

# About the Artist

Caravaggio (1571–1610) was one of the most revolutionary and influential artists in the history of Italian art. Born in Lombardy, he made his career in Rome, where he created intensely realistic and psychologically penetrating works. His dramatic use of lights and darks, a painting technique known as *chiaroscuro*, spotlighted figures in pitch-black spaces. He brought to life gripping religious scenes and the rough-and-tumble streets of Rome, with which he was all too familiar.

Caravaggio was notoriously violent. He routinely had run-ins with the law and fought with rivals and other artists. He murdered a man in a street fight in 1606 and spent the last four years of his life on the run—moving from Naples to Malta to Sicily. Even as an outlaw, he continued to win prestigious commissions, and make enemies. In 1609, he was wounded in a sword fight in Naples. Shortly after, the painter sought a papal pardon through a well-connected protector and began to make his way to Rome. He landed briefly in prison en route, losing all his possessions, including his paintings. Racing to recover his property, he fell ill 100 miles from Rome, perhaps from an infection. He died a few days later at age 38.

# About the Painting

Caravaggio's radical *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1599) depicts the gruesome decapitation of the Assyrian general at the hands of the Jewish heroine—an act she commits to save her people from Holofernes's army. Caravaggio captured all the gory details of the slaying, a depiction made even more arresting by his portrayal of the widowed Judith as young and frightened. She is shown concentrating on her grisly task with a mixture of dread and compassion as Holofernes, spurting blood and screaming, appears unnervingly aware of his final moments.

Caravaggio painted this picture for the Roman banker Ottavio Costa, who already owned several of the artist's works. Records show that Costa kept this painting behind a silk curtain; one can only imagine the shock of his visitors when he theatrically unveiled it. When Costa died in 1639, *Judith and Holofernes* was his prized possession, and his heirs were forbidden from selling it. Rediscovered in 1951 in a private collection in Rome, the painting was acquired in 1971 by the Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica.

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# **The Context of Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes***

The biblical story of Judith tells of a young widow who saves the Jewish people by sneaking behind enemy lines to defeat the Assyrian general Holofernes. He tries to seduce her but has drunk too much wine; Judith quickly cuts off his head and takes it home as a trophy. Traditionally, artists depicted not the murder but the events surrounding it. Caravaggio focused on the decapitation. The lifelike nature of his portrayal is due in part to his novel working methods. He painted directly from live models, posing them as they would appear in the final composition. Infrared reflectography shows that he adjusted the placement of his male model's head so that Holofernes appears partially decapitated.

Caravaggio's graphic depiction may have been influenced by a murder that occurred just before he began the work. In 1598 the Roman nobleman Francesco Cenci had been bludgeoned to death by his daughter Beatrice, with help from her stepmother, Lucrezia, and her brother Giacomo. Beatrice had endured years of sadistic abuse from her father, including rape. General sympathy lay with the Cenci defendants; nevertheless, Pope Clement VIII sentenced them to death. At their public execution, Giacomo was tortured and quartered, and Beatrice and Lucrezia were beheaded with an axe.



Infrared reflectography indicates that Caravaggio first painted Holofernes's head intact. He painted from life, so he had to adjust the placement of the model's head—note the eyes and mouth—to make it appear partially decapitated in the painting.

# Judith in Art

Artists have long been attracted to the tale of Judith, who used courage and guile to vanquish the Assyrian army that threatened the Israelites. The story appears in the book of Judith, part of the Apocrypha (sacred texts excluded from Hebrew and Protestant Bibles, but part of the Catholic canon in Caravaggio's day). According to the plot, the rich and beautiful widow Judith pretends to desert the Israelites and slips into the enemy camp. The Assyrian general Holofernes is enamored and invites her to a banquet in his tent. When he falls asleep from too much wine, she decapitates him with two powerful blows to his neck. She and her maid steal the severed head and return home triumphant. When the Assyrian army discovers the murder, they try to flee but are slaughtered by the Israelites.

Judith's story has offered artists a multitude of interpretations through the ages. It symbolizes triumph over tyranny, virtue over vice, good over evil, and the good fortune of God's faithful. The formidable Holofernes, undefeated on the battlefield, is undone by underestimating women. In Judith, he faced the embodiment of bravery, wisdom, resourcefulness, and feminine power. As the works in this exhibition demonstrate, she is a virtuous beauty, a dangerous temptress, and a courageous hero.