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STUDY DAY AT BRERA

Keith Christiansen

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Monday, a day after the closing of the third dialogue at Brera with the exhibition of the newly discovered and much discussed painting of *Judith and Holofernes* attributed to Caravaggio, a group of invited specialists and conservators assembled for a morning of talks and an afternoon of discussion before the picture and the copy of it that belongs to the Banca Intesa di San Paolo, Naples. As James Bradburne emphasized in his introductory remarks, if a museum is not a place “per facilitare lo studio e la conoscenza” – a place where one can “aprire e facilitare il discorso”, then it has not served its public or fulfilled its obligation to deepen our knowledge of the works of the great masters. What follows is not so much a summary as a digest of the major points of the day.

Let us begin by reminding readers that the intense interest in this picture results from the fact that in September 1607 – just months after Caravaggio left Naples for Malta – the Duke of Mantua was informed by his agent that there was on the market “qualche cosa di buona di Michelangelo Caravaggio che ha fatto qui.” Ten days later we learn what these “qualche cosa di buona” in Naples were: “doi quadri bellissimi di mano de M. Da Caravaggio. L’uno e d’un Rosario et era fatto per un’ancona et e grande da 18 palmi et non vogliono manco di 400 ducati; l’altro e un quadro mezzano da camera di mezze figure et e un Oliferno con Giudita, et non dariano a manca

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di 300 ducati.” We can follow the history of these two pictures, which were in the possession of the painter Louis Finson, until 1617, when, in Amsterdam, the painter – following work in Aix en Provence and Toulouse – drew up a will leaving the two pictures to his colleague Abraham Vinck. The history of the Madonna of the Rosary can be followed without interruption down to the present and is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum. The second picture – the one that interests us – disappears after 1617, though in 1697 we have notice of a Judith and Holofernes by Caravaggio in the Parisian collection of Francois Quesnel; whether this has any relevance or not to the present picture cannot be said.

The appearance of this lost work by the great Lombard master would have remained mere speculation were it not for the existence of the painting of *Judith and Holofernes* in Naples that many scholars have believed must be a copy after the lost painting by Caravaggio that was taken by Finson to Amsterdam. This picture is today in the collection of the Banca Intesa di San Paolo, and has, at various times, been attributed to Finson, who is known to have made copies after a number of Caravaggio’s paintings. The discovery of the painting in Toulouse therefore presented the possibility of the recovery of a lost masterpiece by Caravaggio. A picture of undeniable quality, it nonetheless contains details that, from the outset, have seemed to many scholars too crude to be from Caravaggio’s hand. Three theories have been advanced:

- 1) that the Toulouse picture is the lost painting by Caravaggio but with some features that require explanation (notably, the concentric wrinkles of the old servant and the summary treatment and brutal features of Holofernes);
- 2) that the picture is not by Caravaggio but by another artist, the prime candidate being Louis Finson (Gianni Papi has argued that Finson painted both the Toulouse picture and the copy in Naples at an interval of several years – this in order to explain the qualitative difference between the two, since the Naples picture is decisively inferior);
- 3) that both pictures are copies after a painting by Caravaggio still to be found;
- 4) that neither picture is based on the lost Caravaggio.

Adherants to all of these positions were present at the study day and all had opportunity to present their points of view.

The morning opened with a presentation by Claudio Falcucci and Rosella Vodret, who had been invited to do a diagnostic examination of the picture and who reported on their findings. It is to be hoped that these will be published in full. Here it needs to be said that:

- 1) the technique of the Toulouse painting is fully consistent with the work of Caravaggio, except in one particular: the concentric wrinkles of the old servant’s face, which are painted over a pale layer rather than the more habitual brown ground one might expect with Caravaggio; and
- 2) the use of a red pigment for the abbozzo is a characteristic of the Lombard mas-

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ter's Neapolitan paintings. However, it also emerged that both the Toulouse and Naples pictures are painted on two canvases of different weave stitched together in similar fashion and at the same place and that, moreover, their grounds are similar and, more surprising still, the same initial ideas visible in x-rays and then altered in the Toulouse picture are present as well in the Naples painting. Among those changes it should be noted that the old servant originally had bulging eyes and the gaze of Judith was initially directed at Holofernes rather than at the viewer. This shared phenomenon would only be possible if both pictures were painted simultaneously in the same bottega, side by side. Moreover, the fact that the concentric wrinkles of the old servant are painted on a pale layer raises the possibility that the picture was perhaps finished by another hand. This point was raised with due caution by Vodret.

The results of this examination – previously unknown – transformed the discussions of the rest of the day, for it raised points that had not heretofore been considered. In the first place, it is no longer possible to consider that the Toulouse painting and the Naples painting are by the same artist working at an interval of several years. Second, the pictures – of distinctly different quality – cannot possibly be by the same artist. Third, some of the troubling features of the Toulouse painting may be due to the intervention of a second hand. Finally, because of the technique of the Toulouse painting – the various changes in it, the presence of an abbozzo, etc. – it must be accepted as the prime version. Which is to say that the idea that both pictures reflect a still lost work must be abandoned.

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To some in the group, the evidence of Falcucci and Vodret reinforced the view that the Toulouse painting is, indeed, the lost work by Caravaggio, though possibly with the intervention of a second hand. This conclusion, shared by the present writer, would, however, add a new element to Caravaggio studies: that upon arrival in Naples, Caravaggio established a workshop he shared with at least one other painter. The possibility of “una bottega aperta” was taken up by Nicola Spinosa in his intervention. The fact that Abraham Vinck – the close colleague of Louis Finson and the later owner of the *Judith and Holofernes* – was described in a letter of 1673 as “amicissimo di Caravaggio” is of obvious interest. Spinosa accepts the Toulouse picture as substantially by Caravaggio and believes the Naples copy to be by a northern artist other than Finson. For his part, Gert Jan van der Sman – an expert on Finson – noted that Finson shared some of the same patrons as Caravaggio. He also noted the important fact that x-rays of the painting of *David with the Head of Goliath* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna – a work usually but not universally accepted as by Caravaggio – reveal that it is painted over a composition of *Mars, Venus and Cupid* by a northern painter, adding another element to the question of Caravaggio's relations with the northern painters active in Naples. Van der Sman noted, moreover, the many copies Finson made after Caravaggio and that he had an extremely active role as a dealer. He believes the Naples painting to be by Finson, the Toulouse painting to be by an artist “vicino a Caravaggio” and suggested – despite the overriding

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evidence to the contrary presented by Falcucci and Vodret - that both works may depend from a still lost work by Caravaggio. Conversation during lunch was lively, with many passionate exchanges of points of view.

To the present writer, the most interesting ideas raised in the gallery in the course of the afternoon, with the benefit of standing in front of the pictures, was the question of the portrait-like features of the Judith and her black garments - those of a widow, thus contradicting the Biblical text, in which Judith is said to shed her widow's garb and put on her finery to seduce Holofernes. Might this explain some of the variations in treatment of the various heads, with Judith's being the most carefully described and most physically present, her gaze engaging - or rather challenging - the viewer? The idea that Caravaggio may have left the Toulouse Judith unfinished when, by July 1607, he moved to Malta, was raised, though it is difficult to believe that a picture with oro di conchiglia decoration on the sword could ever have been considered unfinished (such decoration would have been added at the very end of the painting process and is present in only two other works by Caravaggio: *the Amor Vincit Omnia* in Berlin and the *Sleeping Cupid* in Florence, both deluxe paintings). There remained those, among whom Gianni Papi, who continue to believe that the Toulouse picture is by Finson: he presented a powerpoint illustrating his conviction. In short, no consensus emerged, though all agreed that the basis of discussion had been fundamentally transformed.

At the end of the day, the picture was taken into the natural light of the Brera courtyard, which greatly enhanced its qualities - it is a picture that really reveals its qualities only in natural light - and where, I believe, it was generally conceded that, regardless of attribution, this is a very major work of art, indeed, and one fully worthy of the controversy it has inspired. The day was judged a rare occasion in which conflicting points of view could be discussed and a new understanding of the picture gained.

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