

Lifestyle | Features

Art expert stakes reputation on 'lost' \$170 million Caravaggio

Art expert Eric Turquin is not only convinced that a canvas found in the attic of an old house in southwest France is a Caravaggio—he believes it is a revolutionary masterpiece. France's leading authority on Old Masters paintings has staked his reputation on the assertion that the work—left forgotten under an old mattress for 100 years—is the fiery Italian artist's lost "Judith and Holofernes". The painting depicting a grisly biblical scene of the beautiful Jewish widow Judith beheading a sleeping Assyrian general will be displayed in Paris on Friday before it goes under the hammer on June 27 in Toulouse, the city where it was discovered five years ago.

Turquin said it should sell for between 100 and 150 million euros (up to \$170 million). "Not only is it a Caravaggio, but of all the Caravaggios that are known today, this is one of the great pictures," he insisted. "The painting is in an extraordinarily good state, much better than the Caravaggios I have seen in Naples," he told AFP. But although everyone agrees on the quality of the work, a minority of experts—particularly in Italy—have their doubts. They believe it is a copy made by the Flemish artist Louis Finson, who worked alongside Caravaggio as he painted. But Turquin is adamant it is the original from 1606 whose existence was first noted in letters between Italian dukes and art dealers four centuries ago.

'Turning point'

He is more convinced than ever since the canvas was cleaned in January, a process that took three weeks. On top of X-rays, the cleaning "has shown that the painting was changed a lot as it was painted, with lots of retouching. That proves it is an original," Turquin said. "Copyists don't make changes like that, they copy," he added. A less virtuosic version of the scene by Finson hangs at the Palazzo Zevallos in Naples. Standing in front of what has been called the "Toulouse Caravaggio" in a strongroom above his Paris office, Turquin showed the telltale trace of how the artist had changed his mind about which way Judith should be looking.

"After five years of reflection, no one has put up a counter-argument," said the expert, accusing the Italian doubters of "pronouncing against the painting without seeing it. They say it's impossible because Caravaggio



Workers carry a painting believed by some experts to be Caravaggio's "Judith Beheading Holofernes" for its public presentation at the Drouot auction house in Paris on June 14, 2019 before it goes under the hammer on June 27 in Toulouse, the city where it was discovered five years ago. — AFP photos



A woman looks at a detail of a painting believed to be the "Judith Beheading Holofernes" by Italian artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio presented along with a copy of the painting by Flemish artist Louis Finson (not seen).

Painted (no more than) 65 canvases... For them the history of art is set." Turquin said the painting marked a turning point in Caravaggio's development as an artist. The fiercely original painter had created his first canvas on the theme, the far more formal "Judith Beheading Holofernes" in 1598, which hangs at the Palazzo Barberini in Rome.

Condemned to death

But by 1606 Caravaggio's life had changed dramatically, and he was on the run for murder. He fled to Naples after being condemned to death for stabbing a man in a street brawl in Rome. "He was painting faster, more spontaneously and more strikingly," said Turquin, adding that the painting reflects his now darker view of life. "In one place,

he made a brushstroke nearly a metre long. He did Judith's sleeve and the lace on it in one go. He was a virtuoso with the paintbrush.

"He changed his style, painting 'risparmio' (sparingly), using the black background and painting accentuating strokes onto it. This is particularly visible on the sheet." Other experts have speculated that Finson could have added his own touches to the canvas after Caravaggio left suddenly for Malta in 1607, where he hoped he might be safer from his enemies. Turquin said that he kept the "Toulouse Caravaggio" in his bedroom for 16 months "while art historians, insurers and restorers came to view it.

"We wanted to wait until we were sure before coming

forward" and announcing the discovery to the world in April 2016 after the Italian Caravaggio expert Nicola Spinosa also gave it his imprimatur. The painting will be sold in Toulouse by Marc Labarbe, the provincial auctioneer who discovered it after a local family asked him to value some "old things in the attic" of a house they were clearing. The family—who have not been named—believe it may have been brought to France by one of their ancestors, an officer in Napoleon's army. The Corsican invaded the then Kingdom of Naples in 1806 and put his brother Joseph on the throne. — AFP



A visitor seats facing an artwork by Andrea Bowers entitled "Open Secret" during a preview day of Art Basel, the world's premier modern and contemporary art fair, in Basel. — AFP photos

Women artists bring #MeToo reckoning to Basel fair

Mannequins display inflatable, white airbag dresses created to protect women from workplace harassment, while nearby details of the alleged sexual misdeeds of 170 public figures cover four long walls, splashed in red. The #MeToo movement that exploded on the global stage in late 2017 has inspired several works exhibited at this year's Art Basel, the world's biggest contemporary art fair, which opens to the public on Thursday. Women artists have taken centre stage at the show's 50th edition, with in-your-face installations expressing disgust and exasperation at persisting gender inequalities and culturally condoned abuse and harassment of women.



The installation by artist Alicia Framis.

Spanish artist Alicia Framis has filled a room with delicate, white mannequins wearing different styles of dresses made from airbag material, which inflate to protect different parts of the female body. The piece called "Life Dress" consists of dresses "to protect women in all work situations where there is some kind of abuse," Framis told AFP. The 52-year-old artist said she had spoken with victims of harassment and abuse and allowed their stories to inspire the dress designs, using "fashion to demonstrate against violence."

Where Framis uses humor to spotlight abuse, Los Angeles-based artist Andrea Bowers's massive archival project "Open Secrets" radiates rage. It consists of reams of photographic prints on red backgrounds, each listing the name and occupation of a public figure accused of sexual harassment or abuse, their public response to the accusations and details of the case.

'Rape culture'

Disgraced film mogul Harvey Weinstein, whose misconduct first sparked the #MeToo movement, has two full panels dedicated to his long list of alleged misdeeds. US President Donald Trump also figures in the piece, as do his predecessors Bill Clinton and George Bush Senior, two Supreme Court justices, as well as actors, journalists, musi-

cians and other public figures. "I just felt like the #MeToo movement is perhaps one of the most important feminist movements of my lifetime," Bowers told AFP, explaining her inspiration for the piece.

The 54-year-old self-described feminist activist artist said she had been shocked to realize "what it was like for me growing up, that it was rape culture, where ... young men were given permission to sexually violate me and my friends." With the #MeToo movement, such behavior is finally "being acknowledged," she said. "I hope that it's a historic shift." During a preview earlier this week, men in particular lingered in front of the piece which covers two long walls, back and front, in the middle of the fair's Unlimited exhibition space.

"You can see a lot of men standing here and being a bit unsure how to react," said Vanja Oberhoff, a young German art investor standing among some dozen men gazing at the articles. "It's a very strong piece," he told AFP. Not all reactions have been positive. Helen Donahue, who in 2017 tweeted out photographs of herself bearing the marks of alleged abuse by freelance columnist Michael Hafford, voiced outrage that Bowers had used one of the pictures.

"Cool that my f***ing photos and trauma are heading art basel thx for exploiting us for 'art' ANDREA BOWERS," she tweeted on Tuesday. Bowers, who insists on the importance of trusting survivors, quickly issued an apology for not seeking Donahue's consent before using the picture and removed the panel from the exhibit.

'Equalization'?

The artist also told AFP that showing her piece at Art Basel had been more challenging than she had expected. The VIP opening of the show drew "some of the richest people in the world, and they actually know many of the people on the walls, because these are also some of the most powerful people in the world," Bowers said. "This is an emotional piece for a lot of people here because it is very personal." The piece shows "we have to change our thinking, and not everybody is ready to do that... There is still a lot more work to be done."

This year's Art Basel is also abuzz with discussion about disparities between the prices raked in for pieces made by male and female artists, as well as access to gallery representation. Clare McAndrew, a cultural economist who writes the annual Art Market Report released each year ahead of Art Basel, told AFP that women still face "stark under-representation" in the art world. "Only five percent of the work sold last year at auction were by female artists, and the higher up the price point you go, the worse that gets," she said, adding that even at galleries only showing contemporary art, women account for about a third of the represented artists.

Marc Glimcher, who heads Pace Gallery, a global leader in contemporary art, acknowledged that the most talented women artists have long made only about a 10th of the amount made by contemporary male artists, if they were lucky. But he told AFP that "an equalization is taking place". "The market recognizes that there was an arbitrary depression of value, and a possible opportunity," — AFP

Old Masters rare at auction

The sale at auction of old masterpieces is extremely rare, with most such works already held by museums or public collections. Of 311 pieces ever to have surpassed the \$30 million (26.6 million euro) mark at auction, only 13 were by Old Masters, the leading painters in Europe before 1800, according to an AFP database. These include paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Rembrandt and Vermeer. A painting believed by some experts to be Caravaggio's "Judith Beheading Holofernes" is being presented in Paris on Friday ahead of its auction in the southern city of Toulouse.

It was discovered in a Toulouse attic in 2014 and is could join this elite club. In comparison, 142 of those that fetched more than \$30 million are by Impressionist or modern artists and 132 are contemporary. They include 32 paintings by Pablo Picasso, 27 by Andy Warhol, 23 by Francis Bacon and 21 by Mark Rothko.

Already in museums

Old masterpieces are rare at auction today because many entered museums or public collections in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, French art market expert Patrick Michel told AFP. Bought by museums or acquired through donations, such pieces generally do not return to the market. Another factor is that many Old Masters, such as Leonardo and Vermeer, did not produce a body of work as large as that of some contemporary artists. An

example is American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died aged 27 in 1988 but has had hundreds of works sold at auction for more than a million dollars in recent years.

Doubts

Authenticating the artist behind older works sometimes poses problems, Michel said. "Many old paintings are not attributed with certainty to one single painter, which often gives rise to disputes between experts," he said. This is the case with "Judith and Holofernes". Some believe it is a long-lost masterpiece by the Renaissance painter (1571-1610) but others think it may be a fake, perhaps a copy by one of his Franco-Flemish disciples. Some art experts have also expressed doubt about the authenticity of a painting attributed to Leonardo, "Salvator Mundi", which sold for a world record \$450 million at auction in November 2017.

Michel said the market for old art was "filled with works of average or poor quality for which there are no longer any buyers". By contrast, the "very rare" masterpieces that come along attract enormous interest. "As soon as a painting that seems important arrives on the market, all the major institutions of the world—museums in the United States, Britain and now the Emirates—sharpen their knives, financially speaking," he said. — AFP

Emporio Armani's men's spring/summer 2020 fashion collection



Models present creations for fashion house Emporio Armani during the presentation of its men's spring/summer 2020 fashion collection in Milan on June 15, 2019. — AFP photos