# MASTERARBEIT

Titel der Masterarbeit

## Judith Beheading Holofernes

The Iconographic Origins in Italy and Caravaggio's Baroque Revolution

verfasst von

### Sarah Elisabeth Martin-Hall Gnirs

angestrebter akademischer Grad

### Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2014

## 1.  Table of Contents

## Introduction

This paper investigates the depiction of decapitation in the iconography of Judith and Holofernes within Italy. In the Old Testament story, Judith seduces Holofernes, she deceives Holofernes, and she eventually cuts off his head. Despite the many editions and translations produced throughout history, the biblical story – and the outcome – essentially remains the same. Holofernes always loses his head. This, however, is not the case in the realm of art. Pictorial representations of the Book of Judith can be found as early as the eighth century in Europe, steadily increasing throughout the Middle Ages and booming at the introduction of the Renaissance. Amongst these Renaissance adaptations are images of Judith planning the beheading, raising her sword in the instant before the beheading, stowing away the head immediately following the beheading, and returning home with the aftermath of the beheading. But never the decapitation itself. In the entire iconographic history of Judith and Holofernes throughout the Renaissance, there is not one surviving depiction of Holofernes in the moment that he loses his head at the hands of Judith. That is, until the year 1599 and the emergence of Caravaggio. Unlike the many artists before him, the early Baroque master decisively places the dramatic climax of the story at the immediate center of his canvas, and in a form which is so radically realistic and shockingly brutal that it carries no true predecessors in the entire history of art. This paper pursues a deeper understanding of the artistic anomaly which is Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* by surveying its literary and pictorial history, examining the painting and its artist on a more intimate and idiosyncratic level, and by placing the work within the greater societal context of the Counter Reformation in Italy.

# 1. Judith's Beginnings

The literary and pictorial history of the Book of Judith is as complex as it is multifaceted, and ultimately stands at the ideological and iconographic foundation of this analysis. To better understand this foundation, the following chapter will examine Judith's origins in literature, her pictorial development through Bible illustrations of the Medieval Age, and her evolution in the art of the Italian Renaissance.

## 1.1. The Book of Judith and its Literary Origins

The Book of Judith is an anonymous, fictional Hebrew story which is excluded from the Hebrew Bible and assigned by Protestants to the Apocrypha. Catholic and Orthodox Christians also classify the story as Deuterocanonical, as it is eventually included as a scriptural text in the Christian Old Testament.[1] Scholars generally agree that the Book of Judith was originally written in Hebrew in the second century BCE by a Palestinian Jew shortly following the Maccabean revolt (167-160 BCE.).[2] An actual date for the origination of the story remains, however, still debatable, due primarily to the large range of historical and fictive references within the story.

The general plot of the Book of Judith can be briefly summarized as follows:

> Holofernes, the Assyrian general of King Nebuchadnezzar, is sent by the King to punish all of the city-states in the surrounding kingdoms which refused to send him a levy of their soldiers. All those who would not submit to the King were destroyed completely. The Israelites who lived in Judea feared their turn was soon coming and retreated to the hilltops in the town of Bethulia. Achior, one of the princes of the Ammonites, met with Nebuchadnezzar and praised the Israelites, begging the King not to harm them. In return, Achior was seized and forced outside of the town walls. The Israelites found Achior and took him inside the walls of Bethulia, where Achior informed Uzziah, the chief magistrate of the town, of Holofernes' orders to destroy their city in the name of the King. At this stage, Holofernes had already mustered his entire army, which were waiting outside of the strong walls of Bethulia, prepared for attack.

---

[1] Pope 1910, Pgs. 554-556.
[2] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 1.

The townspeople urged Uzziah to surrender the town to Holofernes, at which point Judith stepped forward. Judith, a beautiful, rich and pious widow, approached Uzziah and informed him that she and her maid would leave town that night, and to leave the city gate opened for them. Judith perfumed and dressed herself in her best clothes and jewellery and gathered with her maid food provisions in a large bag. Judith and her maid set out together through the town gates, and were almost immediately stopped by Assyrian patrol. Judith convinced the soldiers that she had secret information that would help Holofernes capture Bethulia, and was welcomed into Holofernes' camp as an honored guest.

Holofernes was immediately enchanted by Judith, stating that he had never met a woman who was as beautiful in appearance and wise in speech as she. He provided a tent for her and her maid, where they remained for three days, leaving only in the evening to eat their own food and pray. On the fourth day, Holofernes invited Judith to an informal banquet in his own tent along with his personal attendants. She dressed in her finest clothes and entered his tent, where her maid had already laid Judith's sheepskin bedding on the ground. Holofernes offered her to drink wine, but she only drank what her maid had already prepared for her. When evening came, Holofernes' attendants grew tired and exited the tent so that Judith and Holofernes were left alone. Holofernes drank himself into a stupor and eventually fell asleep on his bed.

Judith's maid was still standing outside the tent, as she had done every previous night before when she waited to accompany Judith when she went out for her evening prayers. Meanwhile, Judith went to the bedpost near Holofernes' head and removed his sword. She took a hold of his hair, prayed to God for strength, and struck his neck twice with all her might. By the second strike, Holofernes' head fell away from his body. She rolled his lifeless body off of the bed and wrapped it in his canopy curtains. Judith took his decapitated head and handed it to her maid who was standing outside of the tent. The maid proceeded to place the head in her bag. Judith and her maid exited the tent as was accustomed every evening, carrying Holofernes' concealed head with them. They passed through the camp without arousing suspicion and returned to Bethulia, where Judith revealed to Uzziah and the townspeople the contents of the bag

and they exalted and praised her for defeating their enemy and liberating the Jewish people.

Judith then instructed her people to hang Holofernes' head on the town wall in full view of the enemy camps the next morning. The Assyrian soldiers who were standing watch outside of Bethulia saw the decapitated head of their general and ran back to camp to find his headless body in his tent. Without the guidance of their leader, the soldiers immediately panicked and fled the camp. Judith became a national heroine for her courageous act and received many honors. She also received many marriage proposals, but denied them all. She set free her maid and died a virtuous and chaste widow at the age of 105 in Bethulia.[3]

The Book of Judith spans five centuries of historical and geographical information, combined with imaginary details. Nebuchadnezzar, for example, is cited as the King of Assyria, although he historically acted as the King of Babylon (605/604 – 562 BCE). The Assyrian capital of Nineveh is also referenced, which was destroyed after the city was sacked in 612 BCE.[4] The second-century Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes is also alluded to, further bolstering the dating of the story within the second century BCE after the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire. However, elements such as the town of Bethulia (meaning "The City of God") and Judith herself are considered complete fictional inventions by most scholars. Many hypothesize that the figure of Judith was intended as a female symbolic counterpart to Judas Maccabeas, leader of the revolt, and the book itself an interpretation of a contemporary situation in the guise of an ancient historical setting.[5] Such a story would carry notable symbolic power to the Judean Jews following the successful Maccabean uprising which marked a new, unsettling period of independence for the Maccabeans.

---

[3] Summary is based on the English translation of the original Latin Vulgate from the Douay-Rheims Bible. The Douay-Rheims translation has been chosen as the primary English source for this analysis (the Old Testament portion was published by the University of Douai between 1609-1610). This translation is an undertaking by the English College, Douai in service of the Catholic Church in the effort to uphold the Catholic tradition in the face of the Protestant Reformation, and thusly aligns from an ideological standpoint more closely with the Latin Vugate propagated throughout Italy during the Counter-Reformation. For a useful verse-for-verse translation from Latin to English from the Douay-Rheims Bible, see http://vulgate.org.
[4] Judith, http://www.usccb.org/bible/judith (accessed 04.03.2014).
[5] Book of Judith, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/307589/Book-of-Judith (accessed 04.03.2014).

The Book of Judith was originally included in the Alexandrian Septuagint – a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament).[6] The Alexandrian Septuagint was written approximately from the third to the second century BCE and eventually dispersed throughout the Christian world.[7] In total, there are four known Greek recensions of the story: the Septuagint codices Alexandrinus, Vanticanus, Sinaiticus, and Basiliano-Vaticanus, as well as four ancient translations: Old Latin, Syriac, Sahidic, and Ethiopic.[8] It was in the late fourth century that St. Jerome is believed to have predominantly used the Greek Septuagint as his source when translating the Old Testament into Latin for the Vulgate, thusly including the Apocryphal books in the most popular Bible of the Middle Ages and establishing the Book of Judith as canonical.[9] After the fourth century CE, the story was adopted from the Vulgate into various texts of the Middle Ages, including Isadore of Seville's *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum* from the late sixth and early seventh century and a commentary on the Book of Judith by Hrabanus Maurus from the early ninth century, both of which were subsequently incorporated into the *Glossa Ordinaria* from the late 11th and early 12th century – an assembly of Bible glosses compiled by the school of Laon which were highly-circulated throughout the Middle Ages and remained famous up until the Renaissance.[10]

For the sake of this analysis, St. Jerome's edition of the Vulgate will serve as the primary textual source. Though various written adaptations of the Book of Judith based on the Vulgate were produced and disseminated throughout the Middle Ages, St. Jerome's edition remained the definitive and most influential Bible within Western Europe from its creation in the 4th century CE into the Early Modern Period, thusly spanning the centuries which are critical to this analysis: the Renaissance and Baroque. Particularly in Italy, the Vulgate was, following the Council of Trent which spanned 1545-1563, not only established as the official version of the Latin Bible by the Roman Catholic Church, but was also the sole version which was authorized to be printed following Clement VIII's final revision in 1598.[11] Although the role of the biblical text for the artists of the Renaissance and Baroque will be brought into speculation later in this analysis, it can be established that if and when a scriptural text was to be used by an artistic reference for a depiction of Judith, then it can be reasonably assumed to be that of the Vulgate.

---

[6] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 3.
[7] Ibid., Pg. 3.
[8] Judith, http://www.usccb.org/bible/judith (accessed 04.03.2014).
[9] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 3.
[10] Ibid., Pgs. 4-5.
[11] Sutcliffe 1948, Pgs. 35-42.

## *1.2. The Medieval Pictorial Tradition of the Book of Judith*

The Book of Judith's journey to the Western world and acceptance into Christian canonicity in the fourth century naturally coincides with the development of the pictorial tradition of the story and its iconography. The earliest depictions of the Book of Judith are documented to have surfaced during the Medieval Age in Europe. The following section will summarize the most prominent pictorial representations of the narrative throughout the Medieval period, with a specific emphasis on the regional prototypes and prevailing motifs.

The oldest extant pictorial illustration of the Book of Judith can be dated back to the 8th century in Italy in the now heavily damaged frescos of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome. Painted onto the brick barriers of the Scuola cantorum in the main nave of the church, the specific contents of the 10-piece cycle are today only partially identifiable. It is however documented that the fresco illustrates the scene of the victorious return of Judith to the town of Bethulia with the head of Holofernes.[12]

Illustrations of the Book of Judith can be found more predominantly between the ninth and 12th century, utilized to richly illustrate the narrative cycles of Medieval Bibles. One of the earliest extant illustrations of the Book of Judith can be found in a Carolingian Bible dating back to the second half of the ninth century (Fig 1.1).[13] The Carolingian illustration consists of three-tiered registers depicting consecutive events within the story. The topmost scene illustrates Judith and her maid exiting the walls of Bethulia, and simultaneously both figures upon their return to Bethulia with the head of Holofernes. The middle register shows Judith being presented to Holofernes within the enemy camp. The lowest register depicts Judith with a raised sword above Holofernes' unsuspecting body, as well as Judith and her maid exiting the enemy camp with the general's decapitated head. Judith's exit within the last scene comes to a close in the uppermost register with her return to Bethulia, thusly concluding the narrative cycle.[14]

This cycle is one of the earliest extant examples of the typical Carolingian prototype used to depict the story of Judith within Bibles of the Medieval Age. The content of the illustration is

---

[12] Brine/Ciletti/Lähnemann 2010, Pg. 328.
[13] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 27.
[14] Ibid., Pgs. 27-28.

particularly relevant in regards to the way in which the culminating moment of the narrative is being illustrated: the decapitation of Holofernes by Judith. As seen in this specific cycle, Judith is shown standing with raised sword by the bed of Holofernes – in the exact instant before she lowers the sword for her first strike. The dramatic moment before the climax of the decapitation can be found illustrated in numerous Medieval Bibles that proceed this Carolingian cycle. The most notable examples can, interestingly enough, be found in Italy.[15] Although no longer following the complex cyclical narration scheme of the earlier Carolingian illustration, single-scene depictions such as that found in the Parma Bible from the late 11th century (Fig. 1.2) portray the same exciting moment – Judith with her raised sword, preparing to enact the decapitation of Holofernes. These simplified, allegorical depictions mark the beginning of the pictorial tradition of the Book of Judith within Italy. From the 11th century onwards, Italian Bibles increasingly utilize single-scene illustrations to demonstrate (and abbreviate) the most significant act of the biblical story: the decapitation.[16] The overwhelming majority of these decapitation scenes also follow in the tradition of the Carolingian prototype, focusing on the same dramatic moment. Illustrations such as those found in Italian Bibles of the early 12th (Fig. 1.3) and 14th century (Fig. 1.4) serve to demonstrate the continuing influence of Carolingian iconography in Italy.[17]

It would also be interesting to note other prominent motifs used to depict the Book of Judith within medieval Bibles, both in and outside of Italy. The Spanish Roda Bible from the 11th century (Fig. 1.5), for example, displays a similar cyclical reading-style to the Carolingian prototype, now comprised in six scenes within a four level, tower-like structure.[18] Interesting here is also the depiction of the dramatic climax of the story. Instead of showing the moment before the decapitation, the Roda Bible rather illustrates the moment directly following it, as Judith passes Holofernes' dismembered head to her maid to conceal within a bag. Within this cycle, however, the emphasis seems to point towards another moment within the story (or in this case, two separate events), following in the tradition of the eighth century frescos in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome.[19] In the second-to-topmost tier, Judith and her maid are shown in the left-most scene as they depart Bethulia for their journey to the enemy camp. In the right most,

---

[15] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 9.
[16] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 32.
[17] Ibid., Pgs. 32-34.
[18] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 28.
[19] Ibid., Pgs. 28-29.

Judith and her maid can be seen upon their return, presenting Holofernes' decapitated head to the ecstatic townspeople.

An Italian Bible from Naples dated to the 14th century (Fig. 1.6) takes this pictorial emphasis one step further and makes Judith's victorious return to her exalting townspeople the primary motif, shown here occurring simultaneous to the Assyrians' discovery of their fallen General.[20] The emphasis on Judith's departure from as well as return to Bethulia in Bible illustrations of the Middle Ages is highly significant, as these particular scenes are among the most pervading motifs of the iconography of Judith throughout the Renaissance – an aspect which will be revisited later in this analysis.

When examining the pictorial tradition of the depiction of the Book of Judith within Bibles of the Middle Age, the Byzantine prototype provides yet another modus for the illustration of what is considered the climaxing moment of the story, returning again to the decapitation. As previously demonstrated, the Carolingian cycle and preceding Italian Bible illustrations almost exclusively follow the Carolingian prototype in the depiction of this decisive moment within the narrative: the instant in which Judith raises her sword above the sleeping body of Holofernes, preparing for her first strike. Byzantine Bibles such as the Leo Bible from the first half of the ninth century (Fig. 1.7), however, predominantly depict the subsequent and even more dramatic moment within the story: the instant Judith's sword has fallen and the blade strikes the neck of the unsuspecting Holofernes.[21] Medieval French Bibles such as the Arsenal Bible from the 13th century (Fig. 1.8) also largely follow in the Byzantine pictorial tradition, emphasizing Judith's first strike as opposed to the instance directly before.[22] For this analysis, medieval illustrations such as those within the Leo Bible and the Arsenal Bible are of particular significance. Such examples present a motif which does not again resurface until 1599 with Caravaggio's famous *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, wherein it seems, centuries later, Judith's sword has found the neck of her victim yet again.

---

[20] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 29.
[21] Ibid., Pgs. 29-30.
[22] Ibid., Pg. 31.

### *1.3. The Iconography of Judith and Holofernes in the Italian Renaissance*

The timeline of this analysis has now approximately reached the 15th century Renaissance, where the first autonomous representations of the Book of Judith emerge. The following section will examine the development of the iconography of Judith and Holofernes within Italy through a select survey of major Renaissance artworks, leading up until the transition into the early Baroque period and the appearance of Caravaggio's pivotal depiction in the year 1599.

### *1.3.1. Florence: the Early Renaissance*

Lorenzo Ghiberti is recognized as the first major artist of the Renaissance to create an image of Judith: a small bronze figure set which is located at the border of the *David and Goliath* relief on the *Gates of Paradise* panels at the Baptistery of Pisa in Florence (Fig. 1.9).[23] Ghiberti's *Judith*, created approximately between 1425-1452, depicts a non-isolated figure within a larger Old Testament program – a convention which was drawn directly from the Christian Medieval tradition. Judith is shown in a frontal contrapposto with a raised sword in one hand and Holofernes' head in the other and is one of a series of over 20 prophets, heroines and sibyls found in the niches framing the main narrative panels.[24] Interesting is here to note Judith's association with *David and Goliath,* a story which also originates from the Old Testament. It is generally agreed that the prophets on the *Gates of Paradise* panels serve as typological counterparts to the main narrative scenes they border and that the figure of Judith, more specifically, serves as a prefiguration of the Virgin's victory over Satan, David correspondingly representing Christ's victory over Satan.[25] These clear typological associations between the virtuous Judith and the Virgin, and consequently the tyrannical Holofernes with Satan, are also reflective of the continued influence of medieval Mariological iconography in the early stages of the Renaissance, wherein Judith has not yet been awarded the precedence of an isolated depiction.

Following Ghiberti's *Judith* is an observable proliferation of Judith and Holofernes depictions spanning the second half of the 15th century that are concentrated particularly in Florence and

---

[23] Kubiak 1965, Pgs. 24-25.
[24] The Gates of Paradise: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance, http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/ ghiberti/themes.html (accessed 21.03.2014).
[25] Kubiak 1965, Pgs. 23-25.

other regions of Northern Italy. Most notable are works such as Donatello's famous bronze *Judith and Holofernes* (Fig. 1.10), which was created between 1453-1457 and is both the first freestanding statue and the first version to be depicted independent of other Old Testament scenes in the Renaissance,[26] Antonio Pollaiuolo's likewise-freestanding *Judith* bronze from approximately 1470 (Fig. 1.11), and Sandro Botticellis's painted depictions of *The Return of Judith to Bethulia* (Fig. 1.12) and *The Discovery of the Body of Holofernes* (Fig. 1.13), both dated around 1470 and originally displayed as a set during the Renaissance.[27] All of the preceding artworks, produced by Florentine artists at a time when all were highly active within the region, mark the notable transition into the depiction of the biblical figure as a theme within itself, no longer dependent on a larger Old Testament program. From a political and ideological standpoint, this observable flourishing of isolated Judith depictions concentrated within the region during the beginning stages of the Renaissance may also be attributed to the concurrent early developments of Italian humanistic philosophy, which is believed to have originated in the city of Florence.[28]

Florence in the 1400's was marked by an increasing interest in the concept of Civic Humanism – a new historical outlook and ethical philosophy which entailed the refusal of "selfish" withdrawal into scholarship in exchange for a "vita active", or a more active role in civic life, including familial as well as political obligations.[29] Though it is near impossible to pinpoint the concrete causes of the growing humanistic sentiment which permeated Florence during this age, its origins can be credited in part to Italian scholars such as Petrarch who called for a return to original antique texts in an effort to revive the cultural, literary, as well as moral-philosophical legacy of classical antiquity, the objective being the fostering of a more eloquent, well-read citizenry which was equipped with the tools to enact social change and directly engage within their communities and larger civic life.[30] And the story of Judith, resonating with the early Renaissance populace of Florence as a biblical recounting of the triumph of the civic action of one (that one being a woman, for that matter) over the tyranny of many, was the ideal typological model for the expression of these growing sentiments.[31]

---

[26] Ibid., Pg. 31.
[27] Migiel/Schiesari 1991, Pg. 56.
[28] Baron 1966, Pgs. 5-6.
[29] Ibid., Pg. 7.
[30] Brine/Ciletti/Lähnemann 2010, Pgs. 303-306.
[31] Ibid., Pgs. 303-306.

Donatello's sculpture may best illustrate not only the pervasiveness of Judith's growing humanistic associations in Florence during the 1400's, but also an increasingly political interpretation of Judith which synthesizes with, or even trumps, the traditional medieval proto-Marian symbolism still present in works such as that of Ghiberti's figure, created a mere 30 years earlier. Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* stood as early as 1464 in the Medici Palace Garden and was most likely commissioned by Cosimo de'Medici, initially due to Judith's association with Republicanism and her medieval reputation as a figure of piety and virtue.[32] However, a year following Piero de' Medici's expulsion from Florence in 1494, the statue was moved to the Piazza della Signora to serve a completely different symbolic purpose: Judith's defeat of the tyrannical Holofernes in Donatello's triumphant depiction was to stand as the symbolic pre-figuration of the Florentine victory over the tyrannical Medicis, thusly marking the city's transition into a true Republic, lead by Girolamo Savonarola.[33] Interestingly enough, a mere eighth years later, *Judith* was again famously removed from her conspicuous placing at Piazza della Signora in favor of Michelangelo's monumental *David* statue. As a symbol of the triumph of virtue over tyranny, *David* was later deemed by the Republic of Florence as a more "appropriate" biblical figure, one deliberator citing that "Judith is an omen of evil, and no fit object where it stands [...] it is not proper that the woman should kill the male; and, above all, this statue was erected under an evil star, and things have gone from bad to worse since then".[34] As demonstrated by Donatello's *Judith*, the biblical heroine came to serve as a powerful political figure in early Renaissance Florence, with a representative potency which proved malleable according to prominent, and even starkly contradicting, ideologies.

As the Renaissance approached the 1500's, depictions of Judith continued to be produced throughout Northern Italy, still predominately in the provenance of Florence. The Florentine artist Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Judith and Her Maid* from 1489 (Fig. 1.14) was likely based on Botticelli's earlier depiction of the same scene from 1470 (Fig 1.12).[35] The stiff, decorative nature of Ghirlandaio's composition, however, makes a political interpretation of the piece difficult to ascertain in contrast to its Florentine predecessors. Matteo di Giovanni, who was primarily active in Siena, painted his *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* between 1490-1495 (Fig. 1.15), a work that was probably based on a Florentine prototype.[36] Di Giovanni's

---

[32] Kubiak 1965, Pgs. 33-34.
[33] Brine/Ciletti/Lähnemann 2010, Pgs. 305-306.
[34] Ibid., Pg. 68.
[35] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 50.
[36] Ibid., Pg. 51.

depiction is representative of the typical three-quarter length he employed to depict his figures, whereby the lacking tradition of political interpretations of Judith within Siena suggest that, also in contrast with the previous Florentine examples, di Giovanni's work rather borrows from a medieval religious tradition in which such iconography was more universally recognizable.[37]

Within the last decade of the 15th century, Botticelli added two major artworks to his repertoire of Judith depictions. Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles* from 1494 (Fig. 1.16) includes three different representations of Judith: once alone in a niche behind Midas' throne with the head of Holofernes at her feet, once in a narrative relief scene above the throne where Judith is placing Holofernes' head in the bag of her maid, and once in a relief below the throne displaying the figures upon their return to Bethulia.[38] Judith's appearance within this particular constellation of antique and biblical symbols of virtue may best be understood as a reflection of – and possibly response to – the political climate of Florence at the time. Created in the year the tyrannical Piero de'Medici was expelled from his throne, Botticelli, who was a known supporter of Savonarola, may be utilizing Judith alongside fellow virtuous figures such as St. George and David to express again the impending triumph of virtue over misguided tyrannical powers – here represented by the Judge who falsely accuses Apelles.[39]

Botticelli's slightly later *Tragedy of Lucretia*, created between 1496-1504 (Fig 1.17), again engages the symbolic potency of Judith to respond to what was a politically turbulent period for the city of Florence. Following the fall of the Medicis, Florence underwent a dramatic transition under Savonarola with the installment a republican government, creating a climate of social unrest in which the peoples' newly won civil freedom may have seemed fragile or even threatened.[40] In the *Tragedy of Lucretia*, Judith appears once in a narrative panel with her maid placing the head of Holofernes in a bag in what may be the earliest pictorial example of the pairing of Judith and Lucretia.[41] The story of Lucretia, similar to that of Judith, involves the overthrowing of a tyrannical King – in Lucretia's case through the act of her own suicide – whereby a Republic is subsequently established.[42] For Botticelli, a fervent supporter of the newly established Florentine Republic, this symbolic joining of Lucretia and Judith may have

---

[37] Ibid., Pg. 51.
[38] Migiel/Schiesari 1991, Pgs. 68-69.
[39] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 55.
[40] Lightbown, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/75231/Sandro-Botticelli/783/Late-works (accessed 24.03.2014).
[41] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 56.
[42] Grössinger 1997, Pg. 13.

acted to further emphasize the artists' political stance and continued dedication to Republican freedom.

### 1.3.2. *Bologna and Venice: Late 1400's and Early 1500's*

In the late 1400's and early 1500's, known versions of Judith are shown to spread to other regions of Northern Italy, including Bologna and Venice. The Bolognese artist Francesco Francia created a fresco around the year 1500 for the palace of Giovanni Bentivoglio II which, according to a description by Vasari, depicted the camp of Holofernes and various scenes of Judith and her maid, including their approach on the sleeping Holofernes, Judith seizing his hair and "striking the blow that is to destroy her enemy", as well as the maid bending over with a basket to receive the head.[43] Francia's fresco, along with the entire palace, was destroyed in the year 1507 after Julius II unseated the Bentivoglio and the Bolognese subsequently destroyed all remnants of their former tyrants.[44] There remains, however, a series of drawings of Judith by Francia with multiple versions of the same composition (one example is illustrated in Fig. 1.18). Judith is shown placing the decapitated head of Holofernes within the bag of her maid while the severed neck of Holofernes' headless body is depicted with compelling foreshortening and realism, as if the decapitation has just been carried out and the body, slightly propped up on two elbows and bent knees, still writhes with its last bit of life. If Francia's drawing is any indication of the sort of realism and dynamism that would have been displayed in his destroyed Judith fresco, then the decapitation scene that Vasari describes would have served as an instrumental element to this analysis. Francia's fresco would contain the first documented depiction of the decapitation of Holofernes since the Byzantine Bibles of the Middle Ages,[45] and, overall, the first, and potentially only, decapitation scene produced during the Italian Renaissance. As there exist no remnants of Francia's Judith fresco beyond the description left behind by Vasari and the artist's own drawings, the true content and impact of Francia's images can only be speculated within the context of this analysis.

At the turn of the 16th century, there is an observable increase in Judith and Holofernes imagery concentrated within the region of Venice. The interest in antique subject matter didn't reach the Republic of Venice until the late 1400's, possibly influenced by Judith's growing

---

[43] Vasari 1917, Pg. 308.
[44] Burckhardt 2005, Pg. 197.
[45] Uppenkamp 2004, Pgs. 29-30.

popularity in nearby Florence. Venice was at the time already a major port for trade and a growing economic power within Italy, boasting a bustling art market through which the exchange of art and new ideas could thrive.[46] It was in fact the Paduan-born artist Andrea Mantegna who first introduced the Venetians to the Florentine interest in nature and antique subject matter, primarily due to Mantegna's early apprenticeship under Francesco Squarcione and the influence of Florentine artists such as Filippo Lippi and Donatello within the region of Padua.[47] Coincidentally, Mantegna was also one of the first artists to introduce Venice to the figure of Judith. Mantegna's composition from 1495 (Fig. 1.19) depicts a full-length Judith in the moment directly following the decapitation, standing before the open tent of Holofernes as she places the decapitated head in the bag of her maid, while Holofernes' body is indicated within the depths of the tent by the bottom of his foot. Mantegna's depiction seems to follow in the classical tradition characteristic of the artist, with a frontality, attention to drapery and decorative quality which acts to mask any sense of realism within the scene. It has also been theorized that Mantegna's *Judith* – including a series of preceding drawings from the artist that also depict the same scene with minor variation – may in fact be partly based on a now-missing Guariento depiction which could at one point also be found in Padua.[48] Guariento, who was heavily influenced by Byzantine painting, may have also subsequently influenced the distinct Byzantine quality also present in Mantegna's composition.

Adaptations of Judith continued to spread throughout Venice in the 1500's, beginning most notably with Giorgione's full-length version from approximately 1504 (Fig. 1.20). Giorgione's sensual interpretation of Judith embodies the contemporary Venetian interest in favoring the decorative elements of a composition over a realistic interpretation which references the actual content of the narrative. Here, the emphasis is placed on the aesthetic, feminine qualities of Judith, with a poetic landscape retreating into the background and no contextualizing reference to Bethulia or the camp of Holofernes. Holofernes' decapitated head is also decisively muted within the composition, void of any realistic indication of the horror or gore that would be expected in such a post-decapitation scene. This is, however, not a depiction of any specific moment from the Book of Judith, as has been seen in the majority of Medieval and Renaissance depictions previously mentioned. Giorgione's Judith, in fact, may have been originally commissioned for display in a private patron's home, where Judith's popularity as an accepta-

---

[46] Renaissance Art in Venice, http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/renaissance-in-venice.htm (accessed 29.03.2014).
[47] Kelly 1910, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09610a.htm (accessed 31.03.2014).
[48] Kubiak 1965, Pgs. 69-70.

ble, virtuous biblical figure and her established medieval associations most likely influenced the idealized, decorative nature of the composition.[49]

In the early 1500's, Venice also saw an increase in Judith portraiture, typified by the works of Vincenzo Catena from approximately 1520 (Fig. 1.21) and Palma il Vecchio from 1525 (Fig. 1.22). In Catena's *Judith*, a contemporary woman is depicted in the guise of the biblical heroine in the foreground – here with the requisite attributes of Judith's sword and Holofernes' decapitated head – and an opening in the background revealing a poetic, atmospheric landscape. It has been hypothesized that Catena's *Judith* is a representation of the artist's lover, Rosa da Scardona, who also appears as his muse in a number of images of saints produced by the artist.[50] Palma's Judith from 1525 follows in a similar tradition. The portrait is widely accepted as an image of Isabella d'Este, the Marchesa of Mantua who was also a favored model of Titian.[51] D'Este is depicted against a dark background with an indication of Judith's sword and Holofernes' head, here again muted within the larger composition in favor of the individual portraiture and the lavish textures and details of Judith's garment. Both portraits are reflective of the growing influences of Humanism during the Renaissance, influences which assume a distinctly more subtle character to that which can be observed in the earlier, politically-connotative works of Donatello and Botticelli in Florence. As previously referenced, Humanistic thought encouraged that a stronger emphasis be placed upon the individual and their civil obligations over what was considered a "selfish" retreat into scholarship.[52] The progression of Humanism in the region of Venice eventually resulted in a real, contemporary person taking over the role of Judith and, concurrently, a decrease in artistic adherences to the narrative or realistic elements of the story.[53] In addition, Judith's strong religious and typological associations which were established during the Middle Ages continued to resonate with Venice throughout the 1500's,[54] making a direct association with her through the medium of painting even more appealing for the contemporary Venetian woman.

---

[49] Ibid., Pgs. 71-72.
[50] Fondazione Querini Stampalia, http://www.querinistampalia.org/eng/uploads/Schede%20Museo_eng.pdf (accessed 21.08.2014).
[51] Raichel Le Goff, Venetian Portraiture 1475-1575, http://raichel.org/articlesRaichel/Art-Research/N-corteg.htm (accessed 21.08.2014).
[52] Baron 1966, Pg. 7.
[53] Kubiak 1965, Pgs. 73-74.
[54] Justi 1908, Pg. 29.

### *1.3.3. High Mannerism and the Venetian School*

The second half of the 16th century in Italy was most prominently defined by the artistic strains of High Mannerism – centered in the cities of Rome, Florence, and Mantua – and the Venetian School. In 1554, the Mannerist theorist and artist Giorgio Vasari created one of the very few and most poignant Maniera depictions of *Judith and Holofernes* (Fig. 1.23) within Italy. Vasari's composition depicts the moment directly before the decapitation as Judith raises her sword, with the heroine's muscular backside facing towards the viewer in foreground and the maid observing the scene in the shadows of the background. Vasari, a pupil of Michelangelo, seems to follow in the tradition of Michelangelo's *Judith* fresco created between 1508-1512 for the Sistine Chapel in Rome (Fig. 1.24), where he may have derived Judith's unconventional back-facing positioning.[55] A further Sistine Chapel fresco from Michelangelo, *Libyan Sibyl* (1515) (Fig. 1.25), also displays striking similarities to Vasari's *Judith*. In both of Michelangelo's works and Vasari's later *Judith*, the positioning of the figures as well as ornamentation of the clothing and hair display direct references to classical antiquity.[56] Vasari's take on Judith represents what can overall be characterized as a highly derivative approach to depicting the biblical heroine. Borrowing Michelangelo's monumental figures and masking the composition with the complex, artificial posing and decorative details symptomatic to early Mannerism, Vasari constructs a sort of classically heroic Judith which follows more in the tradition of the idealized models developed by his early 16th century predecessors than the politically-driven Florentine versions of the early Renaissance.[57]

During the second half of the 16th century in Italy, the Venetian school of art also flourished, including notable artists such as Titian and Paolo Veronese who contributed their own adaptations of Judith. Titian's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* from ca. 1570 (Fig. 1.26) and Veronese's versions from ca. 1580 and 1582 (Figs. 1.27, 1.28) are similar compositions which again depict the moment following the decapitation, as Judith is in the process of placing the dismembered head into the bag of her maid. The heightened yet harmonious coloring of Veronese's work is characteristic of the Venetian school, whereas Titian's *Judith* displays a more subtle color palette and loose brushwork that was typical to the artist's later compositions. Interesting is here to note the inclusion of a now dark-skinned, exotically-

---

[55] Brine/Ciletti/Lähnemann 2010, Pgs. 354-355.
[56] Ibid., Pgs. 354-355.
[57] Smyth/Cropper 1992.

dressed maid to the trajectory of Judith iconography – a characteristic which Bettina Uppenkamp attributes to a well-established tradition and rhetoric in the Renaissance of contrapposto, which entails the emphasizing of the contrast between people's age, gender and appearance.[58] Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, this visual contrast between Judith and her maid was traditionally achieved through the clear definition of the figures' roles within the scene (i.e. Judith holding the sword, Abra opening the bag, etc.) as well as in the more elaborate ornamentation of Judith's garb, indicative of her higher social standing. In some early Renaissance depictions, however, this contrast is created by means of emphasizing the difference between Judith and her maid's age – an element that was distinctly imagined by the artist, as Abra's age is at no point clearly referenced in the original text of the narrative.[59] The Venetian Giovanni Cariani's *Judith and Her Maid* from approximately 1510 (Fig. 1.29) is one of the earliest compositions to employ this visual contrast by means of age, where the maid is depicted in the guise of an old, withered, almost ghastly woman in the shadows of the background, her actual skull visible under the thin layer of her leathered skin. The portrayal of an old, shriveled maid in contrast to a young, beautiful Judith does not, however, become an established motif until after Caravaggio's famous adaptation in the early Baroque, indicative of the possible influence of earlier Northern Italian interpretations on the artist.[60] According to Uppenkamp, the conflicting skin colors of the two main figures, as demonstrated by Titian and Veronese's works, is a mere stylistic heightening of this contrast by means of the use of color as opposed to age.[61] Mary D. Garrard takes this interpretation of the Renaissance rhetoric of emphasizing contrasts one step further. She proposes that the darker-skinned, older, and at times "grotesquely distorted face" of Abra is intended as a personification of the evil, negative aspects of Judith's character, whereby Judith's youthful, idealized beauty acts to conversely personify her virtuous attributes.[62] In this sense, both the negative and positive interpretations of Judith can be manifested within one painting. It is also notable that the depiction of a dark-skinned maid against a white-skinned, light-haired Judith eventually became a conventional motif in 16th century Venice.

---

[58] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 68.
[59] Ibid., Pg. 67.
[60] Ibid., Pgs. 67-68.
[61] Ibid., Pgs. 67-68.
[62] Garrard 1989, Pg. 290.

### 1.3.4. *Michelangelo in Rome*

One of the earliest and most significant documented appearances of Judith iconography in Rome during the Italian Renaissance is a fresco from Michelangelo decorating a spandrel within the Sistine Chapel, executed between 1508-1512 (Fig. 1.24). Michelangelo's composition is depicted opposite from another spandrel with the scene of David's victory over Goliath, composing an Old Testament pairing reminiscent of early Renaissance works such as that of Ghiberti, which still drew strongly from the Christian Medieval tradition and the typological associations between Judith/the Virgin and David/Christ.[63] Michelangelo depicts the scene of the moment following Holofernes' decapitation – a motif that has also shown to be prominent in Northern Italy through artists such as Botticelli and Mantegna. Michelangelo, however, interprets this moment differently from his Florentine counterparts. Instead of placing Holofernes' decapitated head into the bag held by the maid – as seen in Mantegna's *Judith* (1495) (Fig. 1.19) and in the detail of Botticelli's *Tragedy of Lucretia* (1496-1404) (Fig. 1.17) – the maid is shown balancing the head aloft on a platter of sorts, while Judith conceals the object with a white cloth and looks back at the reposed body of her headless victim. Botticelli was in fact the first artist to depict the maid carrying Holofernes' head upon her own in his *Return to Bethulia* (1470) (Fig. 1.12),[64] and yet Michelangelo's later fresco seems to be correcting this ambiguity in Botticelli's inconsistent interpretations. From a stylistic perspective, it is likely that Botticelli and Mantegna originally based their various depictions on printed woodblock illustrations of the story of Judith from the Malermi Bible, printed in 1471.[65] These illustrations, heavily reliant on the Byzantine tradition, subsequently influenced adaptations of Judith in Northern Italy and, eventually, Michelangelo's composition in Rome.[66]

Furthermore, although the medieval influences of Michelangelo's Northern Italian predecessors are readily evident in his Sistine *Judith*, his interpretation and execution is far from derivative. The depiction of Judith and her maid from their backside was highly unconventional in the tradition of Judith iconography of the Renaissance. It has been hypothesized that Michelangelo's *Judith* may have been loosely based on a drawing from Mantegna dated around 1490 (Fig. 1.30), located today in the Uffizi, in which the heroine is shown with her back to the

---

[63] Reid 1969, Pgs. 376-387.
[64] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 70.
[65] Niccolò Malermi: Biblia Italica (Italian Bible), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/33.66 (accessed 04.04.2014).
[66] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 78.

viewer, placing Holofernes' head into the bag held by the maid.[67] While historians such as Charles De Tolnay interpret Judith's backward-facing gesture as "anti-heroic" and connotative of her lack of control over what was a fated situation,[68] it may also prove difficult to read Judith's muscular figure and solid stance – again evocative of Mantegna's Uffizi *Judith* – as anything but heroic. Another theory holds that Michelangelo depicted his own self-image Holofernes' decapitated head, a practice not particularly uncommon to the artist.[69] Whatever the significance behind the ambiguity of Michelangelo's *Judith*, certain is the provocative power of the depiction.

In summary, it can be concluded that the iconography of Judith and Holofernes underwent a multi-faceted evolution throughout the Italian Renaissance. From Judith's earliest beginnings in the city of Florence in the form of sculpture still heavily intertwined with medieval Christian ideology, the biblical heroine and Old Testament story have shown to develop a truly compelling – and malleable – symbolic potency within a politically-charged and tumultuous Humanistic climate, eventually embodying contemporary patriotic sentiments and the triumph of civic virtue over tyranny. The turn of the 16th century brought with it Judith's expansion to Venice and other areas of Northern Italy, whereby the idealized, decorative nature of Byzantine and Medieval depictions continued to dominate the portrayal of the narrative, and Judith's popularity is shown to increase in the form of contemporary Venetian woman's portraiture in the guise of the biblical figure. With the development of Mannerism and the Venetian School in the High Renaissance came the parallel development of Judith iconography which in turn introduced a new motif for the portrayal of the visual contrast between Judith and her maid by means of an exotic, darker-skinned version of Abra. Michelangelo was one of the first Renaissance artists to transport Judith to Rome, bringing forth an unconventional interpretation innovatively combined with medieval elements derivative of the Northern Italian tradition and ultimately demonstrating that the origins of Judith lie very much in the Northern regions of Italy.

Most notable in the entire development of the iconography of Judith and Holofernes throughout the scope of the Renaissance, however, is the absence of the portrayal of the actual act at

---

[67] Kristeller/Strong 1901, Pg. 468.
[68] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 77.
[69] Reid 1969, Pgs. 376-387.

the climax of the narrative: the decapitation of Holofernes by Judith (excluding the aforementioned and now-lost Francia fresco from 1500). While particular regions and periods may have demonstrated a tendency towards depicting a specific moment within the story – whether it be Judith preparing to strike, stowing the head in the bag of her maid, or the return to Bethulia – the decapitation, and the gore which would typically be associated with such an act, has been distinctively excluded from all of the above-mentioned Renaissance depictions, a fact which has brought this analysis to the core question: what factors may account for the transition of the iconography of Judith and Holofernes from the politically motivated and idealized adaptations of the Renaissance to radically realistic and, extensively, horrific composition of the Baroque? The remaining analysis will examine the primary figure, and painting, at the absolute threshold of this change: Caravaggio and his *Judith Beheading Holofernes* from the year 1599.

## 2. Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*

In the year 1599 at the age of about 28, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio produced his version of the most dramatic moment within the Old Testament Book of Judith: the beheading of Holofernes at the hands of Judith (Fig. 2.1). In what can be considered a strikingly realistic and extraordinarily graphic representation of the decapitation, Caravaggio's autonomous painting, located today in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome, marks the transition into the early Baroque era and a profound thematic and stylistic break with all of the decapitation scenes which came before it. Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* stands as the first extant depiction of the actual, physical beheading of Holofernes since Bible illustrations of the Medieval Age.[70]

Arranged in a frieze-like formation at the abrupt forefront of the horizontal picture plane, Caravaggio's slightly over-life-size protagonists act out the perilous deed before a dramatically shadowed, depthless background defined by a single red curtain which was likely based on Venetian models[71] – a modus which will become paradigmatic for the artist. Judith is shown carrying out her second and final strike with the sword almost completing its course through Holofernes' neck, stylized ribbons of blood spurting out onto the General's once pristine sheets. Holofernes' reaction to the realization of his impending fate has been described as a horrifying depiction of a man's sudden transition from life into death,[72] the positioning of his body, gaping mouth and tensed muscles suggesting both defiance and defeat as his eyes roll upwards to take in his final vision. Judith herself assumes a variety of characterizations within the literature surrounding this painting. Where Uppenkamp notes that Judith's facial expression, stance and the positioning of her muscular arms emphasize the physical exertion afforded by the task at hand [73] in what Howard Hibbard poignantly terms as a sort of "awkward determination"[74], Peter Robb sees a confident and resolved figure viciously sawing away at Holofernes' neck.[75] Where Jutta Held sees a depiction of a beautiful, sexualized murderess who, with her furrowed brow and unskilled hands, embodies a misogynistic projection of

---

[70] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 55.
[71] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 66.
[72] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 56.
[73] Ibid., Pg. 56.
[74] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 66.
[75] Robb 2011, Pg. 96.

female incompetence,[76] Mario Dal Bello interprets a confident biblical heroine who is morally justified as the fated instrument of God.[77] Equally ambiguous is the interpretation of Judith's accomplice. Abra is depicted as a stern, withered old woman in rigid profile reminiscent of a Roman Republican portrait bust which likely carried northern ancestors.[78] The maid's emotional involvement in the scene is likewise contested in the literature; Held states that the old woman is shown in high anticipation, eager to receive Holofernes' head,[79] whereas Uppenkamp gleans a figure which affects both captivation and aversion with a more subordinate presence in the overall composition.[80]

Caravaggio's use of light also assumes a variety of faces. An undefined light source emanating from the left of the picture plane provides spotlight-like illumination of the brutal scene in the foreground. Hibbard and Dal Bello interpret this unnaturalistic lighting as an embodiment of God's divine, affirming presence over Judith's actions.[81] Andreas Prater, however, assesses the artist's approach to light as something which transcends these conventional symbolic associations. The radicalization of chiaroscuro which Caravaggio pioneered may have also corresponded with the artist's own thematic transition towards a pathos of violence in his earliest religious works, particularly in that of *Judith*.[82] As Caravaggio's interest in the artistic possibilities of chiaroscuro increased, his experimentation with more dramatic light/dark contrasts may have influenced his conversion to a more brutal type of subject matter which would both stylistically and thematically better lend itself to this developing technique. Prater also writes that Caravaggio's chiaroscuro cannot solely be examined as a mere instrument of representation, but rather as an autonomous element in and of itself.[83] This is best demonstrated by the voided, neutral backgrounds in works such as *Judith*, where a configuration of non-representational lights and shadows provides no clear definition of a concrete, contextualizing object to the viewer[84] – such as a wall, a landscape, or in *Judith* 's case, a complete curtain in the backdrop.

---

[76] Held 1996, Pg. 69.
[77] Dal Bello 2010, Pg. 31.
[78] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 66-67.
[79] Held 1996, pg. 69.
[80] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 56.
[81] See Dal Bello 2010, Pg. 31 and Hibbard 1983, Pg. 58.
[82] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 57.
[83] Prater 1992, Pgs. 21-22.
[84] Ibid., Pgs. 21-22.

Scholarly interpretations of Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* are largely inconsistent and volatile, and ultimately arrive at no real consensus. What is certain are the elements of horror, drama, immediacy and uncertainty which intermingle within Caravaggio's complex and enigmatic depiction, thrust before us on a Baroque stage. A work which carries no direct predecessors throughout the 15th and 16th centuries before it, in both content and execution.[85] In order to better define the catalyst behind Caravaggio's historically unparalleled portrayal, this analysis will first go below the formal surface of the painting in an attempt to, on a biographical and personal level, reach an understanding of the artist himself.

## 2.1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Michelangelo Merisi was born September 29th, 1571 near to Milan to Fermo di Bernardino Merisi, a steward and possibly also architect to the young Francesco Sforsa, and Lucia Aratori, the daughter of a well-off local family.[86] A younger brother to Caravaggio by the name of Giovan Battista is also documented to have been born in Milan on the 21st of November, 1572. An additional brother, Giovan Pietro, as well as a sister, Caterina, are also mentioned in the literature, Caterina's birth year known to be 1574.[87] The family eventually moved to the town of Caravaggio in 1576, a farming community located east of Milan, in an attempt to escape the plague which had ravaged Milan. Caravaggio's father died in October 1577, leaving Lucia with four young children to care for. In 1584, Caravaggio's mother died, his brother Giovan Pietro following shortly thereafter in 1588.[88]

Caravaggio, still only known as Michelangelo Merisi, is documented to have begun his first apprenticeship on the 6th of April, 1584 under the Milanese painter Simone Peterzano, a former student of Titian.[89] Caravaggio also took up residence in Peterzano's house in Milan during this time.[90] Despite his Venetian training, Peterzano is said to have preferred the heavy, classical forms and realistic details of the Lombard school, which would later have an influence on his young apprentice. In the early years in Milan, Caravaggio would have also been

---

[85] For further details regarding the originality of Caravaggio's Judith in the larger iconographical history of the biblical subject, see Uppenkamp 2004, Bersani/Dutoit 1998 and Held 1996.
[86] Robb 2011, Pg. 17.
[87] Ibid., Pg. 17.
[88] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 1-2.
[89] Harris 2005, Pg. 21.
[90] Robb 2011, Pg. 22.

surrounded by the works of Venetian masters, as well as local masters in nearby Lodi and Cremona and Giorgionesque painters active in Lombardy.[91] Caravaggio's penchant for defiance may be evident in his earliest apprenticeship under Peterzano. Typically the master would have trained his student in the fundamental areas of painting, including the mixing of pigments, painting of frescoes, and the basic principles of drafting in preparation for a composition. Though the exact curriculum and results of Peterzano's teachings are not definite (no paintings or any other works from Caravaggio's Lombard years have been identified), it is certain that Caravaggio never painted a fresco or produced one attributable drawing throughout his entire career.[92] It would also be significant to note that the Milan which Caravaggio lived in during his formative years was one of instability and violence. During his apprenticeship, Milan was still being governed by Spain in the aftermath of the French Wars of Religion and was brimming with aggressive Spanish soldiery, religious zealotry, and unruly, impoverished residents.[93] This was in stark contradiction to Caravaggio's quiet, rural upbringing in the small province of Caravaggio. The artist in training would have not only learned to paint in Milan during his early years, but probably also how to wield his sword. The exact termination date for Caravaggio's apprenticeship is not known, but he did leave Peterzano in the year 1588.[94]

Much of the biographical information pertaining to Caravaggio's beginnings in Milan and Rome is indebted to the Roman scholar Giovan Pietro Bellori. Bellori famously scribbled onto a page of Giovanni Baglione's *Lives of the Painters* that Caravaggio had killed someone in Milan and was eventually forced to flee the city.[95] While the factuality of this claim cannot be confirmed, it is certain that Caravaggio arrived in Rome between late 1592 and early 1593, and never looked back.[96] With a moderate inheritance amounting to 393 Imperial pounds following the sale of the Merisi family's land and property in Caravaggio,[97] the 20-year-old artist began his venture of establishing himself within what was at that time the papal center of the Counter Reformation.

---

[91] Harris 2005, Pg. 21.
[92] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 4.
[93] Robb 2011, Pgs. 19-20, 24.
[94] Ibid., Pg. 27.
[95] Baglione 1642, Pg. 136 (Marginal notation by G. P. Bellori).
[96] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 6.
[97] Ibid., Pg. 5.

Works such as *Judith Beheading Holofernes* belong to Caravaggio's first documented paint-ings. The artist's activities between 1593-1599 can be partially compiled by cross-referencing the scholarship of Bellori's *Lives of the Artists* (1672), Giovanni Baglione's *Lives of the Painters* (1642), and the collector Giuolio Mancini's *Treatise on Painting* (1617-1621). According to Mancini, one of Caravaggio's earliest benefactors in Rome was Monsignor Pandolfo Pucci from Recanati, a steward who took the artist in and fed him only greens in exchange for the completion of demeaning work.[98] Baglione contends in his *Lives* that Caravaggio first worked under a Sicilian, which a later note from Bellori specifies as Lorenzo, at a time when Caravaggio was desolate and trading paintings of busts for little money.[99] All scholars paint a picture of an individual who, desperate for money during his first years in Rome, was forced to work under the sort of minor artists that sold their paintings and crafts on the open market – an interesting observation considering that the amount of money that Caravaggio supposedly brought with him from Milan following the sale of his family's estate could have at that time supported a moderate way of living for a few years.[100] During the late 1550's, Giovanni Battista Armenini, a painter and theoretician, recalled an encounter with " [...] young Milanese whom [he] found much more dedicated to adorning themselves with clothes and fine shining arms than to handling pens or brushes".[101] Bellori also wrote that Caravaggio " [...] tedi nel portamento è vestir io, vado egli drappi e velluti nobili, per adornarli \ ma quando poi fi era m^flb vn habito , mai lo tralafciaua, finche non gli cadeua in cenci."[102] – descriptions which could describe Caravaggio's own exorbitant character and reveal the cause for his early financial struggles in Rome. These characterizations may, however, not be entirely accurate. The Rome Caravaggio encountered in his early years was still reeling from a terrible famine and a long agricultural crisis which had spanned the 1580's.[103] As a result of the lacking grain supplies, there was a serious deficit in food and the price of bread had doubled by early 1593.[104] This might be a better explanation for why Caravaggio struggled and almost starved in his first years in the troubled city – and why Pucci (or *monsignor Salad,* as he was allegedly nicknamed[105]) could only pay the hungry young artist in greens.

---

[98] Mancini 1956, Pg. 224.
[99] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 8.
[100] Ibid., Pg. 5.
[101] Armenini 1997, Pg. 290.
[102] " [he] wore only the finest materials and princely velvets; but once he had put on a suit of clothes he changed only when it had fallen into rags": Bellori 1672, Pg. 214.
[103] Robb 2011, Pgs. 33-34.
[104] Ibid., Pg. 35.
[105] Mancini 1956, Pg. 224.

All of the scholars also corroborate Caravaggio's involvement in Giuseppi Cesari's studio during his early years in Rome. Baglione states that the young artist even took up residence in Cesari's home from approximately 1593-1594.[106] Cesari, who was at the time already a celebrated and highly patronized Mannerist artist and the favored painter of both Sixtus V and the current Pope Clement VIII, was an important early figure in Caravaggio's biography, but not in the traditional sense. Rome during the late 16th and early 17th century – despite its food shortages and many starving civilians – was also a religious, political, and artistic hub of vigorous activity. The Pope was considered both the head of the Catholic Church and a worldly prince, and was campaigning for a great spiritual revival in response to the rivaling influences of the Protestant Church during the Catholic Reformation.[107] This resulted in a profusion of new and elaborate churches and palazzos throughout Italy to support the Catholic Church's divine mission for dominance, structures which also demanded sacred public art. Following the Council of Trent, held between 1545-1563, an explicit and unprecedented doctrine for religious images was also famously set forth by the Church, decreeing that such religious images were to have a great impact on the development of Catholic art and serve solely didactic purposes.[108]

Within this politically and religiously regimented environment with a newfound demand for sacred imagery, artists such as Cesari were able to flourish and profit greatly. While Caravaggio was active in the artist's studio, Cesari was completing numerous fresco commissions, including the vault of the Contarelli Chapel, murals within Cappella Oligiati in Santa Prassede, as well as the vault of the Sacristy in the Certosa di San Martino.[109] It can only be speculated as to whether Caravaggio assisted in the painting of the Contarelli Chapel interior and there are unfortunately no surviving preparatory drafts from Cesari's studio which can be attributed to the budding artist.[110] What is beyond speculation is that Caravaggio was surrounded by large-scale, grandiose fresco decorations in his earliest stages in Rome, frescos which were molded with the High Renaissance sophistication and clarity their high-standing Catholic patrons had implored. There are, however, no substantial artistic influences from Cesari which can be found in Caravaggio's first paintings; the graceful figures recalling Raphael and Michelangelo, sophisticated compositions, and dream-like mythological scenes of the Renaissance seem to have carried little resonance with his young student. In this sense, the High-Renaissance and

---

[106] Baglione 1642, Pg. 136.
[107] Trevor-Roper 1969, Pgs. 41-42.
[108] Cross/Livingstone 2005.
[109] Röttgen 1964, Pgs. 201-227.
[110] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 10.

High-Mannerist styles of Cesari and his contemporaries serve an important function in the development of Caravaggio in that they represent a stylistic antithesis to Caravaggio's aesthetic, even in its earliest stages. From a technical aspect, however, Cesari probably carried a greater influence on his young student. As soon as Cesari became aware of Caravaggio's prodigious skill in realistic still-life, he may have set the young artist on his assembly line, detailing the flowers and fruits within Cesari's grandiose frescoes.[111] If this is true, the young student would have been able to truly hone the technique of direct painting without the guidance of preparatory sketches. Caravaggio's time doing the drudge work within Cesari's studio would have had a profound impact on his approach to painting throughout the rest of his career. Although there are no surviving preliminary drawings for any of Caravaggio's compositions, there is strong evidence that he rather applied scoring lines and incisions with in brush into the wet primer to fix his compositions before he began filling them in, almost like working in fresco.[112] Caravaggio would have undeniably derived this practice from the industrial methods of Cesari's studio and developed them even further to searve his own artistic means. Although the young artist may have been able to successfully distance himself artistically from the regulated and idealized canvases of his first official teacher in Rome, a degree of Cesari's studio will always be present in his paintings.

In January 1594, following his stay with Cesari, the then 22-year-old Caravaggio is assumed to have went out on his own, possibly living in Palazzo Petrignani.[113] Probably the young artist was fed up with doing Cesari's dirty detail work and never getting to touch a human form with his brush. Caravaggio's elder painter friend, Prospero Orsi, may have been the one who helped the artist find a room in monsignor Petrignani's palace.[114] Mario Minniti, a Sicilian boy born in Syracuse in 1577, had met Caravaggio in Cesari's studio and also moved with him into the Palazzo.[115] Around this time, Caravaggio began producing a stream of small-scale secular oil paintings. One of the artist's earliest attributable works in Rome is *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* (1593) (Fig. 2.2), a painting of Mario Minniti which Baglione claims to have been produced for Cesari.[116] In *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, we can observe a number of elements which will become characteristic for Caravaggio's early body of work. Firstly, the painting represents the artist's initial preference for combining portraiture with luxuriantly detailed, naturalistic still

---

[111] Robb 2001, Pgs. 37-38.
[112] Ibid., Pgs. 108-109.
[113] Ibid., Pg. 16.
[114] Ibid., Pg. 45.
[115] Ibid., Pg. 45.
[116] Baglione 1642, Pg. 136.

life (likely a remnant of the 16th century trend for still life and genre in Lombardy – a form of painting which was not particularly fashionable in Rome at the time).[117] Secondly, we see Caravaggio's early dependency on the use of a direct model, and particularly that of Minniti, who was the favored muse in a number of the artist's early paintings of effeminate male youths. Caravaggio was (in)famously dependent on his models, particularly before the year 1606, a fact which the Flemish-born artist and theoretician Carl Van Mander commented on in 1604: " […] he will not make a single brushstroke without the close study of life, which he copies and paints".[118] And thirdly, we have before us a strikingly immediate and powerfully intimate composition with a level of realism which was unparalleled by the art of Caravaggio's Mannerist contemporaries.

Secular compositions such as *Self-Portrait as Bacchus* from approximately 1594 (Fig. 2.3) follow shortly behind *Boy with the Basket of Fruit*, where we again see this combination of portraiture and still-life with protagonists treated so intimately that they are almost solicitous, this particular Bacchus modeled after the artist himself.[119] It has been noted by scholars that many such smaller paintings were likely exhibited by Caravaggio in public exhibitions and painted to sell.[120] Despite how unconventional the artist's execution may have been, these early works followed to an extent the contemporary fashion for pagan subject matter with deeper allegorical or symbolic connotations – whether the artist actually intended an allegorical interpretation remains another aspect. Cesari, in fact, is recorded by Baglione to have owned Caravaggio's *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* and *Self-Portrait as Bacchus* in 1607,[121] suggesting that there may have been a market for such profane pieces early in the artist's career.

As Caravaggio's notoriety was slowly on the rise, he continued to produce secular oils, now almost twice the size and involving a more complex arrangement of multiple figures. The artist's *Cardsharps* (Fig. 2.4) and *Gypsy Fortuneteller* (Fig. 2.5) are both dated approximately between 1594-1595. The paintings show Caravaggio's advancement from the half-length studies of boys discussed previously, his figures now engaged in genre-like situations derivative of the Northern genre art tradition. Caravaggio, however, interprets this tradition different-

---

[117] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 17.
[118] Van Mander/Waterschoot 1983, Pg. 191.
[119] Robb 2011, Pgs. 44-45.
[120] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 8-9.
[121] Baglione 1642, Pg. 136.

ly. The artist's protagonists may be modeled on people taken straight off of the street,[122] but the prototypical dark, voided backdrop present in both paintings allows for no actual contextualizing indication of a setting which would categorize the works as true genre. It seems that Caravaggio characteristically appropriated the elements of the Northern tradition he desired and isolated them within composition which was still very much his own independent creation. There exist, in fact, no direct models for Caravaggio's pseudo-genre paintings; no artist before him had treated a gypsy fortuneteller as an exclusive subject, or created such a large-scale, focused depiction of the act of cheating as in *Cardsharps*.[123]

Caravaggio's novel approach to traditional subject matter seemed to not completely dissuade the Roman public. The young artist's unconventional aesthetic began to captivate his early audience, and after the success of *Fortuneteller* and *Cardsharps*, his patronage quickly increased.[124] Caravaggio's most instrumental early patron was Cardinal Francesco Maria Bourbon Del Monte, a Venetian of noble birth who was described as a sophisticated yet eccentric diplomat with a love for music and broad interest in art.[125] Del Monte owned an extensive collection of art, and is reported by Bellori to have first purchased Caravaggio's *Cardsharps*.[126] Del Monte became a great proprietor of the artist, and in 1595 awarded him with a room within Palazzo Madama and an allowance.[127] Mario Minniti moved in too.[128] In the same year, Caravaggio painted his *Concert of Youths* (Fig. 2.6) specifically for the Cardinal, with Minniti posing as the central figure.[129] In this large-scale painting, we see the artist crowding four androgynous male figures at the abrupt forefront of the picture plane in a composition not unlike traditional musical party themes in Venetian and Northern Italian art. Caravaggio may be attempting a poetically allegorical scene reminiscent of antiquity to rival his Renaissance predecessors (and naturally align with the musical affinities of his commissioner), but the overt, soliciting, gaze of his subjects acts to impede a purely allegorical reading of the painting. Caravaggio's figures are captivatingly immediate and his own self-reference difficult to oversee in the face of the horn player. Even in his earliest commissioned works, it seems that Caravaggio is irrevocably entangled within his own compositions, creating a tension

---

[122] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 26-27.
[123] Ibid., Pgs. 23-31.
[124] Robb 2011, Pgs. 49-53.
[125] Spezzaferro 1971, Pgs. 57-92.
[126] Bellori 1672, Pgs. 203-204.
[127] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 30-31.
[128] Robb 2011, Pg. 54.
[129] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 31.

between traditional subject matter and the artist's own contemporary perspective that proves both discordant and intriguing.

Under the patronage of Del Monte, Caravaggio became increasingly accomplished in Rome. He eventually obtained the attention of Ottavio Costa, a Genoese banker and art patron, who may have given him his first commission for *The Ecstasy of St. Francis* in 1595 (Fig. 2.7), Caravaggio's first night painting, full length figure, angel, and one of his first religious subjects.[130] Other sources claim that the original *Ecstasy* was rather commissioned through, and never left the collection of, Del Monte.[131] There may have also been multiple versions of the painting and Costa likely held ownership of one of these in his private collection at the time of his death.[132] In Caravaggio's *Ecstasy*, we again see the figures arranged at the immediate foreground of the horizontally formatted composition, surrounded by sparse foliage with a darkened, minimal background vaguely suggesting a receding landscape. A brilliant, shimmering light penetrates the darkened scene to accent the abstract body of water in the background and illuminate Francis and the angel in what Hibbard interprets as a symbolic representation of the heavenly light of God.[133] A model for Caravaggio's first official religious commission can be found in a *Vision of Francis* painted by Cesari in 1593 (Fig. 2.8), which the young student likely saw.[134] Cesari introduced a new iconography of Francis reclining or sitting while he experienced a private, internalized vision. Caravaggio could have also derived this reposed Francis from the progressive art he would have found in Rome at the time, where the invention of a dead Christ being mourned and supported by angels was newly introduced.[135] Caravaggio, however, again extracts the models of his liking and creates his own innovative response to what was a traditional religious subject matter. Instead of presenting the stigmatization of Francis with the markings clearly exposed and a seraphic vision overhead, we see the artist focusing directly on Francis' very physical experience of a spiritual transformation, manifested in his surrendered body and unconscious face. Such an intensely physical and personal response to the subject of St. Francis has no real precedent in the art of Caravaggio's predecessors, or even in the artist's own oeuvre of religious imagery.

---

[130] See Robb 2011, Pg. 77 and Spezzaferro 1974, Pgs. 579-591.
[131] Robb 2011, Pg. 77.
[132] Gilbert 1995, Pg. 107.
[133] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 58.
[134] Ibid., Pg. 58.
[135] Ibid., Pg. 58.

Within the next three years, Caravaggio continued to receive important and ever-larger commissions, including a monumental portrait of *St. Catherine of Alexandria* around 1598 for Del Monte.[136] His notoriety also grew, and the dramatic effects of his radical realism and extreme chiaroscuro were gaining him attention. Around the year 1598, Caravaggio also began to darken his compositions even further, taking up themes of violence and brutality in place of the relatively harmless secular and religious scenes he depicted earlier. One of the first of these was likely our painting in question: *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, dated 1599 (Fig. 2.1). The painting was commissioned by Ottavio Costa for his private collection three years after Caravaggio painted *Ecstasy of St. Francis*.[137] In Costa's last will and testament from 1632, he forbid his heirs to alienate his paintings by Guido Reni and "all the paintings by Caravaggio, especially the Judith", [138] suggesting that the collector was rather attached to the *Judith* (or was aware of the painting's potential increase in value and importance in years to come). The novelty and radicality of Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* may be best contextual-ized when briefly compared with contemporary Judith depictions.

Chronologically, the most immediate High Renaissance/Early Baroque predecessor to Cara-vaggio's *Judith* was a painting by Fede Galizia, a relatively established painter in her own time who also hailed from Milan. Galizia produced her first version of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* in 1596, a privately-commissioned piece located today in the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida (Fig. 2.9).[139] Within her lifetime, Galizia was celebrated for her virtuous dedication to the imitation of still-life and naturalistic details,[140] a talent which is readily apparent in her ornately and meticulously detailed depiction of Judith. We see in Galizia's *Judith* a highly controlled, even restrained High Renaissance composition which clearly conformed to the regimented artistic doctrines of the Counter Reformation. This Judith is a composed, idealized beauty (and likely a self-portrait of the artist), grasping the hair of the shadowed and undefined head of Holofernes with the old maid gesturing enigmatically in the background. The only real similarities to Caravaggio's version can be seen in the darkened backdrop with the swoop of a red curtain, lavish textures, the intimate arrangement of the

---

[136] Held 1996, Pg. 57.

[137] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 57.

[138] Gilbert claims that Costa owned five Caravaggios, three of which were certainly *Supper at Emmaus*, *Mary and Martha*, and *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. There is also strong evidence suggesting that *The Ecstasy of St. Francis* and *John the Baptist* are the final two. For more details, see Gilbert 1995, Pgs. 106-107.

[139] In addition to the Florida version, Galizia also produced an almost identical painting in 1601, located today in the Galleria Borghese in Rome. A third version, which is likely a studio replication, is located in a private collection in Northern Italy.

[140] Caroli 1989.

figures, and the inclusion of an old woman as the maid, all indicative of the Northern artists' common Venetian influences. In a comparison, the two works are almost completely irreconcilable – it's difficult to accept that these are renderings from two artists of the same theme, working as contemporaries within the same general region, era, and societal context. Galizia's *Judith* stands as a blaring testament to the true innovation and brutality of Caravaggio's painting.

As Galizia primarily lived and practiced in Milan her entire life, versions of Judith in the more progressive region of Rome might theoretically show more resemblance to Caravaggio's Roman creation. This is, however, not the case. Agostino Carracci, who came to Rome in 1598 to assist his brother Annibale in the decorations of Palazzo Farnese, produced his *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* between 1599-1602 (Fig. 2.10), shortly before his death.[141] Caravaggio's own teacher, Cesari, also painted a *Judith*, dated between 1602-1603 (Fig. 2.11).[142] Both paintings illustrate artists who, at the brink of the Baroque era, are still stylistically and thematically confined by the idealized Northern portrait tradition (in Carracci's case), or alternatively, the moralizing image of a heroic Christian victor in alignment with the Counter-reformative model (in Cesari's case). Caravaggio, indisputably, refused – or was incapable of functioning within – the same ideological and artistic circles of his contemporaries.

Shortly after Caravaggio completed work on *Judith and Holofernes*, he received his first public commission for the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* and the *Calling of Saint Matthew* in the Contarelli Chapel, after which point he truly erupted on the Roman art scene, becoming a successful and celebrated painter and international figure who was never short of commissions or patrons. In Caravaggio's contract from September 1600 for his next major public commission, two paintings within the Cerasi chapel, he was already being referred to as *egregious in Urbe pictor*, or the "renowned master of the city".[143] But beyond his undeniable talent, Caravaggio's own reputation eventually consumed him. The artist boasted an extensive rap sheet from the time he was in Rome, including vandalization, multiple jail visits for street brawls (Caravaggio apparently also regularly carried a sword on him in clear sight without a license)[144], and eventually a fight over 10 scudi on May 28th, 1606 which resulted in the death

---

[141] Thieme/Becker 1912, Pg. 53.
[142] Held 1996, Pg. 70.
[143] Franklin/Schütze 2011, Pg. 30.
[144] Bellori, 1672, Pg. 208.

of his opponent, Ranuccio Tomasoni from Terni.[145] After the Pope issued a death warrant for Caravaggio, he fled to Naples, where he received protection from the Colonna family, leading to a series of major church commissions.[146] Following stays in Malta and Sicily for more important patronages, he returned back to Naples after being followed and allegedly disfigured in the face by more enemies he seemed to have collected.[147] In the summer of 1610, Caravaggio set off in a boat from Naples back to Rome, where the then-Cardinal Scipione Borghese had granted him pardon.[148] The circumstances of his untimely death before reaching Rome still remain uncertain. Scholars argue that he may have succumbed to a fever during his trip, others attribute it to lead poisoning, and still others claim it was murder at the hands of one of his many foes.[149] In any case, the notorious artist's unscrupulous lifestyle eventually caught up with him, and he was dead by the age of 38.

After visiting the biography of Michelangelo di Merisi, it can be concluded that the artist lived his life in the way that he created his art: brazenly, unconventionally, and ultimately danger-ously. Caravaggio is an early Baroque figure who simply rejected traditional models. Fortunate to live in a time where there was to a degree a precedent set forth in Rome which allowed for the experimentation of new artists, the artist's boldly realistic and dramatic aesthetic was eventually able to flourish, garnering him prominent commissions and celebrity. But on a more idiosyncratic level, Caravaggio's paintings, regardless of subject or patron, were also compul-sively personal, riddled with innovation and uncertainty, direct and indirect self-references, and – most significant in the context of this analysis – elements of violence and gore at the verge of the Baroque era. From what we can glean from the individual and artist through his patchy biography and early paintings, it is clear that *Judith Beheading Holofernes* must first be approached on a very individual level to be properly contextualized.  The remaining chapter will attempt an understanding of *Judith* on the intimate level of the artist's own religiosity as reflected by his religious imagery, his treatment of the female figure, as well as his unusual and paradoxical approach to the concept of realism in art.

---

[145] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 206.
[146] Puglisi 1998, Pg. 258.
[147] Baglione 1642, Pg. 138.
[148] Puglisi 1998, Pg. 258.
[149] Tom Kington, The Mystery of Caravaggio's Death Solved At Last – Painting Killed Him, http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jun/16/caravaggio-italy-remains-ravenna-art (accessed 22.06.2014).

## *2.2. The Religious Image*

Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* represents one of the artist's first paintings of a religious subject matter. When approached according to the sheer classification of *Judith* being the depiction of an Old Testament theme, one must first question the overall function of the religious narrative at the turn of the 17th century in Rome. Caravaggio was operating and producing within the societal, theological and political context of the Catholic Counter Reformation. Whether any of the artist's religious commissions can be considered to be truly conformant with the Counter-reformative ideology is another question in and of itself. In the case of *Judith*, the painting should have followed in the precepts set forth by the Council of Trent, which demanded clarity and intelligibility within the sacred image over ambiguity and ingenuity.[150] Furthermore, the contemporary, church-fearing viewer should have been able to extract from Caravaggio's painting Judith's explicit new typological association: a moral, heroic Christian victor, overcoming the adversity of corrupt, tyrannical powers – prefiguring the inevitable victory of the "true Church" over the ever-spreading threat of Protestantism.[151] In Caravaggio's time, the readability and moralizing character of a religious image was the absolute imperative, and Judith was a typological favorite of the papal powers. And yet, his *Judith*– against the conventional works of his contemporaries– raises more questions and obscurities than it provides answers.

The patron naturally played an instrumental role in dictating the final product of such religious paintings, and yet the conditions that surrounded the patronage of *Judith* remain somewhat vague. It is recorded that *Judith* was a privately commissioned work intended solely for display in Ottavio Costa's private collection.[152] This also suggests that the painting would have had limited exposure during the 17th century, which would in turn lead to limited documentation of the contemporary public's response to the brazen scene. It can also only be speculated as to how much influence Costa had on the execution of the composition itself; no actual contract survives for the painting and its title is only shortly referenced in a handful of documents related to the patron and the artist.[153] Taking into consideration that Costa commissioned the work at a time when Caravaggio's notoriety was on the rise and that he was at one point in ownership of various other religious subjects by the artist, *Martha and Mary Magdalene* and a

---

[150] Pericolo 2011, Pg. 208.
[151] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 54.
[152] Robb 2011, Pg. 106.
[153] See Robb 2011, pg. 106 and Gilbert 1995, Pg. 108.

version of *St. Francis in Ecstasy* included,[154] it can be assumed that Costa was a patron with religious sensibilities who was both cognizant of Caravaggio's artistic ingenuity and open to his avant-garde experimentations with a more gruesome mode of representation. Caravaggio's highly emotional and unconventional approach to religious imagery clearly appealed to the collector's aesthetic, creating the right conditions under which a work such as *Judith* could be produced. But the extent to which *Judith* is also a product of Costa's own morbid proclivities will remain forever uncertain.

Numerous scholars have noted the "awkwardness" in Judith's stance as she carries out the beheading of Holofernes. The physicality of the figures, and even more the peculiarity and inconsistency of their positioning, is often the most immediate effect of Caravaggio's composi-tions. Even in the context of religious imagery, we would probably not view *Judith* and immediately recognize a categorical religious event with an intelligible narrative, setting, protagonists, and attributes. We see, first and foremost, three people arranged before a shadowed backdrop, carrying out a bloody decapitation. This is not to say that the early 17th century audience, or even well-versed individuals of today, would not be able to quickly allocate the scene and its players to the Old Testament story, but the physicality of Caravag-gio's composition is – and was – overpowering. One must simply refer to the greatest point of critique the artist received during his early career to deduce the element which occupied his contemporaries the most: his unyielding insistence on painting directly from life. As Carl Van Mander commented in 1604:

> "His belief is that all art is nothing but a bagatelle or children's work [...] unless it is done after life [...] he will not make a single brushstroke without the close study of life, which he copies and paints".[155]

Bellori, in his *Lives of the Artists*, criticized that Caravaggio:

> " [...] recognized no other master than the model, without selecting from the best forms of nature [...] when he was shown the most famous statues of Phidias and Glykon in or-der that he might use them as models, his only answer was to point toward a crowd of people, saying nature had given him an abundance of masters".[156]

---

[154] Spezzaferro 1947, Pgs. 579-591.
[155] Van Mander/Waterschoot 1983, Pg. 191.
[156] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 46-47.

In fact, much of recent scholarship has concluded that Caravaggio's *Judith* was produced by staging studio models within a darkened room beneath an overhead light source,[157] a notion which seems rather obvious once one is made aware of it. The theatricality and physicality of the whole scene reveals itself even further. We see the posed muscularity of Judith's forearms, perplexity in her face and ampleness of her breasts with new clarity. We see the contortion and tension in the body of Holofernes, the forced gaping of his mouth. We see contemporary-looking models holding uncomfortable stationary poses for long hours and a harsh light from overhead. We see the artist's process. What we don't see is a devotional image of the Counter Reformation. Caravaggio approached this Old Testament scene exactly as he did the profane Bacchean Self-Portraits, androgynous boy groupings, and even his vivid still-lifes before it: by dedicating himself to the realistic imitation of the object or model and their natural qualities, not to the actual theological or allegorical significance underlying the theme itself. Vincenzo Giustiani, one of Caravaggio's collectors and friends, once profoundly commented: "Caravaggio said once that it use to take as much workmanship for him to do a good picture of flowers as it did to do one of human figures".[158] Caravaggio simply didn't discriminate, regardless of the subject matter or its greater connotations. In this sense, *Judith* technically fails as in its function as a sacred image of the Counter Reformation. The artist's intimate attachment to the physicality of his models subsequently obscures both the legibility of the scene and the religious significance of the greater narrative it claims to portray. Which begs the further question: is *Judith* simply an example of an early work in which the young artist is still dedicated to the virtuoso imitation of reality, or is the lack of thematic transparency in the painting somehow inversely indicative of Caravaggio's own spiritual affinities? An examination into some of Caravaggio's other religious images may provide more insight.

Around the year 1594, Caravaggio began painting his first religious scenes. Although dates and patronage for each work remain indefinite, the *Repentant Magdalene* (Fig. 2.12) belongs to Caravaggio's earliest surviving religious depictions. This important piece provides an early model for the artist's handling of religious subject matter. The subject of *Magdalene* is, as is typical of the artist, treated along very unconventional terms. Upon first glance, the work appears to be a genre-like painting of a seated female model – a concept which was revolutionary at the time for this specific theme.[159] This Magdalene is, as the later Judith, based upon a

---

[157] Fried 2010, Pg. 154.
[158] Robb 2011, Pgs. 38, 104.
[159] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 50.

model taken rather literally off the streets. Many scholars have hypothesized that the prostitute Anna Bianchini, who was reported on multiple occasions to be in Caravaggio's studio, stood as the model for this painting and three other religious scenes which were to follow.[160] The composition may have began for Caravaggio as a simple study of a female figure which the artist skillfully converted to a more acceptable religious scene, as originally theorized by Bellori.[161] The Magdalene is depicted in contemporary clothes and an area of her skirt has been painted over to provide room for the small still life, further reinforcing Bellori's assumption that the picture began as genre.[162] Overall, this a strikingly intimate image of the Magdalene, presented as the singular focus before a minimal backdrop where the emotional power of her internal conversion, manifested solely in the dip of her head and a single tear running down her cheek, is overwhelmingly present (not unlike the internalized emotionality of *St. Francis*). Caravaggio would go on to paint other converted Magdalenes, indicating a personal interest in the religious subject of conversion in general.

The repentant Magdalene was also a popular pictorial subject of the Counter Reformation, traditionally represented as a symbol of humility, unchastity and supreme penance to appeal to those who may have gone astray from the Catholic Church in favor of Protestantism.[163] Held, however, theorizes that Caravaggio is rather attempting to emphasize the sin of vanity in place of unchastity in his unconventional Magdalene.[164] Robb agrees, and expound that the vanitas theme is demonstrated by the subtle (and later) inclusion of jewelry, a carafe, and other worldly charms which are being overtly rebuked by the figure in favor of her spiritual repentance – awarding Caravaggio's seemingly trivial still-life with a decisively more symbolic component. There are numerous theories surrounding this enigmatic early painting and Caravaggio's true intentions behind it, theories which go far beyond Bellori's initial characterization in the 17th century. Was the artist's depiction intended as an open criticism on the vanity and indulgences of the Catholic Church, an attempt to polemize against the conformity of the inner artistic circles who assimilated their Magdalenes in order to gain the Church's favor? Or might the broken pearls and container of oil act as subtle hints of violence, reflecting the mistreatment of courtesans by Roman police (even inspired by a public beating of Bianchini recorded around

---

[160] See Varriano 2006, Pg. 94 and Robb 2000, Pg. 80.
[161] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 50-51.
[162] Ibid., Pgs. 50-51.
[163] Held 1996, Pgs. 50-51.
[164] Ibid., Pgs. 50-51.

the same time), serving a larger political dimension?[165] Considering what we know of Cara-vaggio's unorthodox tendencies, it is all possible, although Caravaggio was not exactly known for his political activities in his early years in Rome – his efforts seemed to be more reserved for his own personal acts of rebellion. Robb made the telling observation that, in the time in which Caravaggio was utilizing Roman courtesans such as Bianchini as female models for his paintings, it was not uncommon for such prostitutes to be whipped and paraded through the city on a donkey's back in order to reinforce the severe moral rule under Clement VIII.[166] Bianchini herself, Robb notes, had an extensive criminal history in Rome and penchant for violence.[167] Given this information, it is also conceivable that Caravaggio may have been more politically motivated in this painting than his many reckless criminal indiscretions let on. It is also just as possible that the painting can be simply regarded as feigned religious imagery, as Bellori had originally theorized. Or maybe it was a haphazard combination of all of the above, eventually developing from genre into a cryptic political manifesto? A concrete conclusion cannot be reached here, but the *Repentant Magdalene* does introduce an intriguing, albeit ambiguous, early look into what could have been the artist's own religious – and political – ideology in these early stages.

Around the time Caravaggio completed *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, he also received his first official public commission for the monumental *Calling of St. Matthew* (Fig. 2.13) (alongside the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*) within the Contarelli Chapel. These paintings represent Caravaggio's navigation with newfound compositional and thematic challenges, where, for the first time, the artist is obligated to produce an assimilated, didactic religious image suitable for the interior of a church and its public. As a result of these conditions, Caravaggio's Contarelli paintings are somewhat less ambiguous than his *Magdalene* and *Judith*, and may possibly reveal a new component of the artist's religious mental state during this period. The renderings expose on a compositional level Caravaggio's early struggles with the realistic spatiality, perspective and complex arrangements already mastered on a large-scale by the artist's Renaissance counterparts, these deficiencies partly masked by a forced chiaroscuro also prevalent in *Judith*. Caravaggio also failed to coordinate the daylight emanating from the lunette in the chapel with the right-falling light source in his *Calling*.[168] More significant is the possible symbolism behind the artist's use of autonomous light within the scene. This light,

---

[165] Robb 2000, Pgs. 80-84.
[166] Robb 2011, Pgs. 83-84.
[167] Ibid., Pgs. 83-84.
[168] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 97.

illuminating the subject of Christ's calling (historically agreed to be the old, bearded man, although recent debate suggests the younger man with the stooped head[169]), has been interpreted by some scholars to function as an embodiment of the conversional powers of God's divine presence. As demonstrated by earlier works such as *St. Francis* or even the *Magdalene*, Caravaggio could have employed the element of light as the primary mystical agent of conversion within his religious imagery. The *Calling* also demonstrates the artist's continued preoccupation with the concept of spiritual conversion and salvation. The scene shows the moment in which Christ suddenly appears before Matthew and calls upon him to become one of his spiritual followers. Hibbard significantly notes that, at the time of the creation of this painting, the Jesuit Luis de Molina was famously attempting to reconcile the Augustinian (and Protestant) doctrines of predestination and efficacious grace with the Renaissance conception of human's free will.[170] Caravaggio, an individual who was openly confrontational, violent, and may have committed one of the greatest sins of taking another's life shortly before coming to Rome, could be expressing (or reinforcing to himself) his own anti-Molinist position in this piece. In the *Calling*, everything about God's visitation – the arrangement of the figures, the setting and their reactions – appear haphazard, circumstantial, even mundane. Within Caravaggio's setting, an individual's free will and the choices they make carry little consequence in God's larger plan for salvation. Any and every person, whether a common prostitute or an unsuspecting tax collector, is subject to the undiscriminating forgiveness and salvation through conversion which God offers. Although such commissions are naturally informed and influenced by their patronage, a survey of Caravaggio's body of religious imagery reflects an overwhelming majority of conversion themes, suggesting that this apparent preoccupation may at a deeper level indicate the artists own personal struggle with his faith and the concept of eternal salvation, for believers and sinners alike.

Coming back to our *Judith*, can we find here any similar echoes of Caravaggio's possible "anti-Molinist" position? We are dealing, of course, with the subject matter of a beheading (albeit a God-forsaken one), not the moralizing conversion of a once impious individual. We return again to the question of what can actually be recognized as "religious" in Caravaggio's painting. The power of God's divine, emanating light does not carry the sort of mystical, affirming effect in *Judith* as it appears to have in the *Calling*; it beams rather as a harsh spotlight over an almost medical dissection of figures, poses, and anatomy underneath it. This

---

[169] Varriano 2006, Pg. 111.
[170] Ibid., Pgs. 101-102.

is not a haphazard depiction reinforcing God's efficacious grace over the fated destiny of Judith and Holofernes; it is a cold, bare and calculated study. Unlike the *Magdalene*, it is also no longer an intimate, genre-like scene conveying the powerful emotions of an internalized spiritual conversion. Against its religious contemporaries, it can be concluded that there is hardly anything remotely mystical or God-like in our *Judith*.

And yet, in the context of religious imagery within Caravaggio's oevre, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* stands as an important prefigurative piece. In *Judith*, we see Caravaggio's detachment – "severing" as Fried most modernly terms it [171] – from his religious subjects. Yet, through this severing, Caravaggio inadvertently (or perhaps advertently?) implicates himself as the creator, as the realizer of his canvas. We arrive again at the humanity of Caravaggio's models and the paradox in his art which Van Mander and Bellori only hinted at centuries before. While severed from his subjects' religious identities, Caravaggio's hand is manifested in every aspect of their physical identities, to the extent that Fried see the artist himself in the figure of Judith; her reluctant hand and perplexed face a mimic of Caravaggio's own before the canvas, with his brush working as her sword.[172] When examined on the basis of a religious image, we discover in *Judith* the earliest, if not most prominent, foreshadow to the paradoxical detachment/attachment between Caravaggio and his subject matter which will dominate his religious imagery in the years to follow. Although the painting may not bring us any closer to a more intimate understanding the artist's own theology, his innate aversion to religious subject matter proves just as revealing.

### 2.3. Caravaggio's Female Type

This element of aversion present in Caravaggio's religious themes is even moreso apparent in his rendering of the female figure. The novelty of Caravaggio during his time is truly multifaceted. The early Baroque artist depicted only a handful of women throughout his entire career, and these women were almost always fully clothed – a practice truly unprecedented in comparison with his contemporaries. Consequently, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* becomes even more intriguing. The narrative of *Judith* necessitates a female biblical figure as the primary protagonist of the picture. This painting must have served as a true challenge for

---

[171] Fried 2010, Pg. 155.
[172] Ibid., Pgs. 207-208.

Caravaggio, not only in the sense of composition and religious subject matter, but also considering that the artist was compelled by the narrative (and of course also his patron) to place a woman at the center of his canvas – something which was exceedingly rare for him. And to make the undertaking even more challenging, this female protagonist is accompanied by an extensive, intricate, and ultimately conflicting iconographical history, as this analysis has already visited within the first chapter. So how does Caravaggio interpret the "female type" of Judith? And what does this interpretation reveal further about the artist himself in our continued attempt to understand *Judith* and the conditions which lead to its creation?

To begin with, Caravaggio's pictorial "aversion" to the female figure can be defined by the sheer scarcity of women present within his overall body of work. Out of approximately 110 identifiable paintings from the artist (some of which have been destroyed or have disputable attribution), only approximately one fourth of these compositions actually include at least one female figure, and in many the woman is playing a relatively periphery roll. Even more telling is the lack of female nudity, to an extent which was truly anomalous in Caravaggio's time.[173] There exists one sole exception in the artist's late Neapolitan altarpiece titled *Seven Works of Mercy* from 1606 (Fig. 2.14), where a young woman exposes her left breast to feed an old man in a classical allusion to the story of *Roman Charity* in which Pero breastfeeds her incarcerated father Cimon, after which he is freed as a reward for her selflessness.[174] Yet Caravaggio's inclusion of nudity seems, in this case, to be a result of pure necessity, depicted in a subtle and shadowed matter as one of many focal points within a larger, more complex scene intended for a church interior. This deficit in female nudity, combined with Caravaggio's glaring preference for beautifully androgynous figures based on male models, has naturally instigated a great contention within his scholarship over whether the artist may or may not have been homosexual. Caravaggio lived under the same roof as Mario Minniti for years, a model who the artist clearly coveted in his earliest paintings.[175] But whether this love was ever reciprocated from Minniti's side, or even consummated, remains unknown.[176] Caravaggio's sexuality and personal relationships with men and women alike may have had a profound effect on his approach to and execution of *Judith*, but any theories drawn from such dubious aspects of his character also remain profoundly speculative. Taking this into consideration, this analysis will attempt to avoid drawing any concrete conclusions or theories on the basis of Caravaggio's

---

[173] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 219.
[174] Ibid., Pg. 219.
[175] Robb 2011, Pgs. 45-46.
[176] Ibid., Pg. 46.

contended sexuality. Rather, it will strive to better understand Caravaggio's approach to the depiction of the female form based on the vestiges of the artist which can be examined: the female archetypes still present and living within his paintings.

It is readily apparent that Caravaggio's female subject does not comply with the spectrum of traditional prototypes of Judith which have been propagated throughout the Renaissance. This Judith is not a triumphant, patriotic image of the biblical heroine, echoing the victorious figures of Northern Italy (allá Ghirlandaio or Donatello). She is also not a sensual, Giorgionesque statue, and certainly not an idealized Venetian portrait. To contemporize the comparison more, a quick look at Cesari's *Judith* (Fig. 2.8), produced only a few years after Caravaggio's, only further reinforces that we do not have a vigilant champion of the Catholic Counter Reformation in our painting. Do we, on the other hand, see traces of the Proto-Maria typology in Caravaggio's heroine which prevailed during the Medieval Age and well into the Renaissance? In comparison with the works of Ghiberti as well as Michelangelo, one can also conclude that the traditional Mariological associations and dependency between Judith and the Virgin are no longer present, or even relevant, here. Following the assertion that Caravaggio might have lacked a level of spiritual affinity with the religious scene he was depicting, it would also come as no surprise that he saw no Mary in his Judith. Against her Renaissance precursors and contemporaries, our Judith seems to be a species of her own. She is something exceedingly more intimate, gritty, and ambiguous. She is flawed. So what exactly *is* she, and what could she mean? Judith's enigmatic nature may be better explained by examining her female counterparts in Caravaggio's greater body of work.

Of Caravaggio's few "female types", a later depiction of *Magdalene in Ecstasy* from 1606 (Fig. 2.15), located today in a private collection in Rome, proves particularly revealing in comparison to *Judith*.[177] It should first be noted, however, that the following comparison between the Magdalene and our *Judith* is not predicated on the theory that Caravaggio related the two figures thematically. Judith is not necessarily considered a "sinner" within the original

---

[177] Although Caravaggio also produced a number of biblical scenes of Mary, *Judith* is from a compositional standpoint best compared to the artist's depictions of the converted female "sinner" in the Magdalene. Caravaggio's Magdalenes show more kinship to *Judith* in the ambiguous, unconventional, and highly focused treatment of the female figure. His depictions of Mary, in contrast, belong predominantly to his later, more matured body of work, where the artist is able to assimilate his biblical portrayals more seamlessly (although never completely) with the hierarchical formulas set forth by his patrons, Mary thusly becoming a more periphery figure within the larger scene. See: *Madonna of the Rosary* (1607) and *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1609) (Schütze, Cologne 2009, Pgs. 147, 225) for example.

context of the biblical text, although such interpretations have inevitably developed and escalated throughout the discourse of the Old Testament story and its pictorial representation. The interpretation of a sinful, *femme fatale* in Judith is nothing new to her history. Such rhetoric can be traced back to the medieval dichotomization between "good" and "bad" female biblical figures which surfaced as early as the fourth and fifth centuries in Europe,[178] Judith primarily falling into the "good" classification (as opposed to the "bad" Salome and Delilah, for example).[179] Many artists in regions North of the Alps still associated Judith with the "bad" aspects of Eve during the Renaissance, reflecting a duplicity and discordance in her typology which has only grown and deepened through the centuries.[180] However, in the post-Tridentine Roman society which Caravaggio was operating within, Judith was predominantly considered "good" and championed by the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, multiple scholars have postulated a misogynistic motivation behind Caravaggio's female depictions, particularly that of *Judith*. Hibbard, for example, draws a parallel between Freud's writings on the unconscious symbolic relationship between decapitation and castration in *The Medusa's Head* and Caravaggio's "fearful" depiction of Judith,[181] whereas Held argues adamantly for an "antagonism between genders" as the principle underlying motivation behind Caravaggio's *Judith*.[182] According to her theory, the artist endeavored to reinforce the explicit gender relationship between Judith and Holofernes and ultimately discredit the public role of the woman in a "counter-Counter-Reformation" depiction which was intentionally provocative.[183] It seems rather presumptuous to assume that Caravaggio was acting along the same antiquated medieval rhetoric in his creation of *Judith*, and even more bold to claim, as Held does, that the artist was attempting a definitive proclamation of his own misogynistic ideology. After all, there is strong evidence that the real-life model behind Caravaggio's Judith was a popular Roman courtesan by the name of Fillide Melandroni.[184] Melandroni, like Bianchini for the earlier *Repentant Magdalene*, graces the pages of her own share of police records, and would have also been a potential target of the Pope's violent crusade against prostitution.[185] If Caravaggio did in fact embed his *Repentant Magdalene* with a subtle political condemnation of the inhumane acts of the Papal powers against the defenseless women of the streets, then why would he suddenly

---

[178] Grössinger 1997, Pg. 1.
[179] Ibid., Pgs. 10-11.
[180] Ibid., Pgs. 1-18.
[181] Ibid., Pg. 69.
[182] Held 1996, Pg. 69.
[183] Ibid., Pg. 69.
[184] Robb 2011, Pg. 88.
[185] Ibid., Pgs. 88-91.

demean these same women in his *Judith*? This would require quite the cognitive leap, *if* in fact we accept Robb's theory behind the early *Magdalene*. In any case, the feministic debate surrounding Caravaggio is as volatile as it is subjective, and should only be applied in relation to *Judith* with great precaution.

Returning to our comparison. Caravaggio's later *Magdalene in Ecstasy* represents the focused, intimate style of rendering a singular figure more characteristic of his early style. The Magdalene is genre-like in her mundane appearance and lack of attributes, although the artist's stereotypical depthless backdrop obstructs any further contextualization of the scene. The woman is, similar to the precursory *Francis*, completely immersed in her own internal spiritual experience. And yet, what may be most striking about Caravaggio's image of this converted sinner is the overwhelming modesty in his presentation. Titian's highly eroticized and almost completely nude version of Magdalene from approximately 1533 (Fig. 2.16) demonstrates how sexual her sacred image could be during the Renaissance. Even when Titian was forced to clean up his presentation to comply with the more modest principles of the Counter Reformation in 1565 (Fig. 2.17),[186] his second version is still decisively more sumptuous and feminine than Caravaggio's. The Magdalene in *Ecstasy* is, as all of the artist's female figures, notably clothed, the only allusion to her religious identity being the subtle exposure of her shoulder and simple strands of fallen hair. The image was so ambiguous that some Caravaggio followers, including the Dutch artist Wybrand de Geest, felt compelled to add the attribute of a skull so that the religious content could be more intelligible (Fig. 2.18).[187] Caravaggio's focus in his Magdalene is, above all, the emphatic facial features of her face, the figure's external veil functioning as a reflection of her internalized emotions. This same nuanced treatment can be found in the face of the earlier Judith, where Caravaggio also handles her form with the same degree of constraint as his Magdalene. Judith is chastely concealed in comparison to her often heavy-bosomed or even bare-breasted Renaissance and Baroque counterparts. Furthermore, regardless of one's stance on Caravaggio's contested misogyny or homosexuality, it would be difficult to convincingly claim that the artist treated his bevy of nude male beauties with the same modesty and reverence as his female subjects. The very central and sensual representation of the male angel's backside in the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* from approximately 1597 (Fig. 2.19) stands as one of many examples throughout the artist's work. Against contemporary representations of Judith and Caravaggio's

---

[186] Erhardt/Morris 2012, Pgs. 167-168.
[187] Von Rosen 2009, Pg. 158.

own erotic male subjects, this Judith cannot be defined as a sexual figure. She is, like the artist's later version of Magdalene, a nuanced and cautious rendering of a woman, not a lustful and cautionary image of a sinner.

What might the figure of Abra reveal about Caravaggio's enigmatic painting? Judith is, after all, not the only female in this composition. It has been hypothesized that the image of the maid was originally based on an antique Roman portrait bust,[188] a practice which would not have been uncharacteristic of the artist.[189] Real-life models were certainly not the Caravaggio's only visual crutch. Following this thread, was Caravaggio also conscious of the contrapposto rhetoric, and its deeper implications, which many scholars have claimed to be the intention behind the age contrast between Judith and her maid? It is entirely conceivable that the artist would follow in the Renaissance tradition derived from his Northern Italian ancestors, replacing the exotic, dark-skinned maid with an older and more wrinkled version reminiscent of Cariani (Fig 1.29).[190] But on an allegorical level, is it equally conceivable that Caravaggio was attempting a dichotomous personification of Judith's negative aspects in her maid, and her own virtuous aspects in Judith herself, allá Garrard?[191] If we accept the theory that Abra, however withered and old she may be, was directly appropriated from an equally withered and old Roman portrait bust, her allegorical function may become questionable. In fact, this Abra is also Caravaggio's first depiction of an old person, and will reappear in similar form in various later paintings by Caravaggio (the *Madonna of Loreto* and *Supper at Emmaus,* for example), indicating that the old woman's narrative and allegorical identity was probably not a critical component for the artist in the context of his work. Caravaggio is infamous for his reappropriation of sacred as well as profane imagery to serve his own individual artistic means, where the traditional symbolism often becomes obscured in the process, and this tendency seems very present in our Abra. The artist, though loyal to the Northern Renaissance contrapposto tradition on a purely compositional level, was probably not attempting a deeper allegorical rhetorical contrast between the women's ages in *Judith*. He was, principally and most plausibly, grasping for appropriate compositional models and adapting his composition on a superficial level to the

---

[188] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 66-67.

[189] Von Rosen contributes the intriguing theory that the later *Magdalene in Ecstasy* from 1606 was probably also an appropriated image. He claims that the Magdalene's exposed shoulder, the dramatic tilt of her head and extreme curvature of her throat may be derived from antique depictions of the rape of the daughters of Leudippus, citing a reproduction of a Roman sarcophagus as an example. For more details, see: Von Rosen 2009, Pgs. 156-157.

[190] Ibid., Pg. 68.

[191] Garrard 1989, Pg. 290.

most prevalent iconographical conventions of the period. In this sense, Abra functions more as a necessary attribute than a living, interacting presence within *Judith*.

In conclusion, Caravaggio's female type in *Judith* can be characterized by all of the things that she is not. Judith is neither a patriotic victor nor a virtuous Proto-Maria. She is neither an explicit contemporary portrait nor an exemplary prototype for the Catholic Church. She is also not an indisputable testament to the artist's misogynistic mindset or homosexual inclinations. She is, along with Abra, derivative, mundane, un-sensual and unrhetorical. At her foundation, she is a study, a model in the purest sense of the term, and a necessity to Caravaggio's greater image.

## 2.4. "Troppo Naturale"

Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* has, up until this point, been examined according to the artist's biography, discernible personality, his handling of the religious as well as the female subject. The final section of this chapter will devote itself to Caravaggio's compositional rendering of the grisly decapitation scene, where the elements of realism, extremity of chiaro-scuro, and the beheading itself will be more closely investigated on a technical and ideological level.

### 2.4.1. Selective Realism

Much of this analysis is predicated on the concept of the radicality of Caravaggio's realism. When placed within the context of the transitory period in Italy in which *Judith* was produced, where the tired, idealized style of the High Renaissance lead to a reawakened interest in art which not longer strayed too far from life, Caravaggio's aesthetic was absolutely one of the forerunners of this "return to nature". His means of representation was intensely naturalistic in comparison to many of his contemporaries. But how much of the artist's *Judith* is actually, truly realistic?

Annibale Carracci probably summed up Caravaggio's conception of realism best when he criticized *Judith* with the statement "troppo naturale".[192] Too natural. Caravaggio was, in the eyes of both his contemporaries and later scholars, so fiercely dedicated to the imitation of nature that works such as *Judith* were considered iconoclastic.[193] His counterparts were predominantly still operating along the idealistic theories of the Renaissance, predicated on the antiquated story of Zeuxis painting Helen by combining the most beautiful features of various models, thusly establishing an imperative of idealism in art for centuries to follow.[194] Many artists and theorists of the late Cinquecento were still emulating the more "worthy" art of the ancients rather than the flawed, unaesthetic reality of nature. Comments and criticism directed at Caravaggio's naturalism only reinforce his infamy as an artist in his day: Joachim von Sandrart proclaimed that Caravaggio was "determined never to make a brushstroke that was not from life", and Bellori later reprimands him for " […] despising the superb statuary of antiquity and the famous paintings of Raphael […] without selecting from the best forms of nature…it seems that he imitated art without art".[195] Caravaggio's approach was bold, but he was not the inventor of the art of vivid realism, although he certainly radicalized it to an extent that quickly made him a name. Every prodigy has their roots. The artist's earliest years in Northern Italy, surrounded by the modest, unrhetorical Lombard art of Milan and nearby provinces, were profoundly formative. As a boy, all Caravaggio knew were the flat, earthy, naturalistic genre scenes and still-lifes of Lombardy, and this virtuous aesthetic from home never truly left him, even if he never returned.[196] It molded how he looked at the world, how he reproduced it on his canvas, and, upon his arrival in Rome, was so drastically different from the Roman artifice of idealism and grandeur that it made him an instant revolutionary.[197]

His critics are in fact partially correct. Elements of *Judith* can be considered "too natural". As the authors Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit most aptly describe it, Caravaggio painted "the act of looking" itself.[198] We are presented with an unmitigated simulation of what Caravaggio saw, impervious to the perfections and imperfections of his reality. And we see, as the artist saw, Judith's conventionally pretty face, screwed together in distorted concentration. The wisps of her hair, fall of her dress and subtle transparency of her blouse seem almost tangible. Holofer-

---

[192] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 67.
[193] Ibid., Pgs. 46-47.
[194] Mansfield 2007.
[195] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 46-47.
[196] Robb 2011, Pg. 29.
[197] Ibid., Pg. 29.
[198] Bersani/Dutoit 1998, Pg. 2.

nes' features, the rendering of his body and tensed muscles are also a sharp, sober study in anatomy. Even the folds of his sheets, the backdrop curtain, and the cloth held by the maid are rendered impeccably, with convincing texture and weight. There are moments of striking precision here. And yet, the neutralizing, often appeasing elements of a poetic landscape, the delightfully detailed ornaments of the tent's interior or Judith's garb, or even the sumptuous idealization of Judith herself, are notably absent in this painting; the aspects of an "artful" imitation of nature which Bellori deems mandatory. According to the conventional Renaissance formula which Caravaggio should have been abiding by, there is little beauty in *Judith*. The painting is simply and justifiably "too natural" for its late Cinquecento critics.

However realistic Caravaggio's art was considered in his time, his critics may have been too preoccupied with the artist's apparent anti-idealism to notice how profoundly and paradoxically flawed Caravaggio's execution truly was. The realistic elements evident in works such as *Judith*, the instances of vivid, palpable realism, are precisely that – instances. Isolated moments of powerful verisimilitude, embedded within a larger composition which is collectively unrealistic. This somewhat disorienting element present in Caravaggio's painting has lead a number of scholars to term his methodology as a form of selective realism.[199] The artist's aptitude for realism in detail was from a very early stage manifest, but his inaptitude for incorporating this detail into a believable physical space with accurate depth, perspective, atmosphere, and spatial relationships between multiple figures is equally apparent. By closer inspection, the entire composition of *Judith* is rather rudimentary. There is no believable space created here in which the figures are situated – the room is confined, shallow, and almost completely obscured by darkness. The characters themselves are arranged in a sequential, frieze-like formation at the foremost edge of the picture plane in a manner which is as naive as it is unnatural. Abra appears almost artificially inserted within the scene, appearing more as an additive quotation of a figure type than as a believable character. She certainly does not belonging to the same sculptural, fleshy world of her pictorial counterparts. Without the inclusion of a contextualizing landscape or interior details, the protagonists are stifled within an airless composition, the only indication of an outside world being the autonomous light beaming down from an unknown source overhead. It is apparent that Caravaggio at this point could not – or did not strive to – paint in the traditional way of his Roman contemporaries.

---

[199] See Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 46-50, Prater 1992, Pgs. 28-30, and Pericolo 2011, Pgs. 208-209 for varying characterizations of Caravaggio's selective approach to realism in art, all of which center around the compositional inaccuracies apparent in his paintings.

Hibbard summarizes it well in his statement "the details are realistic; the whole is theatre".[200] Caravaggio's realism in *Judith* is highly selective. Though the artist's competence in the Lombard tradition of naturalistic imitation is undeniable, he constantly struggled to reconcile this talent with his conspicuous inability to paint the sort of spatially and figuratively complex scenes of other successful Renaissance painters. His compositional uncertainty abounds throughout his earliest paintings, from the forced immediacy in the *Concert of Youths* to the awkward junctures in the *Calling of St. Matthew*. In this sense, *Judith* was in fact very typical of his early works. "Realism" should, then, in the context of Caravaggio – and more specifically in regards to *Judith* – be understood along the artist's own terms. However virtuous his attention to detail and radical his realism, Caravaggio's *Judith* is a formally flawed and compositionally unrealistic depiction.

## *2.4.2. Behind the Darkness*

The next question involves intention. Was Caravaggio *intending* to depict *Judith Beheading Holofernes* in the way that he did, or was his flawed rendering merely a result of his own deficiencies as a young artist? How much of the artist's novelty can be attributed to a calculated, innate ingenuity, and how much is rather a byproduct of his inexperience and formal inaptitude? This is an additional debate in the scholarship of Caravaggio which remains as contended as it is unresolved. Much of this debate, however, centers on Caravaggio's radicalization of chiaroscuro, which has today become emblematic for the artist. A closer examination of the possible origins of the artist's signature use of dramatic light/dark contrasts may, at least in the context of *Judith*, reveal more about how Caravaggio resolved the clear compositional difficulties he encountered in this painting, as well as the degree to which the dramatic lighting effect of the scene can actually be considered intentional.

There are a number of artists and theorists, both Baroque and modern, who claim that Caravaggio's shadows were employed to conceal his own compositional deficiencies. Considering what we know of the young artist's patchy training and disinterest in following the formal models set forth by his Renaissance teachers and contemporaries, these theories are widely justified. Annibale Carracci is reported to have claimed that "Caravaggio's darkness covered

---

[200] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 116.

the difficulties of art with the shadows of night",[201] while his brother Ludovico was, in response to another unspecified painting, supposedly "struck dumb by seeing only a great contrast of light and dark, with too close an imitation of nature".[202] Hibbard himself subscribes to the theory, stating that the Contarelli paintings, which are contemporary to our *Judith*, also exhibit the extreme use of dark-light to mask "awkward junctures and gaps" with darkness and disguise his own limitations.[203] Caravaggio's forced chiaroscuro was as apparent in the late 16th century as it is to many modern scholars. And in the case of *Judith*, it appears rather fitting. The shadows are pitch black and all-consuming, masking all of the areas which would have posed difficulties for the artist. The indefinite edges of Holofernes' bed disappear into the depthless trenches of the shadows, along with the remainder of what would be the canopy overhead – or does the cloth indicate the tent itself? Caravaggio even avoids painting the rest of Holofernes' would-be receding body. This shapeless black is infiltrated by an intense pulse of bright spotlight from overhead, which the artist manipulates to dramatically highlight the objects of the scene he deems most necessary (or feasible). Dark and light appear manipulated in this early work to conceal Caravaggio's own areas of uncertainty.

Is there also a discernible theoretical dimension to the origins of Caravaggio's signature light/dark contrast? Hibbard further hypothesizes that the artist's forced chiaroscuro may have been derived from a radicalization of Leonardo DaVinci's atmospheric sfumato,[204] which is wholly conceivable from a formal standpoint. Caravaggio would have naturally been aware of the Renaissance master and his celebrated paintings which were spread throughout Italy, and would have also had access to his artist biography in Vasari's *Life of Leonardo da Vinci* from 1568. Robb further hypothesizes that Caravaggio may have even read Leonardo's *Book of Painting*.[205] The writings were not officially published until 1651, but an unofficial text may have been under the possession of Del Monte in his studio at the time Caravaggio was working for him.[206] If Caravaggio did in fact read the text, one particular section would have been especially formative for the artist. Leonardo, who in his book describes the art of seeing and representing what you see, notes that:

---

[201] Ibid., Pg. 67.
[202] Malvasia 1980, Pgs. 43-44.
[203] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 95-96.
[204] Ibid., Pg. 61.
[205] Robb 2011, Pg. 73.
[206] Ibid., Pg. 73.

" […] light and shadow enhances the faces of people who sit in the doorways of darkened houses […] the accentuation of light and shadow gives great relief to the face, the shadows being almost unnoticeable […] Represented thus, with enhanced light and shade, the face gains greatly in beauty".[207]

Was Caravaggio intending a sort of pictorial emulation of Leonardo's real-life observations in his radical chiaroscuro, a realization of what Leonardo had admired in nature but not quite achieved in his art? Robb certainly thinks so, and it is possible. This theory is however based on the still shaky assumption that Caravaggio at one point actually read this text, which neither Robb nor any other scholar can prove. A more traditional – and plausible – theory holds that the artist's light/dark extremes rather originated from a theoretical motivation to create a tenebrous antithesis to the lighter palette of the Mannerists. Annibale, Caravaggio's some-times-critic, gradually lightened the palette of his paintings after coming to Rome in order to separate himself from the "darkness" of the Venetians in favor of a more Raphaelesque clarity.[208] If this is in fact the case, then comments such as those from Annibale and Ludovico criticizing the artist's calculated use of extreme shadows show that Caravaggio's method certainly was effective in setting him apart from his Renaissance contemporaries – admirers and critics alike.

A final theory focuses more on the "chiaro" of the artist's chiaroscuro. When Caravaggio wasn't completely rejecting the values of *chiaro* in his deepening of *scuro*, he was employing a distinctly autonomous form of light. Hibbard sees Caravaggio's light in religious works such as *Francis* as a symbolic substitute for a personified God and the artist himself as the reinventor of the theme of "God's power expressed through light".[209] Prater, on the other hand, contests a traditional religious motivation behind Caravaggio's contrasts entirely. As previously noted in this essay, Prater observes a parallel between Caravaggio's increasing chiaroscuro and a thematic transition towards more violent subject matter.[210] Light, in this sense, serves primarily as a technical foil to the artist's dark; a heightening which is necessary to create a darkening, and vice versa. Following Prater, these sort of symbolic associations were not an imperative in Caravaggio's paintings, secular and religious subject matter alike. The artist may have managed a very mystical effect in his portrayal of light in the *Calling of St. Matthew*, for

---

[207] Ibid., Pgs. 94-95.
[208] Ibid., Pg. 123.
[209] Ibid., Pg. 58.
[210] Prater 1992, Pgs. 21-22.

example, but he still failed to incorporate it with the interior light of the church, a convention which would traditionally have reinforced the effect of God's ominous presence within the physical space. Caravaggio's light was an autonomous element in his compositions, acting in accordance with its own physical laws. This is not to claim that Caravaggio never employed contrasts in a mystical or symbolic way, rather that a religious theoretical motivation was likely not the primary driving force behind such effects.

When applied to *Judith*, Prater's interpretation seems the most likely. We have already classified the portrayal of the narrative and rendering of light as distinctly non-religious. It is more probable that Caravaggio's true intention behind his lights and darks was rather a technical experimentation in strongly contrasting values. There are so many elements of *Judith* which are indicative of the composition being an unrefined, early study in formal complexities by a young artist, and Caravaggio's extreme chiaroscuro is surely one of these elements. Furthermore, the observation that the artist's shadows are a device used to conceal his own artistic errors seems to also apply in the case of *Judith*. The light in the scene may be autonomous, but it is also demonstrative of the artist's lacking ability to incorporate realistic light into the overall scene. The dark may be provocative and unsettling, but it is also strategically placed in order for the artist to avoid exposing his inability to accurately render atmosphere, depth and perspective. Caravaggio's chiaroscuro in *Judith* is an experiment and a strategy, not a theoretical device.

This is not, however, to discredit the artist's own ingenuity. Caravaggio may have been attempting to conceal his inability to create in the way that his Renaissance contemporaries could, but it is this exact inability which ironically made him such a successful figure in his day. The young artist had an established history of rebelliousness as well as a reputation for forging his own standards, in life and in art. At some point in his career, Caravaggio was clearly able to embrace his own deficiencies and exploit them in a way which only garnered him more commissions and notoriety. At the same time, he still managed to stay true to his own intensely personal, dramatic, focused aesthetic, because it was exactly these elements which had made his paintings so popular. Later commissions also gave him the opportunity to hone his craft and better assimilate his innovations and inaccuracies into larger, more appeasing compositions. To refer to one of his latest decapitation scenes, Caravaggio's *Beheading of John the Baptist* from 1608 (Fig. 3.12) demonstrates just how far the artist came from our beheading. The composition is spacious and the figures are whole, finely grouped, even

idealized. The value contrasts are still evident, but composed, and the light permeates the scene with seamless naturalism. In such mature works, Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro and dramatic presentation were probably very much intentional, equipped with the sort of theoretical nuances we can't yet discern from our *Judith*. This painting is simply too transitional and rudimentary in this vein. On the other hand, the level of celebrity *Judith Beheading Holofernes* has attained since its creation – the sheer volume of exhibitions, catalogues, books and articles dedicated solely to the study of this decapitation scene – speaks to the profound, innate innovation present in the painting, be it intentional or not. Caravaggio's use of darkness was on the verge of something very great here. He just didn't know it yet.

### 2.4.3. *An Unskilled Decapitation*

The question of intention in Caravaggio's *Judith* brings us to the component of his painting which truly lies at the center of this analysis: the decapitation. For a young artist struggling with the biblical content, spatiality, figural rendering, and overall realism of this scene, how did he confront the difficulties inherent in depicting a beheading? We've noted the challenges Caravaggio encountered and which remain unresolved in his portrayal of the room and the figures within it, but the depiction of a decapitation must have presented a true dilemma for the artist. Besides the obvious complexity involved in realistically reproducing something so brutally physical, Caravaggio was infamous for his belief in exclusively painting direct from nature. Judith was most probably drawn directly from a model in a studio, but what about Holofernes? And how realistic is this decapitation in actuality, given the artist's tendency towards a selective form of realism? A closer look at the beheading may help to better define the blurred line between the artist's intention and his deficiencies.

There are two primary players in this enacting of the beheading: Judith the determined operator and Holofernes her unwilling receiver. As this analysis has previously mentioned, much of modern scholarship has focused on the "awkwardness" of Judith's stance. Uppenkamp notes the peculiar double-function of Judith's arms, where they appear to both pull Holofernes' head towards her body and distance herself from it at the same time – a deflecting movement which is further reinforced by the swing of her dress.[211] Her upper arm grips the fated sword which visibly courses through Holofernes' neck. The sword is a mere sliver away from consummat-

---

[211] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 61.

ing the complete separation between the head and body, indicative that this is a depiction of the second and final strike, because, as we know, the first one didn't go all the way through.[212] Holofernes' body and mimic reflect believable astonishment and pain, but the profusion of blood projecting out of his wound has been described as curiously nonrealistic in its resemblance to thin stylized red ribbons as opposed to flowing spurts of blood.[213] Bersani and Dutoit observe that these red, ribbon-like jets are really just "posing" as blood, which describes their appearance in the painting rather well.[214] The highly affected quality of Holofernes' overall presence within the scene, and particularly in comparison to his much more naturalistic executioner, suggests that Holofernes himself was likely not entirely based upon a live studio model like his young female counterpart. In fact, recent research provides evidence that Caravaggio initially scored the underlying framework of *Judith* into the wet priming using incisions from his paint brush – the technique he had learned in Cesari's studio and the closest Caravaggio ever got to preliminary drawing.[215] Thanks to these incision marks, we can detect some of the artist's compositional corrections. Caravaggio eventually lowered Judith's arm and relocated some Holofernes' features to raise his head and emphasize it being pulled away from his body.[216] Logically, the studio wouldn't have been able to provide a live model for the decapitation of the painted Holofernes, and Caravaggio would eventually seek other means of visual inspiration. Holofernes' specific origins will be more closely investigated in the chapter to follow.

The awkwardness and uncertainty of Caravaggio's depiction of this decapitation has lead many scholars to award it with the disparaging designation of being "unskilled" – but not in respect to the artist, rather in respect to our biblical heroine. The Bible text states that Judith required exactly two strikes to fully remove Holofernes' head, and specifies nothing further.[217] However, in an example offered by Uppenkamp, etchings from Johan van Luyken in his *Martyrs Mirror*, first published in Holland in 1660, present documentations and stories of Christian martyrs which also included illustrations demonstrating the difference between "successful" and "unsuccessful" decapitations (Fig. 2.20).[218] These illustrations detail a successful decapita-

---

[212] Latin Vulgate Old Testament Bible – Judith, in: Douay-Rheims Bible, http://vulgate.org/ot/judith_13.htm (accessed 07.07.2014).
[213] Bersani/Dutoit 1998, Pg. 91.
[214] Ibid., Pg. 91.
[215] Robb 2011, Pgs. 108-109.
[216] Ibid., Pg. 111.
[217] Latin Vulgate Old Testament Bible – Judith, in: Douay-Rheims Bible, http://vulgate.org/ot/judith_13.htm (accessed 07.07.2014).
[218] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 60.

tion as one which requires only a single, clean strike to the kneeling executionee, the body still kneeling upright and a fountain of victorious blood spurting upward from the severed neck. An unsuccessful execution, however, would involve additional strikes when the first was not properly placed, the executionee eventually falling to the floor while the executioner is forced to hold their hair to stabilize them for the final blow(s). In this scenario, the resulting blood only seeps onto the floor unceremoniously. Uppenkamp also notes that it was not uncommon for such botched beheadings to incite the indignant crowd to in turn attack the executioner.[219] In the realm of actual beheadings, such an act as that which Caravaggio depicted in *Judith* would not be designated as "successful". Judith grasps tightly to Holofernes' hair and tactlessly finishes her crude job on her debilitated victim, without the celebratory splash of blood to mark her victory.

The narrative, however, dictates that this decapitation be carried out on a sleeping – and therefore naturally reposed – Holofernes, and that this severing required two strikes. Taking all into consideration, Caravaggio was only unsuccessful in reproducing the naturalistic aspects of the beheading. Judith's contradicting, distanced stance and the uneasy grip of her sword in conjunction with the forceful decapitation she enacts would be a near physical impossibility,[220] and the spouting, stylized blood is more a symbolic gesture than it is a meditated realistic element.[221] But the artist was very successful in accurately portraying the narrative, as best as an artist can be expected to when the original text provides no gory details on the actual beheading, and when virtually no other artist before him was daring enough to depict said implied gory details and thusly provide him with a reliable model. This still leaves the initial question unanswered: was Caravaggio ultimately trying to portray the character of Judith herself as "unskilled"?

Held again acts to loyally personify the modern mysogyny and subjectification rhetoric which has been so often attached to Caravaggio. She claims that Judith effuses reluctance and fear and that the artist's inclusion of her evil foil in the form of the old maid indicates that one woman was not capable of following through with the deed on her own – that a sort of compartmentalization was required for a female to complete such an act.[222] Held further states that Caravaggio intentionally depicted a woman who was incompetent in her given role as the

---

[219] Ibid., Pg. 60.
[220] Von Rosen 2009, Pgs. 60-61.
[221] Bersani/Dutoit 1998, Pg. 91.
[222] Held 1996, Pg. 69.

executioner and dependent on additional support in order to reinforce the inferior public role of women and establish that they were no worthy adversary or threat towards men.[223] It was, she goes on to note, only through deception that Judith was able to vanquish her male enemy. However "unskilled" Judith's work may be along contemporary standards of decapitation, this essay can simply not subscribe to such "gender antagonism" theories. Not with what we know about Caravaggio's own inexperience and uncertainty in regards to this particular theme, and definitely not considering what we know of his personal – and by all accounts amicable – relationship with the woman behind the Judith figure. It may be tempting to interpret such feminist critique out of this painting, but Held's sweeping generalizations about Caravaggio's ideology take little account of the artist's biography, his discernible person, and what can be found in his greater body of work. This essay would argue that Held's conclusion is both extreme and misleading. Caravaggio was more than likely not yet equipped in such an early work to intentionally compose it with such symbolic and ideological complexity, whether he was truly a misogynist or not. If we are to definitively see anything in our figure of Judith, then she is above all a mirror of the artist himself – an indirect self-reference to Caravaggio standing uneasily before his own canvas. "Unskilled" can, in the context of *Judith*, rather only be applied to the artist's own rendering, to his own hand, and not to the actions of Judith herself. The interpretation of Judith by modern scholarship as an "inferior" player within the greater scene is, just as the many formal inaccuracies in the composition, probably not intentional on the part of Caravaggio. The reductive and generalizing approach of such modern discourse may in turn be shrouding Caravaggio's meaning more than it is unraveling it.

The preceding chapter has attempted a microcosmic deconstruction of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and the artist behind it, and a preliminary characterization has been established. Caravaggio's disregard for traditional artistic models of the Renaissance is manifest in his rendering of *Judith*. The painting has been identified as a non-didactic and non-spiritual interpretation of a religious subject with an overtly non-sexualized female protagonist; elements which deviate distinctly from the strict artistic conventions set forth during the Counter Reformation. Additionally, the traditional rhetorical and religious-symbolic functions of the painting appear either underdeveloped or intentionally neglected as a consequence of the artist's conspicuous dependency on his live and profane models and uneasiness with the theme

---

[223] Ibid., Pg. 69.

in general. Caravaggio engages in a highly selective form of realism in his rendering, a technique which is novel to the artist and greatly derivative of his formative years in Lombardy. From a formal perspective, the work is in fact embedded with multiple non-realistic elements which are mainly shrouded by the dramatic effects of the extreme chiaroscuro the artist pioneered. Despite these deficiencies, the representation of realism and gore within *Judith* is drastic in comparison with Caravaggio's contemporaries. Ultimately, *Judith* can be defined as rudimentary, experimental and completely unprecedented. But the true catalyst behind the painting, and its sudden gore, still remains undefined.

# 3.  Brutality in Art and Society

In the attempt to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and its significance within the greater iconography of the biblical subject, this analysis will now move from a microcosmic examination of the artist's personal biography, ideology, and compositional rendering, and focus more broadly on the macrocosmic level of Italian society at the turn of the century. This final examination will be three-fold: firstly, the artist's potential direct pictorial models will be investigated. Secondly, decapitation on the real-life, societal stage of the Counter Reformation will be discussed – and one notorious decapitation in particular – as well as the extent to which such environmental factors might have impacted the artist's portrayal of *Judith*. And lastly, Caravaggio's later works as well as followers will be briefly visited, to establish what elements of his *Judith* continued to resonate throughout the Baroque and within his own body of work, and additionally, how later artists developed alternative prototypes for depicting the biblical theme.

## 3.1. *Caravaggio's Pictorial Models*

It has been established that Caravaggio's unprecedented depiction of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* has made a dramatic break from all of the preceding models throughout the Renaissance and into the early Baroque. The catalyst behind the abrupt radicality presented by Caravaggio in this painting could not be definitively concluded in our examination of the artist's personal history, or the many compositional and stylistic idiosyncrasies manifest in his early paintings. In fact, the preceding chapter might lead us to conclude that our renegade *Judith* is rather the result of a haphazard combination between one artist's regional aesthetic roots, his innate talent for realism and sincerity, a little experimentation, a lot of disregard for tradition, and a private patron's opportune commission. The right conditions at the right time. This may, to an extent, be true. It is undeniable that *Judith* is on one level a product of coincidence, a revolutionary fluke in the greater iconographic trajectory. But such a conclusion would neither adequately nor fairly explain the sudden appearance of this painting. Where *Judith* may not be strongly informed on a deeper ideological, rhetorical or traditional level, the external pictorial models for the painting are, comparatively, very prominent.

Before we begin examining Caravaggio's pictorial exemplars, the role of the literary model must in the context of this painting be first discussed. We have visited the literary tradition of the Book of Judith, as well as the most significant Medieval Bible illustrations. Though it is notable that many Italian Bibles from the 11th century onwards (Figs. 1.2 – 1.4) illustrate the moment Judith raises her sword before the decapitation, and even moreso that Byzantine and French Bibles from the ninth and 13th century (Figs. 1.7 – 1.8) portray the sword actually slicing into Holofernes' neck, such texts are both from a literary and pictorial standpoint not relevant to this particular painting. Firstly, these various Medieval images of decapitation are obviously not of the same artistic or functional world as Caravaggio's *Judith,* most often found in the form of initial illustrations or single figures placed at the beginning of the text and functioning rather as didactic abbreviations to the narrative and its contents.[224] Secondly, it is highly questionable if such biblical texts even played a role for Caravaggio. In the artist's time, the Latin Vulgate was the authoritative text of the Roman Catholic Church, still based predominantly on St. Jerome's original translation from the fourth century.[225] It can be more or less established that the Clementine Vulgate, the version which became the standard Bible text under Pope Clement VIII in 1592 and remained as such until the year 1979, would have been the most familiar and accessible version of the Bible to Caravaggio during this time in Rome.[226] Following the Pope's final revisions in 1598, the Clementine edition was the sole version being officially printed by the Vatican, although other printers would have reproduced non-official, and possibly also more error-prone, editions.[227] Caravaggio would have naturally had access to other non-authoritative versions of the Latin Bible, especially during his school-age years in Northern Italy before the Church had definitively standardized the Bible text, but any notable inconsistencies between these official and unofficial versions is most commonly attributed to clerical human error rather than to drastic differences in content, this including the Book of Judith.[228] The greater question surrounds whether Caravaggio himself would have even consulted a biblical text for his depiction of the beheading in the first place. Hibbard notes, and we can glean as much from Caravaggio's biography, that the artist was not exactly known for being a learned man, a great reader, or even particularly spiritual.[229] Coming from a family of moderate means, Caravaggio would most likely have received an elementary education and held basic literacy, but no early scholar ever commented on his admirable

---

[224] Kubiak 1965, Pg. 7.
[225] Sutcliffe 1948, Pgs. 35-42.
[226] Ibid., Pgs. 35-42.
[227] Ibid., Pgs. 35-42.
[228] Mergenthaler 1997, Pg. 59.
[229] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 85.

intellectual capacities and there are no surviving letters from the artist himself.[230] What scholars and contemporaries alike do impart about Caravaggio are rather his criminal activities and overall rebellious tendencies, painting an image of a man who was more physical than he was intellectual, and who probably struggled more with the concept of God than he gained refuge from it. In this sense, one can reasonably assume that the artist would not have automatically reached for the Bible in preparation for this painting. Not only would this have been uncharacteristic of him, it would have also been unnecessary. Caravaggio was not striving for readability or accuracy in his portrayal of *Judith*, not in the traditional sense of a sacred image during the Counter Reformation. Additionally, however unintellectual and unspiritual the artist may have been, he had the clear advantage of being surrounded by individuals who were highly cultivated, religiously-affiliated and revered, in turn impacting the quality of his art. Whether it be moving in the artistic circles of Arpino, Cesari, and Prospero Orsi, or benefiting from the connections and patronage of Cardinal Del Monte and Ottavio Costa, Caravaggio was surrounded by the well-born, respected and refined.[231] The artist would have also had a wealth of artistic models for *Judith* readily at his fingertips at the turn of the century in Rome. The Book of Judith had only recently been awarded dogmatic canonicity by the Roman Catholic Church in 1546 following the Council of Trent, and was as a result one of the many sacred images which Papal powers were forcefully promoting in their greater religious mission for dominance.[232] The popularity, commissions and visibility of Judith could only increase following this official decree. Caravaggio would have also come into contact with some of the major Renaissance portrayals of Judith in his travels between Northern Italy and Rome; he spent time in Milan, Lombardy and Venice before eventually making his way south and would have found versions of Judith in each of these regions.[233] For an artist who clearly favored impulse over calculation, one can assume that Caravaggio would have first turned to the abundance of pictorial models in his immediate environment for guidance in his portrayal of *Judith* – whether it be within his intimate group of friends, the city of Rome, or greater Italy – and not to the complexity and exactitude of a literary source.

As we know, Caravaggio was (in)famously dependent on both live and antique models in his depiction of the human form, but what about his depiction of decapitation? *Judith* is his first

---

[230] Ibid., Pg. 85.
[231] Ibid., Pg. 86.
[232] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 54.
[233] Robb 2011, Pgs. 28-30.

known representation of a beheading. But without the guidance of a live human model before

him (we will assume that if Caravaggio did use a live model for Holofernes, then said model's

head was likely also still attached), how did the artist go about capturing such a physical event

realistically? Caravaggio, regardless of how nontraditional he may have been, naturally looked

to other paintings, as any good artist in his position would have done.

Caravaggio's earliest pictorial influence is probably the most surprising. Being trained under

Peterzano (who had been trained under Titian) during the second half of the 1580's, the young

student encountered the Venetian works of the great master of Peterzano's master – Giorgio-

ne.[234] Giorgione's *Judith* from 1504 couldn't be more different from Caravaggio's in her

idealized and sensual representation, but as Vasari notes, Giorgione " […] used to set himself

before living and natural objects and imitate them as well as he could paint […] without doing

any drawing".[235] Ideologically as well as technically, Caravaggio and Giorgione were in fact

not as different as their paintings suggest. Even more compelling is Giorgione's painting of

*David with the Head of Goliath* from approximately 1500-1510. The canvas was eventually

trimmed to only include the portrait of David, but the complete original painting was repro-

duced in an engraving dated 1650 by Wenceslaus Hollar (Fig. 3.1).[236] The engraving proves

that Giorgione did not always depict severed heads with the same refinement and subtlety of

Holofernes' in his *Judith* from 1504. In a rather perverse interpretation, Goliath's dismembered

head seems to be mysteriously winking, and David represents a self-portrait of the artist

himself.[237] Giorgione's version seems to foreshadow the sort of perversity and self-reference

we see in Caravaggio's work to follow. The Venetian master clearly served as a significant

model for the artist, both in his dedication to naturalism and his refusal of drawing. If Giorgio-

ne was such a pivotal figure in Caravaggio's formative years, it is also likely that the master's

early Renaissance portrayals of decapitated heads in his *Judith* and *David* might have served as

some of the primary models – and even catalysts – for his own *Judith* almost a century later.

Judith and Holofernes is naturally not the only biblical story which involves a decapitation. In

the New Testament, Salome, the daughter of Herodias, calls for the head of the innocent John

the Baptist on the occasion of her father's birthday.[238] The biblical theme's iconographical

---

[234] Ibid., Pgs. 29-30.
[235] Ibid., Pg. 30.
[236] Santing/Baert/Traninger 2013, Pg. 199.
[237] Ibid., Pg. 199.
[238] Taylor 1966, Pg. 310.

development is similar to that of Judith. Depictions before the 1520's seem to exclusively represent the moment following the beheading of St. John by Herod Antipas upon the request of Salome, where the executioner either presents Salome with the severed head (as seen in Donatello's *Feast of Herod* from ca. 1427 (Fig. 3.2)) or Salome is shown holding the head on her emblematic dish (as in Titian's famous *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* from ca. 1515 (Fig. 3.3)). Except it appears that the biblical theme assumed its true bloody form about a half a century before our Judith. Callisto Piazza, a Lombardian painter who was active in the regions of Lodi, Cremona and Milan, contributed a startling image of St. John's martyrdom in his 1526 version of *The Beheading of John the Baptist* (Fig. 3.4).[239] Piazza's portrayal is nothing short of horrific, particularly amongst the refined, harmless portraiture of his Northern contemporaries. The figures enact the final moments of the decapitation in the abrupt fore-ground, presented with the sort of immediacy and intimacy one can't help but associate with Caravaggio. Where the deed has technically already been done and Salome is in the process of receiving the head, Piazza makes the daring choice to place the foreshortened, severed neck of John at the very center of the composition. Here, the focus is hardly on the dismembered head as blood spurts in stylized streams from the raw, fleshy wound of the neck and out towards the viewer. But it is not only the ribbons of blood which recall so closely our Holofernes from a half a century later. The positioning of John's tensed, muscular body – exerting its last bit of strength and resistance before making its final fall to the ground – is almost a mirror reflection of our reposed General in *Judith.* Piazza's portrayal of the thriving, headless body of John is also highly reminiscent of Francia's drawing from 1500 (Fig. 1.18) after one of the scenes from his destroyed Judith fresco the palace of Giovanni Bentivoglio II.[240] Piazza would have only been seven years old when the palace burnt down, but it does seem that Francia's frescos may have established a lasting precedent for a more graphic depiction of post-beheadings, as demonstrated by the appearance of later works such as Piazza's. Maybe these frescoes did in fact spur similarly gory depictions from other Northern artists which are today lost, destroyed, or too obscure to appear in the historical iconography of Judith – and maybe Piazza eventually modeled his own representation of Salome after such works (or he simply got a hold of some of Francia's surviving sketches at some point in his career). In any case, Piazza's painting and its unceremonious carnage would certainly have been one of the influential works Caravaggio encountered in Lombardy during his early years, and the horror of the scene is sure to have made a lasting impression.

---

[239] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 228-229.
[240] Vasari 1917, Pg. 308.

Once in Rome, Caravaggio never lacked for inspirational gory imagery. Along with the heroic figures of Judith and David, depictions of martyrdom were the latest craze in post-Tridentine Italy, and the greatest number of martyrdom images would be produced in Rome during this period.[241] The more emphatic the representation and extreme the gore, the more effective these images would be in conveying the righteousness of the Catholic fight against Protestant heresy.[242] The illustrations and descriptions in popular books such as John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* from 1563 acted to spur the already growing cult of martyrs in Rome, grisly depictions of martyrdom eventually becoming commonplace in the interiors of Jesuit churches by the 1570's and 1580's.[243] By 1582, Niccolò Circignani and Antonio Tempesta had already completed their graphic series detailing 34 horrific methods of martyrdom in Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome, which included men and women being boiled, burned, butchered, dismembered and skinned alive, among many other tortures (Fig. 3.5).[244] Beyond the church-sanctioned images of bloody martyrdom, Caravaggio also encountered the less mainstream pictorial influences of Leonardo and the grotesque. Around the time Caravaggio was preparing to leave Cesari's studio, he befriended Prospero Orsi, a painter 13 years his elder with a troubled reputation in his own right.[245] Orsi was often referred to as *Prosperino delle grottesche* in response to his preoccupation with art of the profane nature, including paintings of mannerist grotesques, ornate masks, hybrid monsters and chimera.[246] The art of the grotesque, however, no longer held a legitimate place within the regimented ideology of the Counter Reformation, and the ecclesiastical powers that be denounced Orsi's work. In his book entitled *De sacris et profanis imaginibus* from 1582, the infamously puritanical Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti dedicated a substantial portion to the condemnation of Orsi's abominable images and the threat they posed to the Catholic Church.[247] Orsi's monster-like creatures and imaginative forms might have had an impact on Caravaggio during their years of close companionship in Rome – he would have certainly been exposed to the sort of backlash such unorthodox images received from Church authorities in the aftermath of the Council of Trent. Perhaps Caravaggio, as a result, sought a better method for assimilating profane elements into his compositions, concealing them under the thin, protective veil of his pseudo-religious subject matter.

---

[241] Monssen 1981, Pgs. 130-137.
[242] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 103-104.
[243] Ibid., Pgs. 103-104.
[244] Monssen 1981, Pgs. 130-137.
[245] Robb 2011, Pgs. 43-44.
[246] Ibid., Pgs. 43-44.
[247] Ibid., Pgs. 43-44.

The most significant pictorial model for Caravaggio's depiction of the decapitation of Holofernes could in fact lay in another female figure – this one of the decisively more mythical and nefarious variety than our Judith or Salome. The myth of Medusa has historically drawn strong parallels to the biblical Judith in regards to their traditional moralizing identifications: Judith as a proto-Marian figure, and Medusa as a symbol of the victory of reason/virtue over sensuality in her power to turn human flesh to stone through simple eye contact.[248] This virtuous symbolic association between the two female figures is demonstrated by works such as Lorenzo Sabatini's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* from ca. 1565-1566 (Fig 3.6), which, besides the obvious Piazza-esque (and by extension Francia-esque?) profusion of blood from the headless, foreshortened body in the backdrop, also includes the tiny detail of a Medusa head ornamenting the clasp of Judith's robe.[249] In addition to her moralizing character, Medusa was also a monster in classical antiquity and a threat to all humans who were tempted enough by her hideous appearance to make eye contact with her. She was eventually beheaded by Perseus, who used her severed head as a weapon until he gifted it to Athena to place on her own shield.[250] Consequently, the decapitated Medusa head became a common motif for metal combat shields, serving the apotropaic purpose of scaring off the enemy.[251] Leonardo, it is theorized, also painted a shield of his own. In Vasari's *Life of Leonardo da Vinci* from 1568, Caravaggio might have read about Vasari's own visit to the Medici collections in Florence and his encounter with Leonardo's Medusa, where the theorist noted 'it is the strangest and weirdest invention you could ever imagine".[252] Leonardo's shield painting either vanished or never existed, but Caravaggio would have had access to Vasari's description in any case. And the artist followed suit.

About one year before finishing *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, Caravaggio painted his own *Medusa* onto a round, convex wooden shield, possibly using Minniti again as his model (Fig. 3.7).[253] Del Monte commissioned the work as a gift for Ferdinando I, the Grand Duke of Tuscany.[254] And Caravaggio's Medusa *lives.* Her severed head seems to be suspended within the circular picture plain, the horrific gape of her mouth, furrow of her brows and bulging of her eyes composing a convincing mimic of real, true terror. The entangled sprawl of snakes

---

[248] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 68.
[249] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 65.
[250] Bulfinch 1913.
[251] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 67.
[252] Robb 2011, Pg. 77.
[253] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 64.
[254] Robb 2011, Pg. 76.

frame her face with frantic, serpentine movement, while jets of blood project wildly from the gaping wound at her neck. The shadowing behind Medusa's head gives the appearance that she is projecting outwards from the convex surface of the shield, infiltrating our space. Is this the moment immediately following Perseus' final, dismembering blow, or is Medusa's horrified face frozen in time? Caravaggio remains true to his ambiguity. But if these shield paintings were intended to scare, then Caravaggio's version is certainly an exemplary model.

Caravaggio's *Medusa* would be instrumental for the artist's approach to his next victim. The ribbons of blood, distortion of the face and screaming mouth are clearly repeated in Holofernes' own mimic, if not a bit more refined in his second attempt. Even more significant is Caravaggio's particular attention to the physiognomic character of his subjects. One year earlier, Caravaggio was still uneasily dancing around expressions of surprise, pain and repulsion in the face of Minniti from his *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (Fig 3.8),[255] but it seems he threw caution to the wind in both of his faces to follow. In *Medusa* and *Judith*, the artist is taking his experimentation with the extremes of human expression and physicality to an entire new level of intensity and realism. What sort of model does one consult when he wants to capture the enigma of an intense, momentary feeling – whether it be being bitten by a lizard or having your head chopped off? It is probable that Caravaggio went to the same source which inspired his *Medusa* in the first place: Leonardo. Amongst Leonardo's various ruminations in his *Book of Painting*, there is one section dedicated to the "various accidents and movements of man and proportion of the members".[256] One important passage describes the nuances and difficulties involved in authentically representing emotion, where Leonardo notes that one feeling should never be mistaken for another, and that such emotions "have to be noted down and memorized immediately", anything faked by a model appearing "neither spontaneous nor natural".[257] In fact, many of Leonardo's sketches include glimpses of human faces, caught in a range of emotions spanning from surprise and anger, to fear, disgust and pain.[258] Caravaggio, who seems heavily influenced by both Leonardo's art and theory, would have certainly taken this declaration in his book to heart, if he had read it, and strived to convey the horror and pain of both of his headless victims with the utmost authenticity.

---

[255] There are two (close to identical) versions of this painting; one located today in the National Gallery in London and one in the Roberto Longhi Foundation in Florence. An illustration of the version in London has been included in this essay.
[256] Robb 2011, Pg. 74.
[257] Ibid., Pgs. 74-75.
[258] Ibid., Pg. 74.

While Caravaggio's literary influences were few, his artistic models were many. Although the preceding survey of Caravaggio's pictorial models is by no means intended as absolute or even complete, it can be established that the artist had been surrounded by graphic, grotesque and even violent imagery throughout his life and career, and that such imagery would have played a crucial role in the development of his increasingly bloody aesthetic at the onset of the Baroque era. Additionally, the theoretical writings of Leonardo may have profoundly impacted the artist's approach to art and his interest in the authentic portrayal of emotions – an important element which also seems to come to fruition with the appearance of *Judith*. But Caravaggio's influences weren't solely of the pictorial or theoretical nature. The Counter Reformation in Italy offered its own share of visual inspiration. The proceeding section will examine the tradition and implications of the church-ordained public execution, centering around one event from the fall of 1599 which may have left the most ominous imprint on Caravaggio and in his *Judith*.

### 3.2. Decapitation on the Societal Stage

The erratic religious climate of Italian society during the Counter Reformation has been touched upon in this analysis on multiple occasions, although primarily in the context of the indoctrination of the sacred image. The Church authorities were a truly fickle bunch. They rejected the frivolity and excessiveness of Mannerism in favor of the clarity of naturalism – probably one of the primary reasons Caravaggio's radicalism, veiled by his own intense realism, was able to survive. These naturalistic images were to remain historically accurate, simple and austere – and yet the extravagant brutality portrayed in the many of the Church-ordained scenes of martyrdom far outweigh the harmless excess present in any Mannerist composition produced during the era. Visual decadence was bad, but images of brutality in service of the Church were good, and the comparatively innocuous art of the grotesque was considered one of the greatest, most immoral threats to the spread of Catholicism. The hypocrisy and volatility of the Catholic Church was profound and permeated every aspect of its ideology and regime.

As Caravaggio arrived in Rome between 1592 and 1593, he wasn't only entering into a city devastated by an agricultural crisis and experiencing a serious food deficit, he was entering into a pandemic of contradictions. While the common citizens were starving, the Papal Princes

were aggressively building, expanding and transforming Rome into the greatest and most extravagant image factory in the world.[259] While peasants and bandits were killing eachother over the price of bread, the city was being embellished with shiny new palazzos and churches at every corner.[260] In response to the glaring discrepancies between the opulence of the Church and the depravation of its people, Clement VIII campaigned with a newfound ideological rigidity, increasing the censorship of literature, further restricting the rights of women and intensifying their punishment, and vigorously policing the citizens of Rome in defense of the divine mission of Catholicism.[261] The depraved undergrowth of society was the Pope's favored target, consisting of violent criminals and unscrupulous landlords, prostitutes and their accompanying pimps, gamblers and bans of vagabonds illegally bearing swords. These were the sort of low-life characters Caravaggio would take up with when he wasn't running in the respected circles of his public champions: his masters, cardinals, and patrons. Under the Pope's militant rule, it wasn't uncommon that these vagrants would be made into a public example by means of whippings paraded on the backs of donkeys, beatings in the center of town squares, or even dismemberment and decapitation, with the bridge of St. Angelo serving as the Pope's preferred stage.[262] As the *avvisi* reported in September of 1586, while Sixtus V was still in power: "this year we've seen more heads displayed on the Sant' Angelo bridge than melons at the market".[263] And his successor reigned all the more violently.

It is certainly no coincidence that one of the most notorious and brutal public beheadings in Roman history took place in 1599 – the exact year Caravaggio produced his *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. The Cenci were a noble baronial family boasting an immense fortune, headed by Francesco Cenci, his daughter Beatrice, sons Giacomo and Bernardo, and Francesco's second wife Lucrezia.[264] Much of their fortune was acquired illicitly by Francesco's deceased father while he served as a papal treasurer – already placing the Cenci's on the Catholic Church's stringent moral radar. Francesco was described as a "vulgar and violent character" who was physically abusive to his entire family, confining his daughter and wife to a remote castle in a rural region east of Rome where he might have also raped Beatrice.[265] Giacomo and a trusted ex-guardian of the castle by the name of Olimpio Calvetti, along with the captive Beatrice and

---

[259] Ibid., Pgs. 30-33.
[260] Ibid., Pg. 35.
[261] Fragnito 2001, Pgs. 182-183.
[262] O'Connor 1993, Pg. 65.
[263] Robb 2011, Pg. 34.
[264] Ibid., Pg. 84.
[265] Dumas 1910, Pgs. 15-17.

Lucrezia, hatched a scheme to end all of their misery by murdering the tyrannical Francesco.[266] In September of 1598, Calvetti convinced a local laborer to smash Francesco's head in with a hammer while he slept, after which they dropped his lifeless body from a castle balcony and claimed he had fallen by accident.[267] Roman authorities were immediately suspicious, placing the Cencis under house arrest in Rome. On the order of Giacomo, Calvetti was ambushed and killed by a servant in an attempt to keep him quiet.[268] Calvetti's accomplice, the laborer, was eventually tortured and killed in Rome, but before he died he confessed to the murder and implicated the involvement of the entire Cenci family.[269] Fernando I de' Medici, after receiving a letter from the uncle of Beatrice and his brothers pleading for their protection, instructed Del Monte himself to "act in their favor insofar as needed".[270] The Pope, however, sought to enforce public morality and demonstrate that even unruly baronial families were subject to the totalitarian fist of the Church. After lengthy legal deliberations and the torture of all family members – eventually resulting in their confessions – Clement VIII condemned Lucrezia, Giacomo and Beatrice to death on the evening of September 10th, 1599.[271] The following morning, the Cencis were transported to St. Angelo's bridge, where a platform had been set up to house the droves of Roman public who came out to witness the spectacle. The platform was so overcrowded that it eventually collapsed, killing four people.[272] A large scaffold would have been erected on the bridge in view of the spectators, complete with a block, sword, mallet, and possibly other instruments. Giacomo, who had already been tortured with red hot irons during the procession through the city, was beaten to death with the mallet, after which his corpse was hacked into pieces in a gory technique called "quartering".[273] Lucrezia was the first to be beheaded, and had already fainted by the time her head reached the chopping block and was removed by the looming sword. Beatrice, 20 years old at the time, was a different story. The agent of Ferdinando I wrote that the young woman "died in a most holy manner, but protesting and calling for God's vengeance on Clement".[274] Beatrice is reported to have reacted with both grace and defiance, publicly accusing the Pope of not properly studying her defense before she voluntarily placed her own head on the block. All of the diplomatic reports coming out of Rome unanimously marveled at her beauty, composure and bravery. Beatrice then met the

---

[266] Ibid., Pg. 20.
[267] Robb 2011, Pg. 84.
[268] Ibid., Pg. 86.
[269] Ibid., Pg. 85.
[270] Ibid., Pg. 86.
[271] Dumas 1910, Pgs. 36-37.
[272] Robb 2011, Pg. 87.
[273] Dumas 1910, Pgs. 44-45.
[274] Robb 2011, Pg. 87.

same swift fate as her stepmother. As the execution ceremonies were brought to a close, the heads of Beatrice and Lucrezia, along with Giacomo's fragmented remains, were left on display on St. Angelo's bridge until 11 that evening – blazing torches illuminating their faces and body parts for the entire city to see.[275] Afterwards, the citizens of Rome reacted in complete outrage, romanticizing the young Beatrice as their common-day martyr and condemning the Pope's greed and brutality (Clement VIII also secured a reversion of the entire Cenci estate to the Papal treasury following their deaths [276]). In September of 1600, a year after the event, the Pope personally decreed that any written comment regarding the executions was strictly prohibited.[277] But the memory of the Cenci tragedy, and the heroic Beatrice, remained fresh in the minds of the Roman population. Even today, the notorious executions stand as a startling reminder of the extent of the Church's cruelty during the Counter Reformation.

Was Caravaggio amongst the throbbing crowd of spectators that day in Rome, fighting to catch a glimpse of the horrific executions? Did the artist stand on the platform at St. Angelo's bridge, watching as the blade sliced mercilessly through Beatrice's young, defenseless neck? Most of Rome was present the day of the Cenci killings.[278] Undoubtedly Caravaggio was at least aware of the scandal surrounding the family and their eventual sentencing, as well as the outrage which erupted in Rome after they were finally executed. Even Cardinal Del Monte, Caravaggio's main proprietor at the time, personally received instructions from the Grand Duke himself to "act in favour" of the children. Living under the Cardinal's roof, it is likely that the Cenci tragedy was a part of Caravaggio's environment, however peripherally. If he had been one of those people in that crowd that fated day, what type of sensibilities would have been awakened within the artist when he witnessed a decapitation on the unmitigated stage of his own reality? What did Caravaggio see when the executioner's sword coursed through the necks of the two women? Or afterwards, when he perused the gallery of their decapitated heads, studying the bleeding wound at their throats and the frozen terror on their faces?

Maybe, at first, his mind would wander to his female models and courtesan friends, Fillide Melandroni and Anna Bianchini. Perhaps he would associate their everyday struggle and violent mistreatment with the untimely fate of the noble and beautiful Beatrice. All women seemed to ultimately fall prey to the corruption and zealotry of the Church, regardless of their

---

[275] Ibid., Pg. 87.
[276] Ibid., Pg. 85.
[277] Ibid., Pg. 87.
[278] Ibid., Pg. 89.

social standing. Prostitutes such as Fillide and Anna belonged to Caravaggio's own private circle of sinners and criminals. In between his sessions and their engagements, they would talk together, go to the tavern together, may have even found trouble around Rome together.[279] They weren't just model and painter, they were friends. The artist would have certainly also developed some level of emotional connection to these women in the process. If Caravaggio was so irrevocably bound to the physicality of his models and their personal identities, as is evident in so much of his early work, then how could he completely detach himself from the gruesome realities which plagued these same individual's worlds when they posed for his pseudo-religious paintings? The artist himself was confronted with many of these realities directly, because he was also a part-time member of this same world. As a result, Caravaggio might have even sympathized with Beatrice, relating her plight with that of his discriminated prostitute friends, and transported a little bit of her own rebellion and determination into his portrayal of Fillide in *Judith*. Taking the common chronology and brutality of the Cenci killings and *Judith* into consideration, a political motivation behind the artist's rendering of Anna in the *Repentant Magdalene* also appears more and more plausible. All of these factors propose an image of Caravaggio which is very different from the fearful, misogynistic figure that Held alleges. The artist suddenly becomes political – altruistic even. After all, depicting Judith in such a graphic manner may have enabled Caravaggio to metaphorically turn the tables; now it was corruption and tyranny falling under a woman's sword, instead of the other way around. And maybe that *is* how the artist intended it.

One can also not neglect the profound impact such visuals would have on an artist who had set out to capture the authenticity of a momentary action – and the complex physicality and emotions involved in this action – on the two-dimensional platform of painting. Mancini might have summed up Caravaggio's artistic predicament in *Judith* best when he wrote:

> " [...] composing a history and representing feeling come from the imagination and not from observing something real in front of your eyes. You can't put the whole crowd of

---

[279] It is very likely that Bianchini and Melandroni would have known eachother: police records show that both young women were arrested together in April of 1594. Caravaggio himself was cited as a bystander during a tavern brawl between three women in spring of 1597, one of them being Bianchini. Melandroni and Ranuccio Tomassoni – the man Caravaggio would eventually allegedly murder – were also taken into custody together in February of 1599. For more details, see Robb 2011, Pgs. 82-91.

> people enacting a history into a room lit from a single window [...] So figures done like this are strong but they lack movement and feeling and grace [...] "[280]

Mancini was absolutely right. Caravaggio had already come so far with his composition. He had found his Judith, maybe found a stand-in for the body of Holofernes, probably copied Abra in from an antique frieze or bust. He'd placed his figures under a harsh spotlight in his shadowed studio, he'd probably had them pose, maybe his own sword even served as Fillide's prop. Caravaggio was determined to copy everything from nature. But once he got to the edge of that sword and the neck it was supposed to be severing, he was probably, and rather understandably, stumped. The artist needed to capture a complex, violent action from life within a stagnant history painting. With Leonardo still serving as his theoretical compass and guide, Caravaggio turned to life. And the looming Cenci beheadings would have offered a most opportune solution. It wasn't only Fillide and Anna that Caravaggio would have seen in the frozen, terror-stricken face of Beatrice as her dismembered head perched so unceremoniously on St. Angelo's bridge. He had found his Holofernes. Caravaggio wasn't only a passive bystander when the blade struck through her neck on the chopping block, he was also a student. With his commission from Costa (and his *Medusa* for the Cardinal), the artist would have been compelled to stand before that chopping block when the Cenci were murdered, driven to the scene afterwards to dutifully scrutinize their detached heads and other body parts. Such an opportunity would have been far too luring – and timely – for him to pass up on. Witnessing the Cenci killings may have been one of the most pivotal environmental factors behind Caravaggio's radical conception and portrayal of the bloody beheading of Holofernes at the hands of Judith. Although the exact day, or month, that Caravaggio finished painting his *Judith* for Costa is not known, the creation of this composition is definitively parallel to the events leading up to September 11th, 1599. And even if *Judith* may have been completed before the famous beheadings were actually consummated, it's not as if Caravaggio wouldn't have had other opportunities to find similar visuals within Rome.

Capital punishment had been a part of the status quo of Rome since antiquity. After Pope Paul III established the Holy Office in 1542, the Roman Inquisition came into full force and sought to persecute any individuals guilty of religious heresy, and these practices carried into the turn

---

[280] Robb 2011, Pg. 107.

of the century, particularly during Clement VIII's aggressive reign.[281] The form and intensity of public persecutions would vary in accordance with the crime and the accused's social standing, ranging from harmless salutary penances, to incarceration, torture, and death.[282] In the realm of capital punishment, the most dramatic practices included burning at the stake, beheading by sword, bludgeoning and dismemberment, and being boiled alive in oil.[283] In the year 1599, the philosopher Menocchio (also known as Domenico Scandella) was burned alive on the grounds of his heretical teachings.[284] Shortly after, in February of 1600, the philosopher Giordano Bruno met the same fate in Campo di'Fiori due to his blasphemous conceptions of theology, philosophy and cosmology.[285] The Menocchio and Bruno executions belong to the most famous and well-documented cases in Rome during the time that Caravaggio was residing in the city, along with the Cenci beheadings. Beatrice's end, however tragic and scandalous, was really one of many. In fact, between the years of 1592 and 1605, Clement VIII had a total of 30 odd people burned at the stake for various religious crimes.[286] This number naturally does not account for the many beheadings, bludgeonings, dismemberments and tortures which were also orchestrated on a public stage by the ruthless Pope. History reveals to us a Rome which was dominated by church-sanctioned brutality during the Counter Refor-mation. If Caravaggio needed to reproduce a complex act of violence, then he would have gone out to find it. Following Leonardo's methodology:

> "When you go around, look and consider where men gather and how they act when they speak, and when they argue or laugh or fight together [...] Sketch them briefly [...] in a little notebook that you ought to have with you all the time [...] these aren't things to rub out but to keep carefully, because the forms and actions of things are infinite and the mind can't remember them all."[287]

Of course he couldn't take a snap shot of these movements and moments, couldn't freeze them in time, but he would have had the opportunity to witness them, study them, learn them – beheadings, burnings and dismemberments alike. And an artist like him would have definitely seized such an opportunity. Because after all, what's more authentic than painting from life?

---

[281] Fragnito 2001, Pgs. 182-183.
[282] Tedeschi 1991.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Cullen 2012.
[285] Mercati 1961.
[286] Robb 2011, Pg. 48.
[287] Ibid., Pg. 110.

For Caravaggio, reality was everything. It's all he knew as a boy in Lombardy, all that he understood aesthetically, and the only thing he was willing, and able, to recreate on canvas. *Judith Beheading Holofernes* has little to do with drama, theatricality, or intentional provocation – not even the gore is really all that important. The painting has everything to do with Caravaggio's world. And in this world, bloody beheadings were not confined to the pages of instructional books on martyrdom or the two dimensions of a canvas. No wonder scholars such as Hibbard note the sudden "darkening" of his compositions at the dawn of the Baroque era, his interest in "cruelty", "violent death" and "mutilation" – imagery which must have been a part of his own "private world of fears and fantasies".[288] There was nothing private about it. Violence and death were the norm in Roman society, and Caravaggio was simply projecting his world. However shocked the modern viewer may be by the unexpected indecency of Caravaggio's early Baroque depiction, Judith's earliest critics didn't slander her for her vulgarity, they berated her for her lack of beauty and poetry. Annibale Caracci didn't see the blood in *Judith*, he was offended by the overt naturalism. If his brother Ludovico had ever seen the painting, he would probably find the extreme chiaroscuro more disconcerting than Judith sawing through Holofernes' neck. Bellori would most likely have reprimanded Caravaggio for rebuking the perfectly fool-proof models provided by classical antiquity in favor of imperfect nature. The realities of the Counter Reformation would have ultimately muted the gore present in the scene. Since the painting was privately commissioned and only intended for private display, we will never know the true extent of Rome's reaction to Caravaggio's portrayal. However, when placed within the greater historical and societal context of Italy at the turn of the century, *Judith* certainly appears to be less an anomaly and more an inevitability. The artist's Roman works became more gory because the world became more gory. And Caravaggio, as we know, painted what he saw.

## 3.3. Caravaggio's Later Works and Legacy

Following Caravaggio's *Judith* and his major commissions in the Contarelli and Cerasi chapels, the troublesome figure only had the opportunity to finish a few more paintings before he was ultimately driven from Rome by Pope Paul V's death warrant in May of 1606.[289] One of his final Roman works was the *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Fig. 3.9), completed in the year 1603 for

---

[288] Hibbard 1983, Pgs. 65, 69.
[289] Puglisi 1998, Pg. 258.

Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who would later become Pope Urban VIII.[290] The composition is arranged in a horizontal three-quarter format reminiscent of the earlier *Judith*, narrating yet another scene of biblical violence. The old, balding Abraham is shown before a convincingly receding landscape – the only true landscape Caravaggio will ever paint – lowering his son Isaac's head and preparing to slit his throat in an offering to the Old Testament God.[291]  In accordance with the biblical text, the pair are flanked by an angel interceding at the last moment, and a ram offering himself as a sacrificial substitute. Four years following our *Judith*, Caravaggio still seems preoccupied with images of people losing part – or all – of their heads. The later *Isaac* is a much more violent interpretation in comparison to an earlier version by the artist, dated around 1598 (Fig. 3.10), where the players are arranged intimately and gently in a highly suspenseful and emotional setting.[292] *Isaac*, in contrast, depicts Abraham thrusting his young son onto the stone, his hand forcefully holding Isaac's neck in place as if he were an animal to be butchered and not his own innocent flesh and blood. Abraham appears to be sure in his task and suspicious of the angel's interruption, while the face of Isaac is distorted in a palpable scream of agony and fear, a mimic directly descended from the earlier Medusa and Holofernes. Caravaggio's presentation is characteristically urgent, physical and unembellished, but a sense of refinement and control is also detectible in this later work which was not yet present in the bloody *Judith*. Unlike Judith, Abraham biblically never actually managed to slice into his son's neck (a fact that seems to truly irritate him in Caravaggio's painting), which does to an extent account for the lack of gore. But Caravaggio has managed to still imply this same impending violence with a powerful and practiced subtlety. He intensifies the horror from his first interpretation of the scene, but skillfully masks it with a pleasing, hierarchical figural grouping, a distracting landscape in the background, and a harmonious sense of light, naturalistically integrated throughout the entire painting (unlike the rudimentary frieze of figures and the artificial contrasts in *Judith*). Caravaggio is also becoming more responsive to the desires of his commissioners; Barberini eventually pressured the artist to mute the forcefulness and latent homoeroticism within the painting, and Caravaggio acquiesced to his request, making the necessary last-minute compositional changes.[293] Overall, the *Sacrifice of Isaac* is an important transitional piece, as it foreshadows the increasing sophistication in Caravaggio's later, post-Roman body of work. With his growing fame and prestige, the rebellious artist learned how to adapt his radical aesthetic to the expectations of his public and the critique of

---

[290] Hibbard 1983, Pg. 166.
[291] Robb 2011, Pg. 242.
[292] Ibid., Pg. 242.
[293] Ibid., Pg. 242.

his competition while still remaining true to his own artistic impulses. But Caravaggio will never assimilate completely.

Caravaggio revisited the theme of beheading on several occasions following his *Judith*, with varying results. After that fateful day in May 1606 when Ranuccio Tomasoni was killed, the disgraced artist was on the run, forced to shift around outer provinces of Italy with a large Papal price on his head. Caravaggio initially settled in Paliano, a feudal territory neighboring Rome where his connections through Cardinal Del Monte enabled him to find refuge with the Colonna family.[294] In this same year, Caravaggio produced the second of three versions of *David with the Head of Goliath*, located today in the Galleria Borghese (Fig. 3.11).[295] The painting stands as one of Caravaggio's most powerful, enigmatic, and biographical works to date. The artist's reluctant landscape is gone, replaced by a sweeping, impenetrable black. The delicate head and torso of a young David barely emerge from the darkness, presenting the ghastly image of Goliath's severed head at the end of his skinny, radically foreshortened arm. Goliath is pale, his mouth still slightly agape and his eyes staring emptily as vertical ribbons of blood flow downward from the cut at his neck. David, in turn, appears perturbed and sorrow-ful. The element of horror is as tangible here as it was in the earlier *Judith*, but it has now become a painfully intimate, quiet form of horror – like the artist's own muffled scream. The head of Goliath is no longer based on a studio model or one of the many frozen faces perched on St. Angelo's bridge – it is definitively the head of the artist himself. Caravaggio inverses the self-insertion of Giorgione and turns himself into the villain, not the victor. Following his sentencing in Rome, the artist experienced an immediate and devastating fall from grace. Caravaggio had lost his connections to his Papal commissioners, his wealthy private patrons, his Cardinals and his proprietors, his Marios and his Fillides. He had lost his beloved Rome. The artist had no models, and his own reality and surroundings were circumstantial and often fleeting. So, reducing his canvas to the absolute essentials, Caravaggio reproduced the only object which he could closely observe and authentically imitate: himself. In *David*, the portrayal of a disembodied head serves a very different, very new function. The earlier *Judith* is a demonstration of the *process* of decapitation – both in the action of the painted Judith, and in the many compositional idiosyncrasies and flaws which betray the uncertain hand of the artist behind it. Caravaggio is only implied, and he is still experimental and unsure. But in

---

[294] Ibid, Pgs. 344-345.
[295] Caravaggio produced his first painting of this theme in 1599 while still in Rome, located today in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. A later version, painted around 1607, is housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

*David*, the artist's self portrait in the head of Goliath leaves no shadow of a doubt. Severed from the physicality of his live models, Caravaggio has been forced into introspection, mirroring his own face and internal state of mind in the allegorical guise of another fallen giant. Goliath is an unmasked, unmediated pictorial distillation of the artist's true, psychological self, rendered with an intensity and purity like never before. Was Caravaggio making a symbolic offering of his prized head to the next opportunistic Italian who came around? Or is this rather a personal, painted plea for mercy, directed at the Pope himself?[296] Regardless of the intended recipients, these were desperate times, and subtlety was simply no longer an option for the outlawed Caravaggio.

Following *David with the Head of Goliath*, Caravaggio's canvases never really regained their light. In September of 1606, the condemned artist completed his summer stint in Paliano and moved on to Naples to pursue another major commission, where Don Marzio Colonna had promised him further protection.[297] Around 1607, he painted a solemn first version of *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (Fig. 3.12), located in the National Gallery in London.[298] The commanding, powerful intimacy of so many of Caravaggio's works seems to have been abandoned in this depiction. The figures are derivative, unemotional and generic. The old woman behind Salome – maybe Herodias? – wears an unconvincing mask of stoicism, and the model for Salome appears in two earlier Neapolitan paintings.[299] The executioner is also based on a southern laborer which resurfaces in multiple other works.[300] Most noteworthy is the lifeless head of John, in that the portrayal is so uncharacteristically unnoteworthy. There are no staring, empty eyes, no gaping mouth, no lingering vestiges of terror, there is hardly even any blood. And there is certainly no likeness to Caravaggio. John's severed head is undefined and neglected, his features veiled by an anonymity which is otherwise foreign to the artist's work. It's almost as if Caravaggio was halfheartedly quoting the muted heads of the fallen Renaissance tyrants and martyrs from almost a century before, plopped onto the platter like a burdensome attribute. Caravaggio's beheadings weren't always gory and ambiguous, particularly not during his gloomy stay in Naples. Maybe he was losing hope that the Pope would ever grant him a pardon. Maybe he had come to the realization that his chances for any form of

---

[296] Puglisi 1998, Pg. 361.
[297] Robb 2011, Pgs. 358-359.
[298] A second version was painted in ca. 1609 and can be found in the Palacio Real in Madrid.
[299] The model for Salome also appears in *Seven Works of Mercy* (1606) and *Madonna of the Rosary* (1607) (Schütze, Cologne 2009, Pgs. 191, 147).
[300] The same male laborer can be found *Christ at the Column* (1607) and *Flagellation of Christ* (1607) (Schütze, Cologne 2009, Pgs. 200-201, 197).

salvation – and the Godly sort in particular – were becoming dauntingly minimal. So much for the artist's naive, desperate plea for efficacious grace in his youthful *Calling of St. Matthew*. Caravaggio was older now, had seen too much and sinned one too many times. The darkness and desolation that surrounded him eventually crept its way into his own compositions, and the lifeless *Salome* may be a startling testament to his ever-darkening state of mind.

After arriving in Malta in the final months of 1607, Caravaggio set his sights on becoming a knight in the order of Saint John of Jerusalem.[301] Gaining knighthood would supply the artist with a level of social standing again, protection, powerful contacts, and most importantly, better chances for a Papal pardoning.[302] The Grand Master of the Order, Alof de Wignacourt, seemed convinced by Caravaggio's enthusiasm (and a number of paintings the artist had already been working on for him in Naples) and in 1608 received approval from the Pope's ambassador to award Caravaggio with knighthood.[303] In the same year, he also completed his commission by the Knights of Malta for the altarpiece in St. John's Co-Cathedral. The knights were in need of a glorified image of their patron saint – what better way for Caravaggio to show his gratitude for their benevolence and his devotion to the Order? The *Beheading of John the Baptist* (Fig. 3.13) is the artist's final treatment of the subject of beheading, set on a truly monumental scale. He would never paint anything bigger. The painting is Caravaggio's masterpiece; a testament to his ability to seamlessly reconcile traditional ideals, religious subject matter, his patron's orders and his own artistic perversity on a massive, public scale. We have come very far from our *Judith*. The interior scene and the players are arranged with an unusual but pleasing abstract symmetry. There are no longer any half-figures or busts, cut-off by projecting tables or platforms; we have full-length, life-size figures, rendered within a larger, believable architectural space. Salome bends over, ready to receive John's head on her typical golden platter, while an aged Herodias stands beside her and gestures with shock. A jailer gives the executioner his final instructions, and the executioner prepares to finish detaching John's head with his dagger, his sword still lying next to the bleeding victim. All the while, two anonymous prisoners peer in on the scene behind a grated window to the right. An arched doorway to the left provides a receding glimpse into the world beyond the shadowy prison. The interior details were probably based on a depiction of a prison in the Knights of

---

[301] Robb 2011, Pg. 398.
[302] Ibid., Pg. 398.
[303] Ibid., Pgs. 409-411.

Malta's penal code, which would have pleased the painting's patrons.[304] What is truly remark-able is Caravaggio's ability to mute the horror in this final beheading. John may be lying on the floor bleeding, but it is a clean, controlled bleed. There are no streaking jets of blood like in *Judith* or *Medusa*. This decapitation is also being carried out professionally. John is already long dead – the executioner just needs to sever the last bit of skin still connecting his head to his body to complete the task. This means no shrieking victim, no contorted bodies, no uneasy executioner. The crude drama of *Judith* has been replaced by cool and confident precision – the sort of refinement which Caravaggio only hinted at in his Roman *Sacrifice of Isaac* from two years earlier. But Caravaggio was compulsive in his need for self-reference, and this sophisti-cated masterpiece is no exception to that rule. The artist inscribed his own name in the delicate spill of blood from John's throat – "Fra Michel Angelo",[305] already using his denomination as a knight of Malta. This was the only time Caravaggio ever signed a painting. If he was in fact associating his own indefinite fate with that of John's, then this work would prove eerily prophetic. Caravaggio would be dead in two years.

Following his mysterious death in the summer of 1610 en route to Rome, Caravaggio's celebrity as a notorious criminal and brilliant career as a painter caused the market for paint-ings in his signature style to skyrocket, leading to numerous followers and imitators throughout the Baroque era.[306] Since Caravaggio never established a proper workshop and never took on any apprentices, the impact of his dramatic and innovative aesthetic is difficult to trace. The stylistic aspects of his painting – his intensity and immediacy, vivid realism, and extreme chiaroscuro – can be found dispersed amongst masters of the 17th century on an international scale. There's undeniably a little bit of Caravaggio peering out at us from the shadowed depths of Zurbarán, Rembrandt and Vermeer's canvases, for example. Caravaggio was revolutionary for the art of the Baroque. But a consummate follower of the deviant artist is near impossible to define. While there exists no unequivocal Caravaggesque painter, there are *Caravaggisti* – the main protagonists of international Caravaggism which took what they wanted from his art and translated them into their own compositions, but never with the same degree of risk or disre-

---

[304] Varriano 2006, Pg. 116.
[305] Due to the painting's substantial damages, the artist's signature now reads "*F Michel A…*". Scholars agree that it would have originally read "*Fra Michel Angelo*" (For more details, see Hibbard 1983, Pg. 231).
[306] Franklin/Schütze 2011, Pg. 24.

gard.[307] Many of these artists also turned to Caravaggio's radical portrayal of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* as a model for their own adaptations of the popular biblical subject.

*Judith* remained within the family of Ottavio Costa until the early 20th century when it was acquired by the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in 1971, where it is still housed today.[308] Although the work was confined to the private collection of the Costa family for almost four centuries following its creation, curious artists and Caravaggio enthusiasts seemed to have managed to catch more than just a glimpse of the painting. Spezzaferro reports that Carlo Saraceni's version of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* from ca. 1610-1615 presupposes an intimate knowledge of Caravaggio's own *Judith*, which at the time would have still been located in Costa's home.[309] Around 1626, the French artist Valentin de Boulogne conceived his own beheading, which Uppenkamp claims is so similar to Caravaggio's that it indicates de Boulogne would have had ample time and opportunity to study the painting in meticulous detail during his time in Italy.[310] Costa and his family may not have kept studious notes tracking the comings and goings of the deceased Caravaggio's admirers and imitators in the patron's house, but scholarship seems to be unanimous in the assumption that multiple *Carravagisti* would have had access to the *Judith*. There was definitely some traffic in Costa's collection. We may never exactly know when, how and who, but we certainly do see the result of this artistic interchange.

The iconography of Judith and Holofernes proves just as multifaceted in the Baroque era as it was during the Renaissance. Judith never does seem to lose her symbolic and pictorial malleability, many artists reviving the fail-safe image of the virtuous and triumphant Judith under the moralizing pressures of the Catholic Church.[311] But after Caravaggio's death, the portrayal of the dramatic climax of the narrative seems to finally detach itself from its historical taboo. De Boulogne depicted a bloody beheading about 25 years after Caravaggio's (Fig. 3.14).[312] Under tenebrous lighting, Judith saws through the neck of the still-living Holofernes. The three-quarter figures of Judith and her shriveled old Abra distinctly mirror Caravaggio's arrangement. Holofernes is writhing and resisting, his face contorted and eyes bulging in horror

---

[307] Ibid., Pg. 26.
[308] Ibid., Pg. 263.
[309] Spezzaferro 1974, Pg. 584.
[310] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 72.
[311] Ibid., Pgs. 77-78.
[312] Straussman-Pflanzer 2013, Pg. 17.

and pain. De Boulogne seems to have also managed a couple of minor improvements on his precursor's composition: Holofernes' blood splashes more naturalistically, and his defenseless positioning on his backside allows for a cleaner, more realistic decapitation at the hands of the young Judith, who appears completely unperturbed by the entire scene. De Boulogne also achieves a stronger pictorial effect here. Holofernes' head and torso are thrust even further into the forefront of the picture frame, part of his head and Judith's arm slightly cropped by the edges. Holofernes' head might even roll out of the lower part of the canvas once Judith is finished. De Boulogne has taken Caravaggio's monumentality and intensified it, rendering the biblical beheading with a new sense of urgency and immediacy.

De Boulogne's *Judith* would have never been without Caravaggio. The same goes for the German artist Johann Liss' *Judith in the Tent of Holofernes* from approximately 1622 (Fig. 3.15).[313] Although Liss doesn't choose the fated moment in which Holofernes loses his head, his presentation is so startlingly graphic that it must owe part of its gore to the Cara-vaggean tradition. Liss, like Caravaggio and de Boulogne, brings his figures to the immediate foreground, but here the focus is the haunting stare of Judith and the blood mercilessly gushing from Holofernes' severed neck, his head and her maid barely visible in the shadows of the background. The artist provides us with a voyeuristic glimpse at a woman who has been caught in the act, and she doesn't appear particularly regretful about it either. The darkened backdrop, monumentality of the figures, and dramatic moment of brutality are distinctly Carravagesque, but other elements of the painting also point to a Renaissance ancestry. We've seen Judith's backward gaze before in Michelangelo's fresco of the same theme in the Sistine chapel (Fig. 1.24),[314] and the headless, foreshortened body of Holofernes seems to yet again resurface from Francia's drawing and Piazza and Sabatini's later paintings (Figs. 1.18, 3.4, 3.6, respectively). Caravaggio might have paved the way for the intensity of the gore, but Liss also appropriated other elements of the Renaissance to compose his own innovative take on the decapitation.

It seems that one cannot write about Caravaggio's followers without discussing Artemisia Gentileschi. Of the many *Caravaggisti*, Gentileschi is one of the most contemporary to the artist, and produced the only other version of Judith removing the head of Holofernes which may be more famous than Caravaggio's own. Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* from

---

[313] There are two documented versions of Liss' painting which are almost identical. The earliest is in the National Gallery in London and has been included in this essay. A later version is located in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.
[314] Uppenkamp 2004, Pg. 80.

approximately 1620 is her most defining work (Fig. 3.16). While heightening Caravaggio's violence and drama, Gentileschi simultaneously refines it. If Caravaggio's Judith seemed awkward or perplexed by her task, Gentileschi's Judith is decisive and assured. If Caravaggio's Judith unskillfully and unrealistically sawed away at Holofernes' neck, the vertical blade of Gentileschi's Judith seems to glide right through it.  If Caravaggio's withered Abra stands as an austere Roman bust on the periphery of the scene, Gentileschi's Abra is youthful, alive, and willfully entangled in the bloody act. And if Caravaggio's Holofernes is still shrieking in terror while a few meager ribbons of blood project from his neck, Gentileschi's is already dead, blood spouting in every direction, soaking his sheets and spotting the women's silken clothes. It's like the pictorial answer to Held's feministic plea in her critique of Caravaggio's *Judith*. This murderess knows exactly what she's doing.

Gentileschi was an avid follower of Caravaggio's style.[315] She'd learned his chiaroscuro, the monumentality of his drama and intensity of his realism, and she transported all of these elements into her *Judith* with seamless confidence. But, as Held would have wanted, this is no longer a "subjectified" vision of Judith. Gentileschi's heroine is a self-possessed and merciless killer; a female type which is new to the history of Judith's iconography – at least in conjunction with so much blood. The young Gentileschi's well-documented biography probably has a lot to do with her shocking Baroque interpretation. While training under her father Orazio, Gentileschi came into contact with the painter Agostino Tassi, who eventually became her tutor.[316] In the year 1611, when she was 17 years of age, Tassi raped Gentileschi in her own home.[317] During the ensuing seven-month trial, Gentileschi was subjected to gynecological exams and tortured with thumbscrews to verify her testimony that she was a virgin before the rape.[318] Tassi was eventually found guilty and sentenced to five years' exile from Rome, a punishment which was never fully enforced.[319] Gentileschi remarried in November of 2012, but would be forever marked by Tassi's assault and the legal proceedings which had made the details of the rape very public.[320] Shortly after her marriage, she and her husband moved north to Florence to escape the glare of Rome, where she later produced her *Judith*. Was Gentileschi reacting to her sexual defilement by Tassi and mistreatment by the Roman justice system in the painting, employing the vicious heroine as a metaphor for the artist enacting her own bloody

---

[315] Straussman-Pflanzer 2013, Pg. 13.
[316] Ibid., Pg. 13.
[317] Curry 1994, Pg. 74.
[318] Ibid., Pg. 75.
[319] Straussman-Pflanzer 2013, Pgs. 13-14.
[320] Ibid., Pgs. 13-14.

revenge on the tyranny which had infiltrated her intimate life and world? Have Hibbard's Freudian nightmares finally come true? The general consensus in scholarship is yes, and this assessment does seem justified, particularly in comparison with the artist's earliest painterly attempt at the same beheading. Gentileschi's produced a Judith of the same title and subject between the years of 1610-1613 while she was still residing in Rome (Fig. 3.17). The exact date for the Roman version remains widely contended.[321] Whether it was painted before or after Tassi's assault, the earlier Judith demonstrates a notable progression in Gentileschi's treatment of the theme. Next to the merciless bloodbath produced almost a decade later, the Roman beheading appears timid and restrained – there are still even traces of Fillide's perplexity in the furrow of Judith's brow. It is first in Florence, away from the corruption of Rome and the oppressive presence of Tassi, that Gentileschi can really let the blood start to flow, Judith and her blade becoming more consequent and solidified in their vengeful roles. The dueling compositions indicate that the subject of Holofernes' beheading may have served as a means of psychological catharsis for Gentileschi – not unlike Caravaggio's own severed head in *David and Goliath* and his bloody signature in *Beheading of John*. She may not have been able to bring Tassi to justice in life, but the Florentine Judith certainly did it in painting. And it was Caravaggio's *Judith* which set the stage for Gentileschi to finally act out her own brutal revenge.

The intensity and brutality in Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* from 1599 reverberates throughout the Baroque. Caravaggio's rendering, whether intentionally or not, altered the portrayal of decapitation in art, and the effects can be felt well into the 17th century, up until the ornamentation and insincerity of French Rococo replaced the public's interest in realism in Italy. However inherently flawed and unrhetorical *Judith* may be, Caravaggio achieved something in this painting that no artist before him was capable of: he projected his reality. And imitating reality, as we have seen, was as bloody a concept as it was revolutionary. Caravaggio's realism, flawed as it may be, is truly his greatest legacy.

---

[321] There is no real consensus for the dating of the Roman painting throughout its literature. For example, Schütze claims in *Caravaggio and His Followers In Rome* (Franklin/Schütze 2011) that the Roman *Judith* was painted between 1612-1613, placing it after Gentileschi's rape, whereby Straussman-Pflanzer in *Violence & Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes* (Straussman-Pflanzer 2013) dates the painting around the year 1610, which would precede her assault in 1611.

## Abstract

In the iconographic development of Judith and Holofernes within the art of the Italian Renaissance, the biblical heroine and Old Testament story have demonstrated powerful symbolic elasticity. Judith first emerges in Florence as a patriotic and communal symbol of virtue, traveling southwards at the turn of the 16th century and becoming increasingly more decorative, idealized and non-political, eventually gaining popularity in the form of contemporary Venetian portraiture. Venice also develops a new stylistic motif for the portrayal of the rhetorical contrast between Judith and her maid. Michelangelo stands as one of the first artists to transport Judith to Rome, and contributes a critical and innovative adaptation of the biblical subject which will be continually referenced in the century to follow. Overall, elements of the Medieval tradition persevere throughout the Renaissance. The Northern provinces, and most prominently the city of Florence, are established as the true birthplace of the iconography of Judith and Holofernes within Italy.

The Baroque master Caravaggio is identified as the first artist since the Renaissance to represent the decapitation of Holofernes at the hands of Judith in a painting dated 1599 and produced in Rome. The biography of Caravaggio illustrates a figure who was masterly and highly innovative in his art, but volatile in his life, and experienced an extraordinary and short-lived career as a painter. Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* is characterized as an early painting from an inexperienced young artist on basis of the many formal inaccuracies and artistic deficiencies apparent, where the traditional rhetorical and religious-symbolic functions of the painting are equally underdeveloped or intentionally neglected. Caravaggio's approach to realism is defined as selective and fundamentally flawed, his extreme chiaroscuro employed in his early work as a stylistic device to resolve such flaws. Despite these deficiencies, the representation of realism and gore within *Judith* is drastic in comparison with contemporary renderings of the same biblical subject, and requires analysis on a more macrocosmic level to better contextualize the painting.

The pictorial models for Caravaggio's *Judith* are abundant. The artist's childhood and training in the artistic traditions of the North proves greatly influential, the Renaissance painting and theory of Giorgione and the gore of Piazza in particular. Once in Rome, the post-Tridentine demand for bloody images of martyrdom provide ample inspiration for Caravaggio. The artist's friendship with Prosperino Orsi, the notorious painter of the grotesque,

may have also had an indirect impact on his approach to the sacred image. Caravaggio's depiction of Medusa's head functions as the artist's first essay in decapitation, whereby the integrality of Leonardo's artistic theories is further implicated. Ultimately, Caravaggio's greatest source of visual inspiration for his graphic depiction of *Judith* can be found in the historical realities of Rome during the Counter Reformation, which included innumerable beheadings, burnings, dismemberments and tortures which were sanctioned by the Catholic Church and regularly placed on public display, and most poignantly the famous execution of the Cenci family, which took place the same year that *Judith* was produced.

Following *Judith*, Caravaggio revisits the subject of decapitation in multiple works of various biblical subjects, his later paintings exhibiting a subtlety and refinement which demonstrate his artistic growth. Caravaggio's compulsion for self-insertion also continues into his later paintings of decapitation, becoming progressively more overt and morbid and intimately mirroring his own darkening psychological state. The artist's unexpected death garners him more celebrity and unofficial followers, many of which adapt the realism, drama and brutality of his style to their own depictions of Judith. Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* ultimately revolutionizes the representation of the biblical subject in art, and sets the stage for the masters of the Baroque and the many gory depictions to follow.

## 4. Abstrakt (Deutsch)

In der ikonographischen Entwicklung von Judith und Holofernes in der Kunst der italienischen Renaissance haben sowohl die biblische Heldin als auch die Geschichte im Alten Testament eine starke symbolische Anpassungsfähigkeit aufgewiesen. Judith erscheint zuerst in Florenz als ein patriotisches und kommunales Zeichen der Tugend und ist Anfang des 16. Jahrhunderts südwärts transportiert worden, wobei die Figur ein zunehmend dekoratives, idealisiertes und unpolitisches Erscheinungsbild annimmt. Schließlich gewinnt Judith Popularität in Form zeitgenössischer venezianischer Porträtmalerei. In Venedig wird auch ein neues Stilmotiv für die Darstellung des rhetorischen Kontrasts zwischen Judith und ihrer Magd entwickelt. Michelangelo gilt als einer der ersten Künstler, der Judith nach Rom transportiert hat und trägt dazu eine wichtige und innovative Adaption des biblischen Themas bei, welche im folgenden Jahrhundert kontinuierlich wieder referenziert werden wird. Die Renaissance wird von Elementen der mittelalterlichen Tradition noch stark beeinflusst. In den nördlichen Provinzen – und der Stadt Florenz am wesentlichsten – ist der wahre Ursprung der Ikonographie von Judith und Holofernes in Italien zu sehen.

Der Barockmaler Caravaggio gilt als der erste Künstler seit der Renaissance, der die eigentliche Enthauptung von Holofernes in Form eines römischen Gemäldes von 1599 dargestellt hat. Die Biographie von Caravaggio zeigt eine charismatische und innovative Figur mit einem schwierigen Lebensweg und einer außergewöhnlichen und kurzlebigen Karriere als Maler. Caravaggios *Judith und Holofernes* wird aufgrund der vielen formalen Ungenauigkeiten als ein Frühwerk von einem noch unerfahrenen Künstler bezeichnet, wobei die traditionellen rhetorischen und religiös-symbolische Funktionen der Malerei auch vernachlässigt worden sind. Caravaggio's Art von Realismus ist als selektiv und grundlegend fehlerhaft charakterisiert worden. Sein extremer Hell-Dunkel Effekt funktioniert dabei, um solche formale Unstimmigkeiten in seinem Frühwerk zu verbergen. Trotz dieser Mängel ist die Darstellung von Realismus und Grausamkeit in *Judith* im Vergleich mit zeitgenössischen Darstellungen des gleichen biblischen Themas drastisch und erfordert demzufolge eine noch tiefgreifendere Analyse, um das Werk besser zu kontextualisien.

Caravaggios Bildmodelle waren reichlich vorhanden. Seine Kindheit und Ausbildung in der künstlerischen Tradition des Nordens erweist sich als besonders einflussreich – die Renaissance-Malerei und Theorie von Giorgione und die Grausamkeit von Piazza im Besonderen. In Rom wurde er auch mit den nachtridentinischen, blutigen Bildern von Martyrien konfrontiert. Seine Bekanntschaft mit Prosperino Orsi, dem berühmten Maler des Grotesken, könnte einen indirekten Einfluss auf seine eigenen sakralen Bilder gehabt haben. Caravaggios *Kopf der Medusa* fungiert als seine erste Auseinandersetzung mit dem Thema der Enthauptung, wobei der Einfluss von Leonardos künstlerischen Theorien auf Caravaggio noch stärker impliziert wird. Schließlich kann die historische Realität Roms während der Gegenreformation als die aller größte Quelle visueller Inspiration für den Künstler gelten – vor allem die unzähligen Enthauptungen, Verbrennungen, Verstümmelungen und Folterungen, welche von der katholischen Kirche sanktioniert und regelmäßig öffentlich aufgeführt worden sind. Am bedeutendsten war die Exekution der Familie Cenci, welche im selben Jahr, in dem *Judith und Holofernes* entstanden ist, stattgefunden hat.

Nach *Judith* greift Caravaggio mehrmals auf das Thema der Enthauptung in Form von verschiedensten biblischen Themen zurück. Sein Spätwerk zeigt eine gewisse Feinheit und Subtilität, welche seine künstlerische Entwicklung demonstriert. Caravaggios Zwang zur Selbstreferenzierung wird immer deutlicher und morbider in seinem Spätwerk, was wiederum seinen eigenen beunruhigenden psychologischen Zustand wiederspiegelt. Nach seinem unerwarteten Tod wurde Caravaggio noch berühmter, wodurch sich auch inoffizielle Nachfolger fanden, die seinen Realismus durch ihre eigene Malweise tradierten. Letztendlich hat Caravaggios *Judith und Holofernes* die Geschichte der Darstellung des biblischen Themas revolutioniert und setzte somit Maßstäbe für die Meister des Barock und die vielen blutigen Adaptationen der Judith, welche noch folgen sollten.

# 5. Curriculum Vitae

(BA) Sarah Elisabeth Martin-Hall Gnirs

Bachelor of Arts in Art History/Criticism

Born 01.03.1987 in Whittier, California, U.S.A.

2005            Diploma – Eisenhower High School, Rialto, California

2005–2009    Study at University of California, San Diego
                UC San Diego Research Conference Participant in Art History Division
                Study Abroad in Rome, Italy with concentration in Art History and Italian
                Art History Honors Seminar, Graduated with Departmental Honors in High
                Distinction for Art History/Criticism (BA)

2010–2011    Intensive German Language Course at the University of Vienna
                (Vorstudienlehrgang)

2010–present   Administrative Assistant at Barta & Partner Art Insurance/Consulting, Vienna

2011–present   Study at University of Vienna – Master of Arts in Kunstgeschichte (MA)

# 6. Works Cited

**Armenini 1977**
Giovanni Battista Armenini, On the True Precepts of the Art of Painting, ed. by E.J. Olszewski, New York 1977.

**Baglione 1642**
Giovanni Baglione, Le Vite De'Pittori, Scultori et Architetti, Rome 1642.

**Baron 1966**
Hans Baron, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance; Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny, Princeton 1966.

**Bellori 1672**
Giovanni Pietro Bellori, Le Vite de'Pittori, Scultori e Architetti Moderni, Rome 1672.

**Bersani/Dutoit 1998**
Leo Bersani/Ulysse Dutoit, Caravaggio's Secrets, Cambridge 1998.

**Brine/Ciletti/Lähnemann 2010**
Kevin R. Brine/Elena Ciletti/Henrike Lähnemann, The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines, Cambridge 2010.

**Bulfinch 1913**
Thomas Bulfinch, Perseus and Medusa, in: Age of Fable: Stories of Gods and Heroes, Vols. I & II, New York 1913.

**Burckhardt 2005**
Jacob Burckhardt, Italian Renaissance Painting According to Genres, Los Angeles 2005.

**Caroli 1989**
Flavio Caroli, Fede Galizia, Torino 1989.

**Cross/Livingstone 2005**
Frank Leslie Cross/Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Council of Trent (1545-63), in: The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, New York 2005.

**Curry 1994**
Peggy L. Curry, Representing the Biblical Judith in Literature and Art: an Intertextual Cultural Critique, (unpubl.), Massachusetts 1994.

**Dal Bello 2010**
Mario Dal Bello, Die Bibel des Caravaggio: Bilder aus dem Alten und Neuen Testament, Regensberg 2010.

**Douay-Rheims Bible**
Latin Vulgate Old Testament Bible – Judith, in: Douay-Rheims Bible, 2005-2012 (07.07.2014), URL: http://vulgate.org.

**Dumas 1910**
Alexandre Dumas, Celebrated Crimes, New York 1910.

**Encyclopaedia Brittanica**
Book of Judith, in: Encyclopaedia Brittanica, nd (21.03.2014), URL:
http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/307589/Book-of-Judith.

**Encyclopedia of Art History**
Renaissance Art in Venice, in: Encyclopedia of Art History, nd (29.03.2014),
http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/renaissance-in-venice.htm.

**Erhardt/Morris 2012**
Michelle A. Erhardt/Amy M. Morris, Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the
Baroque, Leiden 2012.

**Fondazione Querini Stampalia**
Fondazione Querini Stampalia, nd (21.08.2014), URL: http://www.querinistampalia.org/
eng/uploads/Schede%20Museo_eng.pdf.

**Fragnito 2001**
Gigliola Fragnito, Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy, Cambridge 2001.

**Franklin/Schütze 2011**
David Franklin/Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio and His Followers in Rome, New Haven 2011.

**Fried 2010**
Michael Fried, The Moment of Caravaggio, Princeton 2010.

**Garrard 1989**
Mary D. Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art,
Princeton 1989.

**Gilbert 1995**
Creighton Gilbert, Caravaggio and His Two Cardinals, University Park 1995.

**Grössinger 1997**
Christa Grössinger, Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art, New York 1997.

**Harris 2005**
Ann Sutherland Harris, Seventeenth-Century Art & Architecture, Upper Saddle River 2005.

**Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History**
Niccolò Malermi: Biblia Italica (Italian Bible), in: Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, 2000-
2014 (04.04.2014), URL: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/33.66.

**Held 1996**
Jutta Held, Caravaggio: Politik und Martyrium der Körper, Berlin 1996.

**Hibbard 1983**
Howard Hibbard, Caravaggio, New York 1983.

**Justi 1908**
Ludwig Justi, Giorgione, Berlin 1908.

**Kelly 1910**
Blanche Mary Kelly, Andrea Mantegna, in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1910 (31.03.2014), URL: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09610a.htm.

**Kington 2010**
Tom Kington, The Mystery of Caravaggio's Death Solved At Last – Painting Killed Him, in: The Guardian, 2010 (22.06.2014), URL: http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jun/16/caravaggio-italy-remains-ravenna-art.

**Kristeller/Strong 1901**
Paul Kristeller/S. Arthur Strong, Andrea Mantegna, London 1901.

**Kubiak 1965**
Richard Joseph Kubiak, The Iconography of Judith in Italian Renaissance Art, (unpubl.), Wisconsin 1965.

**Le Goff 1994**
Raichel Le Goff, Venetian Portraiture 1475-1575: Mistresses and Courtesans, A Discussion of the Erotic Appeal of the So-Called Belle Donne Portraits Concentrating on the Works of Palma Vecchio and Titian, 1994 (21.08.2014), URL: http://raichel.org/articlesRaichel/Art-Research/N-corteg.htm.

**Lightbown 2014**
Ronald W. Lightbown, Late Works, in: Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2014 (24.03.2014), URL: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/75231/Sandro-Botticelli/783/Late-works.

**Malvasia 1980**
Carlo Cesare Malvasia, The Life of Guido Reni, University Park 1980.

**Mancini 1956**
Giulio Mancini, Considerazioni sulla Pittura, Rome 1956.

**Mander/Waterschoot 1983**
Carel Van Mander/W. Waterschoot. Ter Liefde der Const: Uit Het Schilder-Boeck, Leiden 1983.

**Mansfield 2007**
Elizabeth Mansfield, Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis, Minneapolis 2007.

**Mercati 1961**
Angelo Mercati, Il Sommario del Processo di Giordano Bruno con Appendice di Documenti sull'Eresia e l'Inquisizione a Modena nel Secolo XVI, Vatican City 1961.

**Mergenthaler 1997**
Volker Mergenthaler, Medusa Meets Holofernes: Poetologische, Semiologische und Intertextuelle Diskursivierung von Enthauptung, Bern 1997.

**Migiel/Schiesari 1991**
Marilyn Migiel/Juliana Schiesari, Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance, Ithaca 1991.

**Monssen 1981**
Leif Holm Monssen, Rex Gloriose Martyrum: A Contribution to Jesuit Iconography, in: The Art Bulletin, 1981, Pgs. 130-137.

**Murphy 2012**
Cullen Murphy, God's Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World, Boston 2012.

**O'Connor 1993**
Colin O'Connor, Roman Bridges, Cambridge 1993.

**Pericolo 2011**
Lorenzo Pericolo, Caravaggio and the Pictorial Narrative: Dislocating the Istoria in Early Modern Painting, London 2011.

**Pope 2012**
Hugh Pope, Book of Judith, in: Charles G. Herbermann (ed.), The Catholic Encyclopedia: an International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church, New York 2012, Pgs. 554-556.

**Prater 1992**
Andreas Prater, Licht und Farbe bei Caravaggio: Studien zur Ästhetik und Ikologie des Helldunkels, Stuttgart 1992.

**Puglisi 1998**
Catherine R. Puglisi, Michelangelo Merisi Da Caravaggio, London 1998.

**Reid 1969**
Jane Davidson Reid, The True Judith, in: The Art Journal, 1969, Pgs. 376-387.

**Robb 2000**
Peter Robb, M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio, New York 2000.

**Robb 2011**
Peter Robb, M: The Caravaggio Enigma, London 2011.

**Röttgen 1964**
Herwarth Röttgen, Giuseppe Cesari, die Contarelli-Kapelle und Caravaggio, in: Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, 1964, Pgs. 201-227.

**Santing/Baert/Traninger 2013**
Catrien Santing/Barbara Baert/Anita Traninger, Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture, Leiden 2013.

**Schütze 2009**
Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009.

**Smyth/Cropper 1992**
Craig Hugh Smyth/Elizabeth Cropper, Mannerism and Maniera, Vienna 1992.

**Spezzaferro 1971**
Luigi Spezzaferro, La Cultura del Cardinal del Monte e il Primo Tempo del Caravaggio, in: Storia dell'Arte, 1971, Pg. 57-92.

**Spezzaferro 1974**
Luigi Spezzaferro, The Documentary Findings: Ottavio Costa as a Patron of Caravaggio, in: The Burlington Magazine, Special Issue Devoted to Caravaggio and the Caravaggesques, 1974, Pg. 579-591.

**Straussman-Pflanzer 2013**
Eve Straussman-Pflanzer, Violence & Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes, Chicago 2013.

**Sutcliffe 1948**
Edmund F. Sutcliffe, The Council of Trent and the Authentia of the Vulgate, in: The Journal of Theological Studies, 1948, Pgs. 35-42.

**Taylor 1966**
Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark, London 1966.

**Tedeschi 1991**
John A. Tedeschi, The Prosecution of Heresy: Collected Studies on the Inquisition in Early Modern Italy, in: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Binghamton 1991.

**The Art Institute of Chicago**
The Gates of Paradise: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece, in: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2011 (21.03.2014), URL: http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/ghiberti/themes.html.

**Thieme/Becker 1912**
Ulrich Thieme/Felix Becker, in: E.A. Seeman (ed.), Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler bis zur Gegenwart, Vol. VI, Leipzig 1912, Pg. 53.

**Trevor-Roper 1969**
H.R. Trevor-Roper, The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays, New York 1969.

**United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**
Judith, in: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010 (04.03.2014), URL: http://www.usccb.org/bible/judith.

**Uppenkamp 2004**
Bettina Uppenkamp, Judith und Holofernes in der Italienischen Malerei des Barock, Berlin 2004.

**Varriano 2006**
John L. Varriano, Caravaggio: The Art of Realism, University Park 2006.

**Vasari 1917**
Giorgio Vasari, Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, Vol. II, New York 1917.

**Von Rosen 2009**
Valeska Von Rosen, Caravaggio und die Grenzen des Darstellbaren: Ambiguität, Ironie und Performativität in der Malerei um 1600, Berlin 2009.

# 7. Illustration Sources

**Figs. 1.1 – 1.8:** Uppenkamp 2004, Pgs. 27-34.

**Figs. 1.9 – 1.13:** Kubiak 1965, Figs. 5-9.

**Fig. 1.14:** Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin 1975, Cat. No. 21.

**Fig. 1.15:** Indiana University Art Museum Provenance Project, https://www.indiana.edu/~iuam/provenance/view.php?id=259 (accessed 18.08.2014).

**Fig. 1.16 – 1.17:** Kubiak 1965, Figs. 15, 16.

**Fig. 1.18:** Cara D. Denison/Helen B. Mules, European Drawings, 1375-1825, Oxford 1981, No. 6.

**Fig. 1.19:** National Gallery of Art: The Collection, http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.1181.html (accessed 30.08.2014).

**Fig. 1.20:** Hermitage Museum: Collection Highlights, http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/03/hm3_3_1c.html (accessed 01.09.2014).

**Fig. 1.21:** Fondazione Querini Stampalia, http://www.querinistampalia.org/ eng/uploads/Schede%20Museo_eng.pdf (accessed 21.08.2014).

**Fig. 1.22:** Kubiak 1965, Fig. 27.

**Fig. 1.23:** St. Louis Art Museum, https://www.slam.org/european/works/07.html (accessed 22.08.2014).

**Fig. 1.24:** Web Gallery of Art, http://www.wga.hu/art/m/michelan/3sistina/5spandre/00_1pe1.jpg (accessed 28.08.2014).

**Fig. 1.25:** Musei Vaticani (ed.), Michelangelo. La Cappella Sistinia. Documentazione e Interpretazioni. Tavole. Il Giudizio Universale Restaurato, Vol. I, Novara 2002, Fig. 52/1.

**Fig. 1.26:** Hans Tietze, Tizian. Leben und Werk, Vienna 1936, Vol. 2, Pg. 286.

**Fig. 1.27:** Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie, UNIDAM.

**Fig. 1.28:** Musei di Strada Nuova: Palazzo Rosso, http://www.museidigenova.it/spip.php?article475&var_recherche=veronese (accessed 01.09.2014).

**Fig. 1.29:** Uppenkamp 2004, Fig. 31.

**Fig. 1.30:** N. Bätzner, Andrea Mantegna 1430/31 - 1506, Cologne 1998, Pg. 103.

**Fig. 2.1:** Exh. Cat., David Franklin/Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio and His Followers in Rome, Ottawa/Fort Worth 2011, Pg. 263.

**Fig. 2.2:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 41.

**Fig. 2.3:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 38.

**Fig. 2.4:** Exh. Cat., Andrea Bayer (ed.), Painters of Reality, The Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 27 Mai 2004 - 15 August 2004, New York 2004, Pg. 170.

**Fig. 2.5:** Caravaggio's "La Buona Ventura" (The Fortune Teller): A masterpiece from the "Musei Capitolini", Rome, in: Italian Cultural Institute of New York/Speed Art Museum, New York 2011, Pg. 1.

**Fig. 2.6:** Renato Guttuso, I Classici dell'Arte, Caravaggio, Florence 2003, Pg. 85.

**Fig. 2.7:** Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, Caravaggio. Sehen-Staunen-Glauben. Der Maler und sein Werk, Munich 2009, Pg. 89.

**Fig. 2.8:** Web Gallery of Art, http://www.wga.hu/html_m/c/cesari/ (accessed 01.09.2014).

**Fig. 2.9:** Web Gallery of Art, http://www.wga.hu/html_m/g/galizia/judith.html (accessed 21.08.2014).

**Fig. 2.10:** Uppenkamp 2004, Fig. 73.

**Fig. 2.11:** Held 1996, Fig. 35.

**Fig. 2.12:** Francesca Cappelletti, Caravaggio. Un Ritratto Somigliante, Milan 2010, Pg. 31.

**Fig. 2.13:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 101.

**Fig. 2.14:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 191.

**Fig. 2.15:** Exh. Cat., Jürgen Harten (ed.), Caravaggio, Originale und Kopien im Spiegel der Forschung, Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, 9 September 2006 - 7 Januar 2007, Ostfildern 2006, Pg. 192.

**Fig. 2.16:** Held 1996, Fig. 20.

**Fig. 2.17:** Exh. Cat., Der späte Titian und die Sinnlichkeit der Malerei, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna 2007, Pg. 324.

**Fig. 2.18:** Von Rosen 2009, Fig. 89.

**Fig. 2.19:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pgs. 58-59.

**Fig. 2.20:** Uppenkamp 2004, Figs. 25-26.

**Fig. 3.1:** The British Museum, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3491841&partId=1&searchText=hollar+giorgione&page=1 (accessed 28.08.2014).

**Fig. 3.2:** Fotothek, Universität Wien, UNIDAM.

**Fig. 3.3:** Galleria Doria Pamphilj, http://www.doriapamphilj.it/uksalome.asp (accessed 01.09.2014).

**Fig. 3.4:** Gallerie dell'Accademia, http://www.gallerieaccademia.it/sale/sala-vii (accessed 21.08.2014).

**Fig. 3.5:** Scenes of Martyrdom: Spherical Panoramas, http://panoramy.zbooy.pl/gallery/rzym-santo-stefano-rotondo-3/20120224-124644-4497-raw5d.jpg/e (accessed 27.09.2014).

**Fig. 3.6:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 89.

**Fig. 3.7:** Exh. Cat., Jürgen Harten (ed.), Caravaggio, Originale und Kopien im Spiegel der Forschung, Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, 9 September 2006 - 7 Januar 2007, Ostfildern 2006, Pg. 106.

**Fig. 3.8:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 43.

**Fig. 3.9:** Exh. Cat., Duncan Bull (ed.), Rembrandt - Caravaggio, 24. Februar 2006 - 18. Juni 2006 im Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Stuttgart 2006, Pg. 98.

**Fig. 3.10:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 289.

**Fig. 3.11:** Sebastian Schütze, Caravaggio. Das vollständige Werk, Cologne 2009, Pg. 237.

**Fig. 3.12:** Exh. Cat., Caravaggio e l´Europa, Il movimento caravaggesco internazionale da Caravaggio a Mattia Preti, Mailand, Palazzo Reale, 15 Oktober 2005 - 6 Februar 2006, Mailand 2005, Pg. 46.

**Fig. 3.13:** Vincenzo Pacelli, L'ultimo Caravaggio, Perugia 1994, Pg. 64.

**Fig. 3.14:** Uppenkamp 2004, Fig. 34.

**Fig. 3.15:** Uppenkamp 2004, Fig. 37.

**Fig. 3.16:** Straussman-Pflanzer, Fig. 13.

**Fig. 3.17:** Straussman-Pflanzer, Fig. 12.

# 8. Illustrations



1.1 CAROLINGIAN BIBLE, 2ND HALF OF 9TH CENTURY



1.2 ITALIAN BIBLE, PARMA, LATE 11TH CENTURY



1.3 ITALIAN BIBLE, EARLY 12TH CENTURY
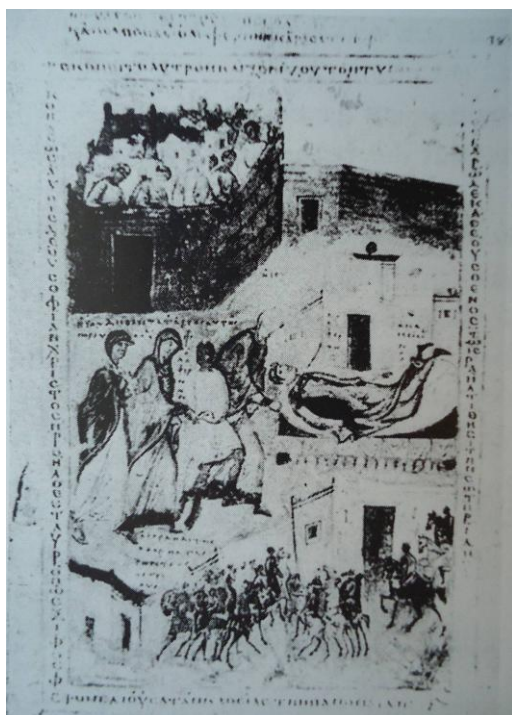


1.4 ITALIAN BIBLE, 14TH CENTURY

**1.5 SPANISH RODA-BIBLE, 11TH CENTURY, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, FRANCE**



**1.6 ITALIAN BIBLE, NAPLES, 14TH CENTURY**



**1.7. BYZANTINE LEO-BIBLE, 1ST HALF OF 9TH CENTURY**



**1.8 FRENCH ARSENAL-BIBLE, 13TH CENTURY, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, FRANCE**

**1.9 Lorenzo Ghiberti, Judith, 1425-52, east doors of Baptistry of Pisa**



**1.10 Donatello, Judith, 1453-57, bronze, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence**



**1.11 Antonio Pollaiuolo, Judith, ca. 1470, bronze, The Detroit Institute of Arts**



**1.12 Sandro Botticelli, The Return of Judith to Bethulia, 1470, oil on panel, 31 x 24 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence**

**1.13 Sandro Botticelli, The Discovery of the Body of Holofernes, 1470, tempera on panel, 31 x 24 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence**



**1.14 Domenico Ghirlandaio, Judith and her Maid, 1489, wood, 44,5 x 31,3 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin**



**1.15 Matteo di Giovanni, Judith with the Head of Holofernes, 1490-95, tempera on panel, 55,9 x 46 cm, Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington**



**1.16 Sandro Botticelli, The Calumny of Apelles, 1494, tempera on panel, 62 x 91 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence**

**1.17** Sandro Botticelli, Tragedy of Lucretia, 1496-1504, tempera and oil on wood, 83,3 x 176,8 cm, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston



**1.18** Francesco Francia, Judith with the Head of Holofernes, 2nd half of 15th century, pen and brush with ink and white highlighting on vellum, 35,9 x 33,5 cm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York



**1.19** Andrea Mantegna, Judith, 1495, tempera with gold and silver on panel, 30,6 x 19,7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

**1.21 VINCENZO CATENA, JUDITH, CA. 1520, OIL ON PANEL, 82 X 65 CM, PINACOTECA QUERINI STAMPALIA, VENICE**

**1.20 GIORGIONE, JUDITH, CA. 1504, OIL ON CANVAS, 144 X 66,5 CM, HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG**





**1.22 PALMA IL VECCHIO, JUDITH, 1525, OIL ON CANVAS, 90 X 71 CM, GALLERIA DEGLI UFFIZI, FLORENCE**

**1.23 GIORGIO VASARI, JUDITH AND HOLOFERNES, 1554, OIL ON PANEL, 108 X 79,7 CM, ST. LOUIS ART MUSEUM, MISSOURI**

**1.24 Michelangelo, Judith Carrying the Head of Holofernes, 1508-12, fresco, 570 x 970 cm, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City**



**1.25 Michelangelo, Libyan Sibyl, 1515, fresco, 395 x 380 cm, Sisting Chapel, Vatican City**



**1.26 Titian, Judith with the Head of Holofernes, ca. 1570, oil on canvas, 113,03 x 95,25 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan**

**1.27 Paolo Veronese, Judith, ca. 1580, oil on canvas, 111 x 100,5 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna**



**1.28 Paolo Veronese, Judith, ca. 1582, oil on canvas, 195 x 176,3 cm, Musei di Strada Nuova, Genoa**



**1.29 Giovanni Cariani, Judith and her Maid, 1510, private collection, Bergamo**



**1.30 Andrea Mantegna, Judith, ca. 1490, 38,8 x 25,8 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence**

2.1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Judith Beheading Holofernes, 1599, oil on canvas, 145 x 195 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome

**2.2 CARAVAGGIO, BOY WITH BASKET OF FRUIT, 1593, OIL ON CANVAS, 70 X 67 CM, GALLERIA BORGHESE, ROME**



**2.3 CARAVAGGIO, SELF-PORTRAIT AS BACCHUS, CA. 1594, OIL ON CANVAS, 67 X 53 CM, GALLERIA BORGHESE, ROME**



**2.4 CARAVAGGIO, THE CARDSHARPS, CA. 1594-95, OIL ON CANVAS, 94 X 131 CM, KIMBELL ART MUSEUM, FORT WORTH**



**2.5 CARAVAGGIO, GYPSY FORTUNETELLER, CA. 1594-95, OIL ON CANVAS, 115 X 150 CM, MUSEI CAPITOLINI, ROME**

**2.6 CARAVAGGIO, CONCERT OF YOUTHS, CA. 1595, OIL ON CANVAS, 92 X 118,5 CM, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK**



**2.7 CARAVAGGIO, THE ECSTASY OF ST. FRANCIS, 1595, OIL ON CANVAS, 92,5 X 127,8 CM, WADSWORTH ATHENEUM, HARTFORD**

2.8 GIUSEPPE CESARI, VISION OF ST. FRANCIS, 1593, OIL ON CANVAS, 270 X 198 CM, MUSÉE DE LA CHARTREUSE, DOUAI



2.9 FEDE GALIZIA, JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES, 1596, 120 X 94 CM, RINGLING MUSEUM OF ART, SARASOTA



2.10 AGOSTINO CARRACCI, JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES, 1599-1602, OIL ON CANVAS, 121,9 X 97,9 CM, PRIVATE COLLECTION



2.11 GIUSEPPE CESARI, JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES, 1602-03, FRESCO, VILLA ALDOBRANDINI, ROME

**2.12 CARAVAGGIO, REPENTANT MAGDALENE, CA. 1594 -95, OIL ON CANVAS, 122,5 X 98,5 CM, DORIA PAMPHILJ GALLERY, ROME**



**2.13 CARAVAGGIO, THE CALLING OF ST. MATTHEW, CA. 1599-1600, OIL ON CANVAS, 322 X 340 CM, SAN LUIGI DEI FRANCESCI, ROME**



**2.14 CARAVAGGIO, THE SEVEN WORKS OF MERCY, 1606, OIL ON CANVAS, 390 X 260 CM, PIO MONTE DELLA MISERICORDIA, NAPLES**



**2.15 CARAVAGGIO, MAGDALENE IN ECSTASY, 1606, 106,5 X 91 CM, PRIVATE COLLECTION**

2.16 TITIAN, REPENTANT MAGDALENE, CA. 1533, OIL ON CANVAS, 85 X 68 CM, PALAZZO PITTI, FLORENCE



2.17 TITIAN, REPENTANT MAGDALENE, 1565, OIL ON CANVAS, 119 X 98 CM, HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG



2.18 WYBRAND DE GEEST, COPY OF MAGDALENE IN ECSTASY, 1620, OIL ON CANVAS, 110 X 87 CM, SANTIAGO ALORDA COLLECTION, BARCELONA



2.19 CARAVAGGIO, REST ON THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT, CA. 1597, OIL ON CANVAS, 135,5 X 166,5 CM, DORIA PAMPHILJ GALLERY, ROME
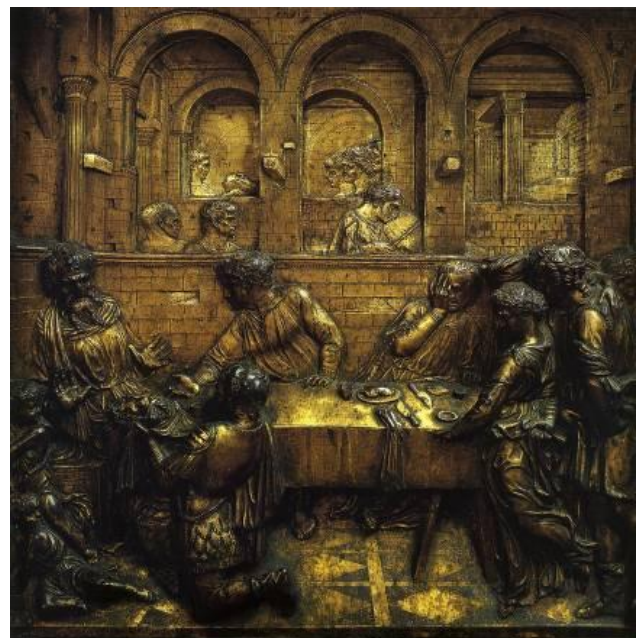
**2.20 Johan van Luyken, Martyrs Mirror, 1700, Leyden**



**3.1 Wenceslaus Hollar, Giorgione's Self-Portrait as David, 1650, engraving, British Museum, London**



**3.2 Donatello, The Feast of Herod, ca. 1427, bronze relief, 60 x 60 cm, Baptistry of St. John, Siena**

**3.3 Titian, Salome with the Head of John the Baptist, ca. 1515, oil on canvas, 90 x 72 cm, Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome**



**3.4 Callisto Piazza, The Beheading of John the Baptist, 1526, oil on wood, 119 x 93 cm, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice**



**3.5 Niccolò Circignani and Antonio Tempesta, selection of Martyrdom frescoes, ca. 1582, Santo Stefano Rotondo, Rome**

113

**3.6 Lorenzo Sabatini, Judith with the Head of Holofernes, ca. 1565-66, oil on canvas, 110 x 85 cm, Banca del Monte di Bologna e Ravenna, Bologna**



**3.7 Caravaggio, Medusa, 1597, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 60 x 55 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence**



**3.8 Caravaggio, Boy Bitten by a Lizard, 1596, oil on canvas, 66 x 49,5 cm, National Gallery, London**
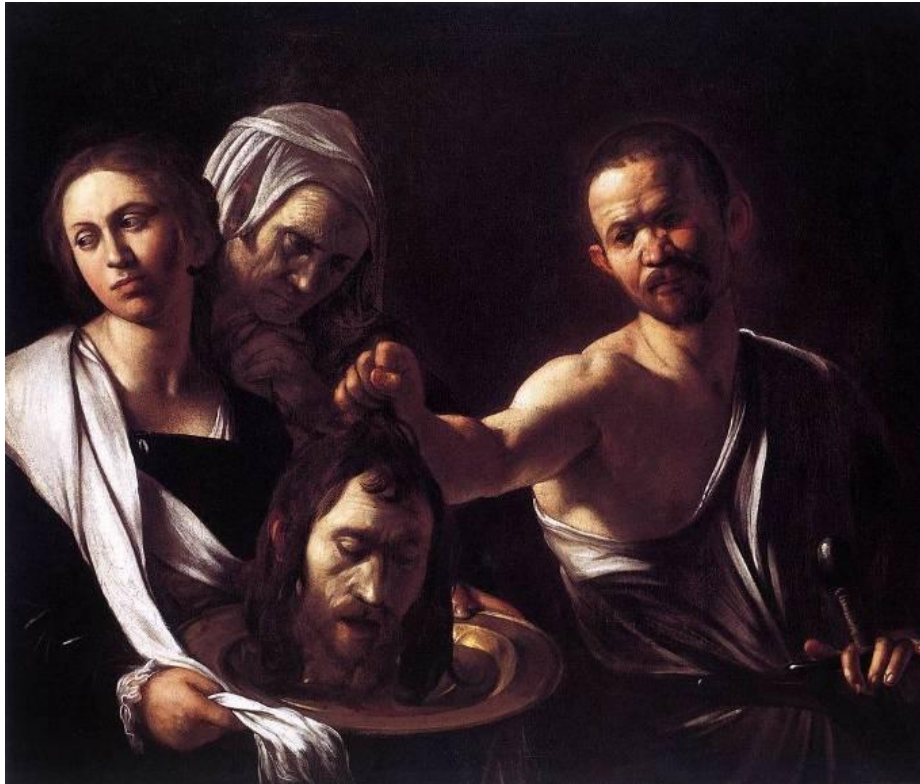


**3.9 Caravaggio, Sacrifice of Isaac, 1603, oil on canvas, 104 x 135 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence**

3.10 CARAVAGGIO, SACRIFICE OF ISAAC, CA. 1598, OIL ON CANVAS,
116 X 173 CM, PIASECKA-JOHNSON COLLECTION, PRINCETON



3.11 CARAVAGGIO, DAVID WITH THE HEAD OF GOLIATH,
1606, OIL ON CANVAS, 125 X 101 CM, GALLERIA BORGHESE,
ROME



3.12 CARAVAGGIO, SALOME WITH THE HEAD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, CA. 1607, OIL ON CANVAS,
91,5 X 106,7 CM, NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

**3.13 Caravaggio, The Beheading of St. John the Baptist, 1608, oil on canvas, 361 x 520 cm, St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta**



**3.14 Valentin de Boulogne, Judith and Holofernes, ca. 1626, oil on canvas, 106 x 141 cm, National Museum of Fine Arts, Malta**

**3.15 Johann Liss, Judith in the Tent of Holofernes, ca. 1622, oil on canvas, 128,5 x 99 cm, National Gallery, London**



**3.16 Artemesia Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes, ca. 1620, oil on canvas, 200 x 162,5 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence**

**3.17 ARTEMESIA GENTILESCHI, JUDITH SLAYING HOLOFERNES, CA. 1610-13, OIL ON CANVAS, 158,88 X 125,5 CM, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CAPODIMONTE, NAPLES**