

# ***Judith with the Head of Holofernes* by Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini**



*Judith and her maidservant with the head of Holofernes, Pellegrini, Giovanni Antonio, 1703/13, oil on canvas, 124.7/102cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.*

Hello, my name is Evie Garrett, and I'm a third year Classical Literature and Civilisations student at the University of Birmingham. Thank you for joining me in today's podcast. My talk today is on Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini's beautiful painting, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. This piece is a four-foot-tall beauty of perfectly controlled oil paint, with Pellegrini seemingly presenting the heroine, Judith, as though in a portrait, dominating the composition in her impressive outfit. Then we notice another woman, a maidservant, crouched beside her, and a narrative begins to unfold. For, as doll-faced and angelic as Judith may seem upon first glance, this painting has a violent subject – one that is carefully disguised, hidden in plain sight. Today's talk will analyse the work in more detail, while providing contextual insight into the artist and period of the painting.

Judith is a biblical heroine from the Old Testament, this episode taken from chapter 13 of her eponymous book. But the painting itself is from the relatively recent period of the early Eighteenth Century. The Venetian-born artist Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini, who worked in England between 1708 and 1713, is thought to have painted this piece around 1710. This was the same period in which he was battling for a much-coveted commission to decorate the interior of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in London. The commission ended up being awarded to Sir James Thornhill, but the mere consideration of a Venetian artist to decorate one of the most famous buildings in London over an English

artist is a clear indication of the widespread respect held for Pellegrini's name and art at this time.

The Barber painting holds significance as one of only about a dozen independent works by Pellegrini in a UK public collection. He was predominantly a decorative painter – hence the commission bid for St Pauls – and unfortunately several of the large-scale murals and ceiling paintings he created in buildings were destroyed or damaged beyond repair during World War Two.

Whilst this may be one of few works remaining, it is typical for Pellegrini to put a female in the starring role. He was known for featuring famous heroines in his work, and in this particular painting he puts Judith at centre stage, with her maidservant the only other obvious figure. But the violent subject matter I spoke of earlier is the story of Judith, and how she came to hold the head of Holofernes, that we can just see, delicately suspended between her right-hand thumb and index finger– once we know where to look for it.

Today I will start with the story of Judith and then discuss how she has been represented. The biblical Book of Judith revolves around the titular central figure – a daring and beautiful Israelite widow, who goes with her loyal maid to the camp of the enemy Assyrian general, Holofernes. Once in the enemy camp, Judith works to ingratiate herself with Holofernes, promising him information on the Israelites. Once she gains his trust, she is able to sneak into his tent as he lies in a drunken stupor and decapitate

him. With her brave actions, Judith not only risks her own death upon discovery – or if Holofernes had awoken – but she also gambles on the Assyrian response. Luckily, once the enemy Assyrians see the decapitated head of Holofernes, they flee, and the Israelites are saved.

Judith is one of the few prominent independent female figures in the Bible, which makes her story that much more intriguing and important to recount. There are similarities between Judith and the few other strong women in the Bible – they all engage in bloody acts against men for the sake of their tribe, creating a clear negative connotation between women in powerful roles and men being murdered... It isn't hard to see why there are so few of these female heroines in the Bible!

The polarised archetypes these women fill is a clear indication of the biblical tropes we still see reflected in society today: will the 'virtuous' or the 'sexually dangerous' woman come out on top in the end? Artists, scholars and society have changed their opinions on Judith's moral character over the decades and centuries, and Judith as a concept has been consistently adapted through art: from righteous to deviant; prudish to promiscuous. This story has been depicted by artists from Botticelli to Klimt, and the many and varied portrayals of Judith over the centuries come hand in hand with the many and varied standards of beauty in society. One could spend hours dissecting the shifts in these societal opinions of women and if and how they were charted through art, but I'm afraid there is just not enough time for us to explore this all today!

Many artists have interpreted Judith's tale differently – did she outsmart Holofernes with her wit and skill, or rely on her body to distract him? Was the beheading bloody and vicious, or reluctant and in aid of patriotism? Pellegrini's interpretation of it is certainly very modest. He uses a subtle spotlight from the top left corner to shine light on Judith, bringing further attention to her. This spotlight, paired with the white turban and dress she wears, helps to convey a virginal and pure image of Judith. It is hard to imagine as a viewer that this angelic woman we see would ever be capable of viciously beheading the leader of an army - which is why I find this painting so powerful. There is deceptive beauty in Judith and the painting, which is arguably its biggest strength.

During my research for this talk, I have seen Pellegrini's Judith described as a 'dumb blonde', and that it is, in fact, the maid who looks 'a great deal more intelligent'. I found this an intriguing observation - it seemed to me that this stereotype was surely feeding in to the timeless and misogynistic 'beauty versus brains' dichotomy. The reduction of Judith to a dumb blonde fails to consider how Pellegrini and his contemporaries typically represented female heroines whilst simultaneously underscoring an essential and eternal message of Judith's tale. Pellegrini was painting in the Eighteenth Century, a time in which most female-centred pieces showed white, upper class women. They typically had blonde or fair hair and were very conventionally attractive, with almost exclusively white European features – therefore I personally find the 'dumb blonde' comment very reductive, even ignorant!

In the biblical tale, however, men underestimated Judith by categorising her in something akin to the ‘dumb blonde’ trope, thereby facilitating her success in gaining access to and beheading Holofernes. Therefore, whilst one scholar’s comments may sound offensive on a surface level, they actually serve to reinforce the power of Judith’s story and are testament to why it still resonates with artists of all genders, all these centuries later. It is difficult to come to a conclusion regarding the intention behind Judith’s appearance – I do think her beauty serves in her favour if we are considering the biblical story, but ultimately our Judith was painted by Pellegrini, a male artist. Furthermore, it is more than likely that this piece was painted for a male patron and would have been viewed by a largely male audience, which raises further issues surrounding Judith’s agency and self-determination. Trying to reclaim a heroine seen through the male gaze like this is of course far from a one-off – it has been and continues to happen throughout art, literature and history. I think essentially the viewer must make up their own mind on the answer: can a female figure like Judith truly be seen as a figure of strength and self-determination if we can’t be certain of the intention of the male artist painting her? It is an interesting discussion point, and I wish I was doing this talk in person so we could talk it out!

But enough on that – lets discuss the more stylistic qualities of this lovely painting! Our Judith was painted in the very early days of what later art-historians have called ‘the Rococo’ era, with a clear crossover of influence from the preceding period of ‘the Baroque’. Judith herself is light, elegant and innocent, painted in the porcelain colours typical of the decorative and airy Rococo style. But the warm and intense blue that drapes her is

accentuated by the red-brown hue of the background – all heavier colours more typical of the Baroque. The modesty and decorum of eighteenth-century society is reflected in the subtlety of the depiction of the decapitated head of Holofernes - Judith holds it daintily by the nose, barely even touching it, whilst her maid cradles the head and places it into a bag. This Rococo sensibility seems to dominate through the asymmetrical lines that spark a sense of instability and danger, and the complete absence of complex allegorical devices. However, there are arguably vestiges of the heavier preceding Baroque style in the plain backdrop and relatively limited palette. Pellegrini certainly constructs a perfect juxtaposition in this piece with his mastering of painting within two artistic styles which create a setting of balance and harmony – a direct contradiction to the theme of violence and deceit.

I chose this painting as the subject of my talk as I find it constantly surprising. There are hidden details such as the head of Holofernes itself, so subtly painted it almost blends in with the background; the decapitated body tucked into the right corner, with the blood also blending subtly with the red-brown hues. There is also the clear phallic symbolism of the sword upon which Judith rests a hand, suggesting a serene and certain force over the male sex. But ultimately and most importantly, Judith takes centre stage, holding eye contact with the viewer and refusing to let go or submit. Whilst this is intense, I find it brave – as a female character that has been sexualised, indeed even presented as a monstrous sex-maniac in the past, Pellegrini's Judith is comfortable with the power she yields, gently resting upon her sword, already successful in achieving her

task and therefore forcing us to appreciate her for what she so clearly and proudly is – a woman that is capable of immoral acts, but one that refuses to let these acts define or rule her.

## Further Readings

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**Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.**

