

# Judith Slaying Holofernes

**Woman, Murderer, Icon**

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forces.<sup>3</sup>

As with many originally Jewish stories, hers was absorbed by and used to reinforce Christianity and its values. The earliest known image of Judith is an eighth century fresco in a Roman church, which depicts her serenely holding Holofernes' head.<sup>4</sup> Medieval Judith imagery remained largely confined to religious spaces and manuscripts; often alongside other biblical scenes and figures, representing salvation, chastity, and virtue.<sup>5</sup> Judith was consistently shown in simple clothing, regardless of the importance of elaborate dress and jewelry in her biblical text.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the early Quattrocento that Judith depictions are known to have been produced for private, domestic display, and in many new mediums. Judith's popularity peaked in the Renaissance; numerous notable artists produced depictions of her that infused her religious imagery with political overtones. The earliest prominent example of her influence is Donatello's bronze *Judith*, commissioned by the Medici clan in 1457 for semi-private display. Donatello's *Judith* transformed the formal conventions of Judith imagery. While medieval Judith was a pious widow in humble clothing, Donatello's is dressed luxuriously. The references to classical antiquity and warrior status are per

few exceptions, Judith imagery was intended for private display.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the transfer of Donatello's *Judith* to Florence's central plaza, after the exile of the Medici, was startling—and impermanent. The public display of *Judith* transformed her into an explicitly anti-authoritarian, anti-Medicean symbol.<sup>10</sup> However, she was replaced just a decade later by Michelangelo's *David*. The Florentine council member who argued for her removal contended that the statue was inappropriate as a former Medici symbol and it was “not fitting that the woman should slay the man.”<sup>11</sup>

Like Donatello's sculpture, early Renaissance paintings of Judith tended to depict the moments just before or after the murder, foregrounding Judith's ambivalence about performing this necessary but distasteful deed. Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Judith* fresco in the Sistine chapel from around 1510 shows her as a muscular woman, yet she modestly turns her head away from the head of Holofernes, which is covered with a cloth. Holofernes' contorted body lies out of her sight, in shadow. She is physically strong, but weak-stomached. Her physical robustness here contrasts sharply with Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* from 1600, in which the heroine is dainty, unconvincingly grabbing at the enormous Holofernes' hair, the sword like a slender dagger in comparison to his body. Even more so than in Michelangelo's depiction, Judith is visibly disturbed. This is shown in the way she holds him at arm's length, leaning away with an expression of unease. The blood spurting from his neck is directed away from her, leaving her clothing unstained, and her face is bathed in light, a sign of divine blessing. Caravaggio's Judith is undeniably feminine, and though disturbed by her action, morally pure.

Other Renaissance artists treated Judith's transgressively masculine aspects more explicitly and emphasized her active participation. Giorgio Vasari's oil painting *Judith and Holofernes* from 1554 echoes Michelangelo's, but depicts her as strong both physically and mentally. She holds the sword, pulling Holofernes' unresisting head down with ease, and gazes dispassionately down at him, undisturbed. Even more unapologetic is Artemisia Gentileschi's oil painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes* from 1620. Shown in the very act of decapitation, Judith is well-built, wrestling his writhing body into submission as her strong arm forces the sword through his neck, her gaze fixed resolutely on his face. There is blood on her hand, his blood spurting toward her. The ends of her sleeves, rolled up in a practical manner, are red, indicating the corruption of her innocence. Gentileschi's Judith is the very picture of strength in mind and body, bloody-handed. In Gentileschi's 1623 painting of the same story, *Judith and her Maidservant*, Judith's hands are clean, her hand and righteous sword are lit with divine light, while her maidservant's hands are bloodied. Still, Judith is tainted by the sin of the deed, her face cast in shadow.

Beyond Judith's physical strength and ruthlessness, other Renaissance paint-

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9 Crum, 292-294.

10 Roger J. Crum, “Judith between the Private and Public Realms in Renaissance Florence,” in *Vjg"Uyqtq"qh"Lwfvj<"Lwfvj"Uwfvjg"Cetquv"vjg"Fluekrnkpgu* (Open Book Publishers, 2010), 305-306.

11 Saul Levine, “The Location of Michelangelo's *David*: The Meeting of January 25, 1504,” *The Art Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (1974), 36.

ers underscore the encounter's sexual aspects. When his body is pictured, Holofernes is often shown naked and abed, and while many images show Judith fully clothed, just as many show her suggestively dressed or provocatively posed. Giorgione's 1504 Judith gazes down demurely like Venus or Virgin Mary. Yet the fully exposed length of her leg, foot resting lightly on Holofernes' head, and the blush pink of her dress, cast her as more of a Venus. Fede Galizia's 1596 Judith is even more sumptuously clothed

prototype of the Virgin Mary, and though she becomes more challenging as a strong, sensual woman, the emphasis on her femininity and virtuousness allows her to retain acceptable devotional status. The example of Judith provides a useful insight into the