquired by Giustiniani.<sup>34</sup>

The ungainly musculature of Holofernes' upper right shoulder and arm and the thickly applied highlights on his teeth are very close to another of Caravaggio's probable Neapolitan

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<sup>33</sup> Falcucci Report **Extract 6**: "Di Oloferne viene modificata anche l'espressione del viso, resa più cupa mediante l'allungamento dei sopracciglio sinistro verso il naso e il leggero ampliamento del naso, che, nascondendo parte del profilo destro del volto, rende quest'ultimo più contratto."

<sup>34</sup> For the Naples argument, see Vincenzo Pacelli: *L'ultimo Caravaggio*, Todi 1994, pp.59-60.



works, the Vienna *David with the Head of Goliath* [Fig.9], now generally thought to have been done in 1606/07, although maybe only acquired by the Count of Villa Mediana after he became Viceroy in 1609. The Vienna *David is*, interestingly, painted on panel over a late sixteenth-century composition of Mars, Venus and Cupid, probably by a Northern painter, thereby possibly reinforcing Caravaggio's links with north European artists in Naples, such as Finson and Vinck.<sup>35</sup> The deep shadows that eat into the bodily form are also comparable with a painting of uncertain date, although nowadays most usually linked with the first Neapolitan period: the recently cleaned *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* (Palacio Real, Madrid) [Fig.10].<sup>36</sup> The Madrid canvas too, though much smaller than the Toulouse *Judith*, has an unusual technical feature, a squiggly black line above the upper lip of Salome, which finds its equivalent in a comparable line *between* the lips of Judith in the Toulouse picture. It is Judith's lips as well that betray a close technical parallel, in the way they are executed, with the colour brushed in smoothly but freely over only the upper part of her lower lip, with that of Pero giving suck to her father in the great Neapolitan altarpiece of *The Seven Works of Mercy*, finished by January 1607 [Fig. 11]. The highlights on the nails of several of the figures in that picture, thickly brushed, are also like those on Holofernes, just as the calligraphically realised lace cuff of Judith [Fig. 1h] recalls Saint Martin's cuff and, especially, collar in the *Seven Works*.

A certain lack of compositional fluency in the Toulouse *Judith* might fuel the ammunition of the doubters, but in fact such a quality of frozen action was recognized by Mancini even in

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<sup>35</sup> See Wolfgang Prohaska and Gudrun Swoboda: *Caravaggio und der internationale Caravaggismus (Sammlungskatalog der Gemäldegalerie: Rom 1)*. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Milan 2010, pp.94-98.

<sup>36</sup> For the Madrid picture, see Maria Cristina Terzaghi in *De Caravaggio a Bernini: Obras Maestras del Seicento Italiano en Las Colecciones Reales*, exhibition catalogue, Madrid, Palacio Real 2016, pp.122-29.

Caravaggio's Roman canvases,<sup>37</sup> while a shift from the narrative to the emblematic is especially noticeable in his later works, not least those referred to above. It arguably underpins the *tableau-vivant* quality of much of his art, but is brought to a new intensity of concentration in these late paintings, not least in his last recorded one, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (Banca Intesa Sanpaolo, Naples, 1610), in which all superfluous detail is eliminated as the Hun king fires his arrow into Ursula's breast at point-blank range. This more pungent distillation of iconography, with its quality of re-enactment, was doubtless the product of Caravaggio's own growing introspection and experience, but it may also have been encouraged by the intellectual circles that he frequented in Naples, centred round Giovan Battista Manso and Manso's chief benefactor and Protector, Matteo di Capua, Principe di Conca.<sup>38</sup> And since it was the Prince of Conca's death on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1607 and the subsequent sale of parts of his art collection that prompted the visit to Naples of Ottavio Gentili and Frans Pourbus in September 1607 to assess the available works, it does not seem unreasonable to surmise that the *Judith*, at any rate, though not so obviously the *Madonna of the Rosary*,<sup>39</sup> may have been a recent commission for that very same prince. Death would be the neatest possible explanation of its sale so soon after execution. But there are many imponderables to navigate. Caravaggio was already in Malta by 14<sup>th</sup> July 1607, only two and a half months after Matteo di Capua's death, and if he was working on the picture for him but had not yet finished it, did he complete it, or not, in those months and then leave it with Finson and Vinck to sell on his behalf, or did he sell, or give, it to them, in the latter case for

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<sup>37</sup> Giulio Mancini: *Considerazioni sulla Pittura* (1619-20), ed. Luigi Salerno and Adriana Marucchi, Rome 1956, vol. I, pp.108-09.

<sup>38</sup> See note 6.

<sup>39</sup> It seems likely that the *Madonna of the Rosary* was intended for a Neapolitan chapel, but which one, and the reasons for it not being installed, remain to be ascertained. The latest and most detailed scholarly study of the picture, by Prohaska and Swoboda, however, suggests that, on stylistic and technical grounds, the picture was arguably executed in the mid-Roman period, so that Gentili's report that it was done in Naples may have been ill-informed. However, most students still consider the picture to date from 1605-07 (see notes 1 & 37).

unknown reasons of friendship? And why is Judith garbed in her widow's weeds rather than the seductive attire which The Book of Judith says that she donned in order to captivate Holofernes and save her nation? Her outfit is actually midnight blue rather than pure black, and the décolleté does suggest the other side of her mission, so we are probably dealing with Caravaggio's emblematic way of compressing an entire narrative into a single scene, always a challenge for History Painters. Could the picture have been commissioned by a female patron intent on apostrophising her virtue, and was the extremely determined, arguably malevolent, expression on Judith's face as she challenges the viewer, one step too far for her, or a more or less conscious reversion on the part of artist and/or (a possibly male) patron to the misogyny of certain sixteenth-century renderings of the story? And if the picture was not quite finished when he sailed to Malta, probably on 12<sup>th</sup> July, did Finson and/or Vinck add the finishing touches to Abra's face?

In favour of Caravaggio's authorship of the entire composition, give or take some such conceivable interventions in the latter instance, is the power of the invention. The beautifully expressive old face of Abra, in empathetic counterpoint with that of Judith, is arguably more potent than her slightly caricatured cousin in the earlier Costa version. The conception of the two contiguous female heads, old and young, so close in feeling to those in the Madrid *Salome*, must surely stem from Caravaggio's mind. It is inevitable that we become habituated to a particular set of canonized Caravaggio images, but that familiarity does not mean that his imagination was limited by our preconceptions. Who, for example, would have easily accepted the 'Mannerist' Nancy *Annunciation* as his prior to Georges Pariset's discovery of some documents in the late 1940s and the subsequent only very gradual acclimatization of scholars to its distinctive, though now sadly damaged, virtues? Indeed, one of the *Annunciation's* most striking compositional features, the way in

which the angel bursts forward out of the pictorial space on the upper left, finds a precise analogue in the boldly protruding knot in the corresponding position on Holofernes' tent.

On the other hand, the doubts raised by some about the faces of Holofernes and Abra must leave the slight possibility of a partial collaboration, or completion, or merely touching up, by others, open.

That the commission was certainly a prestigious one is confirmed by its high price (300 ducats) and large size for a cabinet picture (144 x 173.5cm.), which latter puts it on a par with two works from around the same date, the Brera *Supper at Emmaus* (141 x 175 cm.) and the Rouen *Flagellation* (134.5 x 175.4 cm.), and in direct line of descent from the banker, Ottavio Costa's great Roman commissions, *Saint John the Baptist* in Kansas City (173.35 cm. x 132.08 cm.) and, of course, the first version of *Judith and Holofernes* (145 x 195 cm.). The fact that the Toulouse picture is substantially different in conception from the Costa version, though also organically dependent on it, testifies too to Caravaggio's constant refusal to be content with merely copying his own work. If it were not to be by him, it must be the work of some hitherto unknown great master of comparable skill and sensibility. And if other artists conceivably contributed in very limited ways to its final realization, these scarcely undermine its status as a masterpiece emanating from Caravaggio's mind and brush.

#### **LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

**Fig.1.** *Judith beheading Holofernes*, here attributed to Caravaggio. 1607. Canvas, 144 x 173.5 cm. (Private Collection, Toulouse).

**1a** Detail of the head of Judith. **1b** Detail of the arms and upper body of Holofernes. **1c** Detail of the sheet. **1d**. Detail of the bed curtain. **1e**. Detail of Holofernes' head. **1f**. Detail of Abra's head. **1g**. Detail of the pommel of Judith's sword. **1h** Detail of Judith's cuff. **1i** Detail of Abra's tassel and hand.

**Fig. 2.** *Judith beheading Holofernes*, after Caravaggio. c. 1607. Canvas, 140 x 161cm. cm. (Collezione Banca Intesa Sanpaolo, Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano, Naples).

**Fig. 3.** *The Flagellation of Christ* by Caravaggio. c. 1607. Canvas, 134 x 175 cm. (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen).

**Fig. 4.** *Judith beheading Holofernes* by Caravaggio. c. 1602 or 1598/9. Canvas, 145 x 195 cm. (Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Barberini, Rome).

**Fig. 5a.** X-radiograph of Fig. 1. **5b.** Infrared reflectogram of Fig. 1. **5c.** X-radiograph of the faces of Abra and Judith in Fig. 1. **5d.** Infrared reflectogram of the faces of Abra and Judith in Fig. 1. **5e & f** X-radiographs of *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1601/03, Museo del Prado, Madrid. **5g** X-ray of the face of Holofernes in Fig. 1, realigned vertically.

**Fig. 6.** *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* by Caravaggio. 1608. Canvas, 520 x 360 cm. (Oratory of Saint John's co-cathedral, Valletta).

**Fig. 7.** *The Flagellation of Christ* by Caravaggio. 1607. Canvas, 286 x 213 cm. (Museo di Capodimonte [on loan from San Domenico Maggiore], Naples).

**Fig. 8.** *Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt and his Page*. 1607. Canvas, 194 x 134 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

**Fig. 9.** *David with the Head of Goliath*. c. 1606-07. Poplar wood, 90.5 x 116.5 cm. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

**Fig. 10.** *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*. Canvas, c.1607. 116 x 140 cm.

(Palacio Real, Madrid).

**Fig. 11.** *The Seven Works of Mercy* by Caravaggio. Canvas, 1606-07. 390 x 260 cm. (Pio

Monte della Misericordia, Naples).

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