



A Drawing of *David with the Head of Goliath*  
Attributed to Simon Vouet

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Daniel Seghers (1590–1661) and Erasmus Quellinus the Younger (1607–1678), *Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child*, c. 1645–50. Oil on copper, 85.5 x 61.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7505.

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##### A Drawing of David with the Head of Goliath Attributed to Simon Vouet

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## A Drawing of *David with the Head of Goliath* Attributed to Simon Vouet

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**In 1627, Simon Vouet** (1590–1649) returned to Paris after fourteen years in Italy, bringing with him his experience of an exceptionally dynamic period in painting, one in which classicism and Baroque tendencies tussled with each other, and knowledgeable and wealthy patrons spurred on artists. In Rome, which had been Vouet's base, the 1610s and 1620s were particularly characterised by the assimilation of Caravaggio's realism and dramatic chiaroscuro. Spanish, French and Dutch artists absorbed these innovations, transferring them to their home countries. Simon Vouet received prestigious commissions during his time in Italy and, in 1624, was appointed president (*principe*) of Rome's academy of arts, Accademia di San Luca.<sup>1</sup>

On his return to Paris, Vouet became a leading force in French painting, with commissions for the king and leading aristocrats, who appreciated his classically tempered Baroque style. His ability to lead the work of a large studio contributed to his success, with the individual contributions of assistants and pupils being harmoniously adapted to the style of the master (or, more correctly, the studio), making it almost impossible to distinguish between them. Several artists in the upcoming generation learned their craft with Vouet, including Charles Le Brun, who would apply his skills on an even larger scale in well-organised and monumental commissions for Louis XIV.



Fig. 1 Simon Vouet (1590–1649), *David with the Head of Goliath*, c. 1620–21. Black chalk and white chalk on brown paper, 333 x 262 mm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 16/2019.





Fig. 2 Aubin Vouet (1595–1641), *David with the Head of Goliath*. Oil on canvas, 117.5 x 89.5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux, Bx 1986.4.1.



Fig. 3 Michel Lasne (c.1590–1667) after Aubin Vouet (1595–1641), *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1633–57. Engraving, 229 x 151 mm. British Museum, London, 1873.0809.114.

Whether Simon Vouet had already established a large studio in Rome is an open question.<sup>2</sup> His success should have meant he had some need for assistance; a number of his compatriots were registered in the artist's household in 1624–25, but it is not known whether they were pupils, colleagues, servants or perhaps lodgers. There are really just two painters who can be definitely linked to Vouet's activities: his brother Aubin Vouet (1595–1641) who was five years his junior and worked in Rome

for a short period in c. 1620, and his wife Virginia da Vezzo (1597–1638), from c. 1621–22.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, engravings have identified them as the authors of two paintings of Old Testament heroes: in Virginia's case, a *Judith* in a Roman collection and, in Aubin's, a *David*, which was acquired by Musée des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux in 1986 (Figs. 2–3).<sup>4</sup> Half-figures of saints or biblical characters were popular subjects in this period's art. This also applies to Vouet's Italian works, in which a painting of *David*

with the *Head of Goliath*, produced in Genoa in 1621, is a clear manifestation of the principles of Roman Caravaggism (Fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> The Nationalmuseum has acquired a drawing of the same subject, attributed to Simon Vouet (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> The drawing, in black and white chalk on brown paper, shows a young man with dark curly hair, wearing a feathered cap and standing beside a crag, his head turned to the right, gazing out of the picture to the observer's left. He is holding a large sword in his right hand, while





Fig. 4 Simon Vouet (1590–1649), *David with the Head of Goliath*. Oil on canvas, 121 x 94 cm. Musei di Strada Nuova, Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, PB 2201.



Fig. 5 Attributed to Pierre Mignard I (1612–1695) after Simon Vouet (1590–1649), *David with the Head of Goliath*, c. 1630. Etching with engraving on laid paper, 302 x 230 mm. Gift of Alan Stone and Lesly Hill. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 2006.77.1.

his left rests on the dead Goliath's sketched head; this has been wrapped in a piece of fabric and placed above the crag. The light comes from the left, playing over the muscles of David's exposed torso and the folds of his clothing. The surroundings – a cloud, the crag and what should probably be interpreted as a tree trunk – are drawn with a firm and, for Vouet, characteristic hatching with parallel lines in black chalk.<sup>7</sup> There is a subtle use of white chalk highlights, particularly in the arm of David's tunic or shirt, which has fallen off his shoulder, and

the highlights on his collarbone, shoulder, nose and chin.

There are remarkable likenesses between this drawing and Vouet's *David* in Genoa. This is particularly true of the posture, turn of the head and a detail such as the fingers of the right hand. The light is similar, but the hint of outdoors and the crag are not found in the painting; there, the background is almost entirely dark, contrasting with the illuminated, naked shoulder. The biggest differences are in the clothing: in the drawing the stomach is

exposed and the right arm covered by the shirt – in the painting it is the opposite. The model in the painting also appears to have a somewhat more compact physique.

However, Aubin Vouet's *David* also has likenesses with the drawing. The lower section of the exposed torso is studied at the same angle and with the same dividing line to the right as the drawing, even if the model is less idealised in Aubin's version, with more relaxed muscles and other realistic elements.<sup>8</sup>



A third presentation of this subject also appears to have associations with the drawing. This is an engraving attributed to Pierre Mignard (1612–1695) after Simon Vouet (Fig. 5).<sup>9</sup> In the engraving, David's right arm is the one that rests on Goliath's head, which is placed high on the left, with the left hand holding the sword. Here, the light falls from the right. The image of the curly-haired model is generally reminiscent of the drawing. The lower area of the stomach is drawn with the same profile to the right, with a distinct break in the line. In the drawing this is partially motivated by the deep shadow, but in both cases it appears somewhat dubious anatomically.

Considering the above-mentioned links to the two paintings dated 1620–21, it is tempting to propose the same dating for the Nationalmuseum's drawing of *David with the Head of Goliath*. Simon Vouet's drawn oeuvre from his time in Paris is both extensive and well-known, but very few drawings have been dated to his time in Italy. There has even been discussion of whether Vouet actually used drawn studies in Rome or, like Caravaggio, sketched straight onto the canvas. The leading expert on Vouet's drawings, Barbara Bréjon de Lavergnée, feels that this is unlikely, but is wary of accepting dates for figure studies that locate them during his time in Italy.<sup>10</sup> Stylistically, the Nationalmuseum's drawing is comparable with Vouet's drawings from the 1630s and, if the attribution to Mignard is correct, then the engraving should also be dated to the period after Vouet's return to France, when Mignard became his pupil. There appears to be no simple answer to the question of the relationship between the various Davids, but the problem actualises issues about the reuse of successful model studies and close cooperation in a studio. Aubin was a highly trusted colleague of Simon Vouet and distinguishing between their works stylistically is almost impossible.<sup>11</sup> How the drawings were used in work at the studio is not clear in Vouet's case and, naturally,

is difficult to determine, but is nonetheless interesting as a matter of principle.<sup>12</sup>

#### Notes:

1. William R. Crellly, *The Paintings of Simon Vouet*, New Haven and London 1962, p. 8.
2. Guillaume Kazerouni, "Un maître bien entouré", in *Simon Vouet (les années italiennes 1613/1627)* (exh. cat.), Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes / Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon, Paris 2008, pp. 191–192.
3. Crellly 1962, p. 7.
4. Judith engraved by Claude Mellan.
5. Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova, Palazzo Bianco (Inv. PB 2201). See *Simon Vouet (les années italiennes 1613/1627)*, (note 2), cat. no. 27.
6. NMH 16/2019, 33.3 x 26.2 mm, black chalk and white chalk on brown paper, purchase by Hedda and N.D. Qvist's fund, Sotheby's, Paris, 30 October 2018, no. 452.
7. Cf *Simon Vouet, 100 neuentdeckte Zeichnungen aus den Beständen der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek*, (exh. cat.), Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, München 1991, cat. nos. 46, 54.
8. Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Art, inv. 1986.4.1., see *Simon Vouet (les années italiennes 1613/1627)*, (note 2), cat. no. 84.
9. There has also been discussion of whether Vouet could have done the engraving himself. See Jacques Thuillier, "Vouet et la gravure", in *Vouet* (exh. cat.), Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, 1990–91, p. 63.
10. Barbara Bréjon de Lavergnée, "Vouet dessinateur en Italie", in *Simon Vouet (les années italiennes 1613/1627)*, (note 2), pp. 50, 55 (49–55). The author draws comparisons with Nicolas Régnier, who had established activities in Rome in 1621 with life drawing from nude models, but with no known drawings being preserved.
11. Crellly 1962, p. 12.
12. In another example, Raphael's studio – better known but not without parallels – accepted truths about drawings and studio practices have proven questionable, and consequently that issues of attribution must be reconsidered. Cf. Nicholas Turnes, "Swings and Roundabouts in the Attribution of Drawings to Raphael over the Last Two Centuries", in *Raffaello als Zeichner / Raffaello disegnatore*, Marzia Faietti and Achim Gnann (eds.), Florence 2019, p. 145 (137–152).