Claude Vignon
(Tours 1593 – 1670 Paris)

Judith with the head of Holofernes
oil on canvas
102 x 82 cm.;
40 x 32 1/2 in.

Provenance

With Carlo Orsi;
The Wellington Gallery;
Private collection, Italy, from 2001.

Literature

G. Papi, in *Caravaggio e l'Europa: il movimento caravaggesco internazionale da Caravaggio a Mattia Preti,* exh. cat., Milan 2005, pp. 296-297, no. IV.5 (as Vignon);
D. Franklin & S. Schütze, *Caravaggio and his Followers in Rome,* exh. cat., New Haven 2011, p. 321, no. 51 (see also S. Schütze, 'Staging Religious History for Collectors and Connoisseurs', in Franklin and Schütze 2011, pp. 268-9).

Exhibited

Milan, Palazzo Reale, and Vienna, Liechtenstein Museum, *Caravaggio e l'Europa: il movimento caravaggesco internazionale da Caravaggio a Mattia Preti,* 15 October 2005 – 6 February 2006, and 5 March – 9 July 2006;
Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada and Fort Worth, and Texas, Kimbell Art Museum, *Caravaggio and his Followers in Rome*, 10 June – 11 September 2011, and 9 October 2011 – 8 January 2012.

This striking and beautifully executed painting of *Judith with the head of Holofernes* by the intriguing French Caravaggesque master Claude Vignon was first published by Gianni Papi in the catalogue of the major exhibition on the International Caravaggesque Movement held in Milan and Vienna in 2006. Prior to that, the painting had been known to some scholars, but it was misattributed, though with no real critical consensus, first to Giovanni Battista Discepoli (known as Zoppo di Lugano) and subsequently to Francesco Cairo. Consequently, it did not appear in Paola Pacht Bassani's monograph on Vignon, which was published in 1992, fifteen years prior to its rediscovery. The Vignon attribution, first advanced orally by Wolfgang Prohaska, was endorsed not only by Papi in the catalogue of the 2006 exhibition, but also by David Franklin and Sebastian Schütze in the catalogue of another important exhibition on Caravaggio and his followers held five years later at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and at Fort Worth. It is now recognised as a fine example of Vignon's early work, dating from his time in Rome (probably around 1620), and is a significant addition to the artist's known *oeuvre*.

Although our earliest definitive record of Vignon's presence in Rome is in 1618, he may have arrived there considerably earlier than this between around 1609 and 1610, although there is no documentary evidence of this. In 1616, he was recorded in Paris where he enrolled as a member of the Painters' Guild, but he was almost certainly in Rome in 1617, because his *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, painted in that year, seems inconceivable without the example of Caravaggio's earlier version of the subject. He remained in Italy (with a possible visit to Venice) until probably late 1622, and was back in Paris in 1623, the year of his first marriage. He was to remain in the French capital for the rest of his long career and was an important and influential figure in the development of French painting in the seventeenth century.

Vignon's early training was with Jacob Bunel, one of the most successful artists working at the court of Henri IV and a Mannerist artist of the Second Fontainebleau School. Although the nature of Bunel's influence is very difficult to ascertain because very little of his work survived, this apprenticeship may account, at least in part, for a certain courtly stylishness evident in the present picture – painted probably over ten years later – as well as helping to

lay the foundations for his later success, following his return to France, as a court painter working for Cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIII. The most seminal influence on his early career, though, was undoubtedly that of a far greater and more dynamic figure – Caravaggio – and his period in Rome coincided with that of the leading artists of the French Caravaggesque movement, Jean Valentin (de Boulogne) and Simon Vouet, at a time when the Caravaggesque movement was in full swing in the decade following the death of the great Lombard master. Vignon is recorded as sharing lodgings with Vouet in the Parish of San Lorenzo in Lucina in 1619, and in 1618 he executed an engraving based on a Vouet composition of *Two Lovers*, which is dated 'Romae, 1618', providing our first firm piece of evidence of Vignon's presence in Rome and also testifying to the close relationship between the two French artists. Vignon was also in Rome at the same time as some of the other French followers of Caravaggio, such as Nicolas Tournier and Nicolas Régnier, and his time in the Eternal City likewise coincided with that of Dutch Caravaggesque masters such as Dirck van Baburen and Gerard van Honthorst, as well as the great German master by whom he was strongly influenced, Adam Elsheimer. During this period, he entered the orbit of some of the great Roman patrons of Caravaggio such as Cardinal del Monte and the Marchese Giustanini; for the latter of whom he executed a now-lost masterpiece of the *Supper at Emmaus.*

Like Vouet, Vignon, while in Rome, adopted both the chiaroscuro and brutal realism of the great Lombard master. This can be seen particularly in his most full-bloodedly Caravaggesque work, the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (now Musee des Beaux Arts, Arras) (fig. 1), signed and dated 1617, which owes an obvious debt to Caravaggio's painting of the same subject in the Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi. This suggests that Vignon was probably in Rome at the time of the execution of his version of the subject, though he may have known Caravaggio's painting from a previous visit to the city. Interestingly, Vignon's painting goes beyond its model in its frank depiction of violence and the blood soiling the saint's garments. Certain motifs, such as the angel who places the palm of martyrdom in St. Matthew's hand and the figure of the executioner, are directly taken from Caravaggio, but Vignon's version compresses the composition and intensifies the horror and the drama: his composition is much more crowded than Caravaggio's and is a show-piece of

Vignon's technical virtuosity both in the rapid painting of the figures and the lovingly painted still-life elements in the right lower corner.

Conversely, despite its gruesome subject, the present *Judith with the head of Holofernes* is depicted in a surprisingly unaggressive way. Caravaggio, and still more his follower Artemisia Gentileschi, had portrayed with unsparing realism the moment of decapitation. In the case of Artemisia's celebrated picture in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (1612-13) (fig. 2), the artist aims to extract the maximum emotional impact from the scene by inclusion of the the blood spurting from Holofernes' neck and the sword cutting short his screams. Yet Vignon's depiction of Judith is wholly different in character. Rather than showing the moment of violence, Vignon, perhaps harking back to earlier Renaissance prototypes, shows its aftermath and, as with Botticelli's small painting of the subject in the Uffizi, the main focus is on the beautiful heroine, while the decapitated head of the Philistine general is tucked rather discreetly into the shadows of the middle ground, along with the figure of her elderly maidservant and collaborator. Whereas Artemisia's heroine pinions her struggling victim and proceeds with her bloody task with grim determination, Vignon's wide-eyed Judith seems more anxious than triumphant. As noted by Schütze, 'the delicate young heroine, dressed in her pearl collier and fanciful feathered hat, presents a typical example of [Vignon's] elegantly dressed courtly heroes, mostly lost in their own narcissistic and often melancholy beauty'.[1] Not only is Judith dressed very sumptuously, but the style of the painting emphasises the virtuosity of the brushwork: note the swiftness and elegance of handling and the refined painting of some of the details, such as the play of light over Judith's jewels and her shimmering silks and Judith's elaborate coiffure, which are highly characteristic of Vignon's other known works. These display what Papi characterised as the "ostentatious elegance" of his style in which, as Papi notes, the costumes have little connection with the world and time of the Old Testament, but instead represent the height of contemporary fashion.

The plumed hat and jewels are found on figures in other paintings by Vignon, such as the *Salome* (Lemme Collection, Rome), the very elaborately dressed figure of the lady in the right foreground of the lost painting of the *Marriage at Cana* commissioned by the Marchese

Giustianini, and the figure of *David holding the head of Goliath* (Blanton Museum of Art, Texas)[2] (fig. 3), in which the protagonist wears a similar plumed headdress combined with an air of melancholy.

The face of Judith, with her wide opened eyes and straight nose, finds parallels in the *Musician and Drinker* (Private collection, Florence), and also the *Head of the Young Man* (Musee des Beaux Arts, Caen).

Following his return to Paris in 1623, Vignon embarked upon a successful career as a court artist whose patrons included Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu and, prior to the return to France of his friend Vouet in 1627, he developed a rich decorative style of painting popular with his courtly patrons, which is best exemplified in his painting of *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* of 1624 in the Louvre, (fig. 4), whose subject was perfectly attuned to his style.

Shortly after his return to France, Vignon took up the theme of Judith again in two drawings in the Louvre: one was previously in the collection of the banker Jabach and the other similar drawing shows *Judith being presented with the head of Holofernes by a young boy*. Both were executed probably in 1624-5 and in both cases the Old Testament heroine wears a plumed hat and fashionable contemporary dress.

Vignon returned to the theme of Judith and Holofernes twenty years later in his illustrations for the *Galerie des Femmes Fortes*: a publication dedicated to Anne of Austria written by the Jesuit Pierre le Moyne (fig. 5). The book was composed of 12 chapters celebrating examples of strong women from the Bible or classical antiquity, some of which were designed by Vignon and engraved by Abraham Bosse and Gilles Rousselet. The iconography of this series can be seen as a response to the tradition of the paintings of Famous Men which had been developed in the fifteenth century in Italy, and was also perhaps a throwback to the paintings of famous women of antiquity and the Bible which appeared in the *studiolo* of Isabella d'Este.

Vignon's later career in France was bedevilled by the political disturbances of the Fronde, but he lived long enough to be elected to the French Academy in 1651 and in that same year was commissioned to paint the main altarpiece for the most important Jesuit church in Paris. Vignon opposed the classicising tendencies of Poussin and remained, until the end of his life, a virtuosic Baroque master, the "*far presto*" of French seventeenth-century painting. His legacy spread beyond France and he has also been seen as an important indirect influence on Rembrandt. As Anthony Blunt noted, Vignon's *Death of the Hermit* (Louvre, Paris) (fig. 6) shows that "the rich and tortured quality of paint" which is strikingly reminiscent of the work of Rembrandt's master Pieter Lastman and which appears in the early paintings of Rembrandt, and the fondness for costumes and jewellery seen in our lovingly depicted *Judith,* combined with the strong chiaroscuro, seem to look forward to Rembrandt's more mature works of the 1630s.

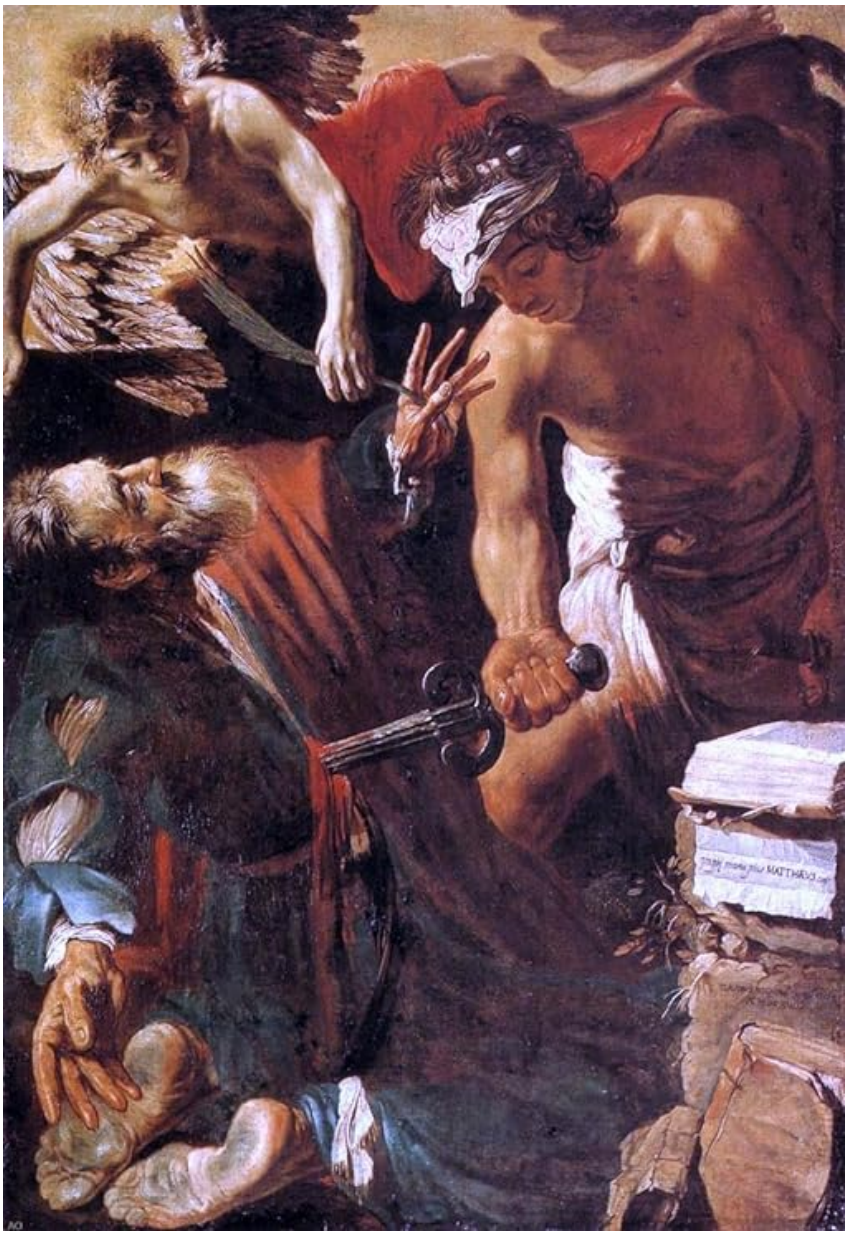

Figure 1. Claude Vignon, *Martyrdom of St. Matthew***,** 1617.
Musee des Beaux Arts, Arras

Figure 2. Artemesia Gentilleschi, *Judith slaying Holofernes*, 1612-13.
Museo del Capodimonte, Naples

Figure 3. Claude Vignon*, David with the Head of Goliath*.
Blanton Museum, University of Texas, Austin

Figure 4. Claude Vignon, *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, 1624.
Louvre Museum, Paris

Figure 5. Abraham Bosse after Claude Vignon, *Judith,* etching, 1647

Figure 6. Claude Vignon, Death of the Hermit, early 1620s.
Louvre Museum, Paris

Footnotes

[1] See D. Franklin & S. Schütze, *Caravaggio and his Followers in Rome,* exh. cat., New Haven 2011, p. 321, no. 51 (see also S. Schütze, 'Staging Religious History for Collectors and Connoisseurs', in Franklin and Schütze 2011, pp. 268-9).