

Italy buys rare Caravaggio portrait for €30 million

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ROME — Italy's Ministry of Culture has purchased a rare Caravaggio portrait for 30 million euro, one of the largest sums ever spent by the Italian state on a single artwork, securing a painting that spent decades hidden in private hands before resurfacing in Rome in 2024.

The work depicts a young Maffeo Barberini, the future Pope Urban VIII, painted around 1598 at what scholars believe was the beginning of his ascent through the Catholic Church. It is one of only three portraits securely attributed to Caravaggio.

A face returned to Palazzo Barberini

The painting will join the permanent collection at Palazzo Barberini, where it will hang alongside Judith Beheading Holofernes and Narcissus, both from the same period. In a gilded room where natural light falls across Caravaggio's most dramatic canvases, the young Barberini's face will occupy a space that bears his family name, a homecoming of sorts for a work long lost to public view.

The portrait was first attributed to Caravaggio in 1963, when Italian art historian Roberto Longhi described it as "the first modern portrait." Despite that recognition, it remained in private collections for six decades, resurfacing only for a temporary exhibition in Rome last year. After more than a year of negotiations, the Ministry of Culture finalised the purchase, with Museum Director Thomas Clement Salomon credited as instrumental in locating and securing the work.

"We have the most important collection of Caravaggio and Caravaggesque paintings in the world," Salomon said. "Its attribution as a Caravaggio has been confirmed by rigorous analysis over the past

Source: https://italynow.co.uk/italy-acquires-rare-caravaggio-portrait-for-e30-million/

two years.”

“The portrait is extremely important for the Galleria Nazionale, even more so for the venue of Palazzo Barberini,” said Thomas Clement Salomon, Director, Palazzo Barberini.

The 30 million euro price represents nearly double the average annual acquisition budget of major Italian state museums, underlining how exceptional the operation is considered. The connection between Caravaggio and the Barberini family adds symbolic weight: Maffeo Barberini went on to become one of the most powerful popes of the seventeenth century and one of the great patrons of Baroque art. That this portrait may document the earliest chapter of that story gives the acquisition a resonance beyond its price tag.

Culture Minister Alessandro Giuli said the purchase forms part of a broader commitment to keeping masterpieces in public collections and accessible to scholars and visitors alike.

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