



**Emperor Commodus as Hercules  
and as a Gladiator**

Peter Paul Rubens  
Siegen 1577 – 1640 Antwerp

ca. 1599–1600

oil on panel

65.5 x 54.4 cm

PR-101



---

## How To Cite

Van Tuinen, Ilona. "Emperor Commodus as Hercules and as a Gladiator." In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. New York, 2017.

<https://www.theleidencollection.com/archive/>.

This page is available on the site's Archive. PDF of every version of this page is available on the Archive, and the Archive is managed by a permanent URL. Archival copies will never be deleted. New versions are added only when a substantive change to the narrative occurs.

---

Peter Paul Rubens painted this bold, bust-length image of the eccentric and tyrannical Roman emperor Commodus (161–92 A.D.) within an illusionistic marble oval relief. In stark contrast to his learned father Marcus Aurelius (121–80 A.D.), known as “the perfect Emperor,” Commodus, who reigned from 180 until he was murdered on New Year’s Eve of 192 at the age of 31, proudly distinguished himself by his great physical strength.<sup>[1]</sup> Toward the end of his life, Commodus went further than any of his megalomaniac predecessors, including Nero, and identified himself with Hercules, the superhumanly strong demigod of Greek mythology famous for slaughtering wild animals and monsters with his bare hands. According to the contemporary historian Herodian of Antioch (ca. 170–240 A.D.), Commodus responded only to the name “Hercules, son of Zeus” and, mirroring his Greek counterpart, wore a lion’s skin and carried around a club.<sup>[2]</sup> Following in the footsteps of his adopted namesake, Commodus even became a fervent gladiator, killing many wild animals in the arena, although with the rather un-Herculean aid of spears.<sup>[3]</sup>

This striking painted bust shows Commodus in the guise of a gladiator. In his proper right hand, the emperor proudly clenches one of his spears, while a fragment of a shiny bronze and silver shield dominates the bottom right corner of the composition. Resting on top of the emperor’s head like a helmet is the head of the lion’s hide, the paws of which are wrapped around the emperor’s shoulders. With a forceful expression, and with his head turned slightly to the right, Commodus stares directly at the viewer. Light coming in from the left illuminates that side of his face as well as the inner right edge of the illusionistic oval surround.

When this painting appeared on the art market in 2011, Peter Sutton correctly identified it as an early work by Peter Paul Rubens, executed by the young master before he left for Rome in May 1600.<sup>[4]</sup> Relatively few of Rubens’s paintings are known from between 1597, the year of his earliest known dated work, *Portrait of a Man, Possibly an Architect or Geographer* (**fig 1**), and his departure for Italy three years later.<sup>[5]</sup> Reflective of the influence of his teacher Otto van Veen (ca. 1556–1629), Commodus’s intense gaze, the conspicuous pink highlights in the flesh tones, and the relatively well-defined contours of his figure are comparable to that early portrait.<sup>[6]</sup> Similarities are also seen in the way Rubens modeled Commodus’s head and that of Adam in *Fall of Man*, which the young master painted just prior to his departure for Italy (**fig**

## Comparative Figures



**Fig 1.** Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of a Man, Possibly an Architect or Geographer*, 1597, oil on copper, 21.6 x 14.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982, 1982.60.24, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)



**Fig 2.** Peter Paul Rubens, *The Fall of Man*, ca. 1599–1600, oil on panel, 180 x 158 cm, Rubenshuis, Antwerp, © Lowie De Peuter and Michel Wuyts

2).<sup>[7]</sup> In each instance Rubens left the red-brown undermodeling partially exposed in the hair and beard, thereby adding a rich sense of depth to the otherwise dense, dark hair. A similar use of the underpaint in the final modeling of flesh tones is also seen in the figure of Saint Paul in Rubens's *Conversion of St. Paul*, which he also executed around 1599–1600.<sup>[8]</sup>

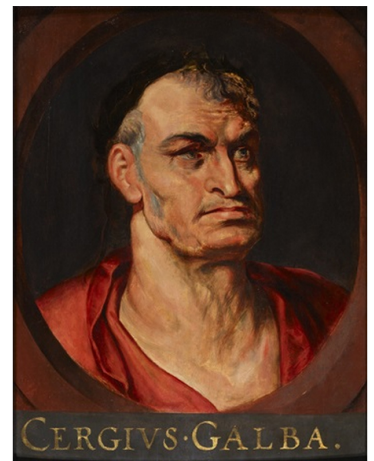
Rubens may have created this work as an independent commission, but it is more likely that it was part of a series of Roman emperors. One such series, which Rubens painted shortly before his departure for Rome, is known today primarily through copies in Stuttgart and Brussels. This series contained portraits of Julius Caesar and the first eighteen Roman emperors.<sup>[9]</sup> These emperors ruled during the Julio-Claudian dynasty (from Julius Caesar to Nero), the Flavian dynasty (from Galba to Domitian), and the Nerva-Antonian dynasty (from Nerva to Commodus).<sup>[10]</sup> The Leiden Collection painting is separate from that series, however, for Commodus is shown there facing the opposite direction and holding a club instead of a spear.<sup>[11]</sup> Unlike the paintings associated with that series, moreover, *Commodus* does not bear an identifying inscription.<sup>[12]</sup> Nevertheless, the absence of a bevel at the bottom, as well as the chipped, irregular paint layer along this edge, suggests that *Commodus* was cut at the bottom.<sup>[13]</sup> This reduction must have occurred relatively soon after the painting's execution, since a copy by an unknown member of Rubens's circle reproduces it in its current state (fig 3).<sup>[14]</sup>

*Commodus* is closely related stylistically to a bust-length portrait of the emperor Galba (fig 4), also by the young Rubens.<sup>[15]</sup> Judging from a photograph, *Galba*, which is about the same size as *Commodus*, appears to have been cut along the bottom edge of the panel. These similarities further suggest that the two paintings once belonged to a series and that they once had inscriptions that were removed, presumably at the same time. It is unclear for whom Rubens would have painted such a series of emperors. Nevertheless, the presence of *trompe l'oeil* oval framing devices suggests that these paintings were set into a wall, probably of a scholar's study. The fact that the light source in *Commodus* comes from the left suggests that it originally hung to the right of a window. Otto van Veen, who was a learned humanist, perhaps facilitated the commission.<sup>[16]</sup>

The convention of depicting a series of famous men from classical antiquity, so-called *Uomini famosi*, had its origins in Italy. One renowned



**Fig 3.** Circle of Peter Paul Rubens, *Commodus as Hercules*, probably ca. 1600, oil on panel, 58.2 x 47.4 cm, whereabouts unknown (formerly sale, Christie's, London, 30 October 1987, no. 157)



**Fig 4.** Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of the Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba*, ca. 1600, oil on panel, 6.7 x 52.2 cm, private collection



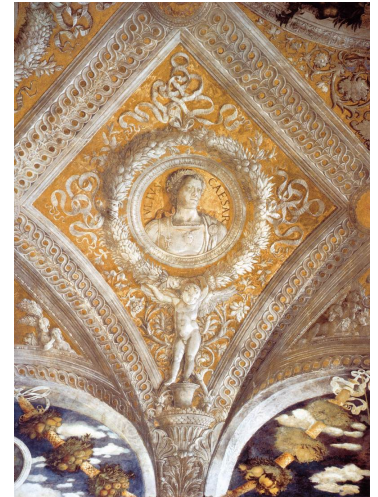
**Fig 5.** Aegidius Sadeler after

series of famous men was the Twelve Caesars that Titian executed in 1537–38 for Federico II Gonzaga (1500–40) as part of the decorative program at the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua. Even before his trip to Italy, Rubens could have known images of Titian's forceful half-figures through Aegidius Sadeler's print series of 1593 (**fig 5**).<sup>[17]</sup> Titian, in painting this series, had been inspired by Andrea Mantegna's painted roundels of Roman emperor busts set in *trompe l'oeil* frames in the Camera degli Sposi in the Ducal Palace (**fig 6**).<sup>[18]</sup> Rubens likely also knew about these painted busts in oval frames from Van Veen, who had spent five years in Italy.

Rubens's own training with Van Veen included making copies of casts and sculptures after the antique.<sup>[19]</sup> Nevertheless, no known bust or other visual source exists for *Commodus*, not even the famous *Hercules Commodus* in the Courtyard Belvedere, which Rubens might have known through Van Veen. Indeed, it is probable that Rubens's rendering of the emperor is the young master's own invention. Much later, after his return to Antwerp from the south, Rubens painted other busts of Roman emperors, including *Julius Caesar* (PR-100), in which his firsthand knowledge of and exposure to antique statues, coins, and reliefs are evident.<sup>[20]</sup>

-Ilona van Tuinen

Titian, *Julius Caesar*, 1593, engraving, from the series *Twelve Emperors and Their Wives*, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung Munchen, Munich, inv 1057, © National Graphic Arts Collection in Munich



**Fig 6.** Andrea Mantegna, *Julius Caesar*, 1465–74, fresco, Camera degli Sposi, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua

## Endnotes

1. The first book of the eight-volume *History of the Roman Empire Since the Death of Marcus Aurelius* by Herodian of Antioch (ca. 170–240 A.D.) is devoted entirely to Commodus (and it is chapter 2 of this book that is entitled “Marcus Aurelius, the Perfect Emperor”). See online translation by Edward C. Echols (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961). Herodian does not appear to have been a direct source for Rubens’s painting, for Herodian, in chapter 7 of the first book, described Commodus as “naturally blond and curly.”
2. Herodian of Antioch, *History of the Roman Empire Since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, book 1, chapter 14:8–9. See online translation by Edward C. Echols (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961).
3. Herodian of Antioch, *History of the Roman Empire Since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, book 1, chapter 15 is devoted to Commodus’s adventures as a gladiator. See online translation by Edward C. Echols (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961). According to Herodian, Commodus was more skillful at using his arrows and spear than he was brave.
4. After having been in an unidentified Belgian collection, the painting was purchased by Jack Kilgore & Co. in 2011. A copy of Peter C. Sutton’s unpublished essay, written for Jack Kilgore, is on file at the Leiden Collection.
5. For a discussion of *Portrait of a Man, Possibly an Architect or Geographer*, see Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York, 2007), 187–89. Although the painting is not signed, there has never been any question about the attribution. For a discussion of the pre-Roman oeuvre of Rubens, of which little is known with certainty, see C. Norris, “Rubens Before Italy,” *Burlington Magazine* 76 (1940): 190–93; Michael Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* (Oxford, 1977), esp. chapter 2, “Preparations for Italy,” 14–19; and Julius Held, “Thoughts on Rubens’ Beginnings,” *Ringling Museum of Art Journal: Papers Presented at the International Rubens Symposium, April 14–16, 1982* (1983): 14–35. Held mentions the 1606 will of Rubens’s mother, Maria Pijpelincx, which records “all the other paintings . . . the property of Peter Paul who has painted them,” suggesting that the paintings Rubens left in Antwerp before his trip to Rome in 1600 were numerous. For the full transcription of Pijpelincx’s will, see P. Genard, *P. P. Rubens: Aanteekeningen over den grooten Meester en zijne Bloedverwanten* (Antwerp, 1877), 371–76.
6. See, for instance, Otto van Veen’s *Adoration of the Shepherds*, executed before 1608, oil on copper, 87.6 x 73.3 cm, sale, Christie’s, New York, 30 January 2013, no. 26 (currently with Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York). For Rubens’s time as Van Veen’s apprentice, see Piet Bakker’s biography in this catalogue.
7. For the *Fall of Man*, see Michael Jaffé, *Rubens: Catalogo Completo* (Milan, 1989), 146–47,

no. 8. Jaffé catalogues this work, which he titles *Adam and Eve*, as the eighth and last painting Rubens made before his departure to Italy in 1600. See Peter C. Sutton's unpublished essay, written for Jack Kilgore, on file at the Leiden Collection, in which he also compares the present work to the Antwerp painting.

8. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, oil on panel, 72 x 103 cm, Sammlungen des Fürsten von und zu Liechtenstein, Vaduz and Vienna, inv. GE 40. See Michael Jaffé, *Rubens: Catalogo Completo* (Milan, 1989), 151, no. 30, where he dated it to 1602–4. In 2005 David Jaffé proposed a dating to ca. 1598–99, before Rubens's departure for Rome. See David Jaffé, ed., *Rubens: A Master in the Making* (Exh. cat. London, National Gallery) (London, 2005), 150–51, no. 67. Whether Rubens executed this painting while still in Antwerp or after arriving in Italy, the correspondences with *Commodus* and *Fall of Man* certainly reveal a working method that had evolved from his 1597 *Portrait of a Man*.
9. Michael Jaffé, "Rubens's Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine* 113 (June 1971): 297–303. Copies of eleven of these emperors are in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, and copies of thirteen of them are in a private collection in Brussels. A number of these were published, though not all of them illustrated, in Jaffé's article. See also *Katalog der Staatsgalerie Stuttgart* (Stuttgart, 1957), 229, no. 2241, for the discussion of the Stuttgart *Vitellius*, oil on panel, 67 x 52 cm (which Burchard attributed to Rubens himself, but which Jaffé did not adopt), and for the mention of the other paintings, though not by title, only by inv. no. (2257–66). Jaffé also illustrated as the original prototype by Rubens a painting of *Nero*, oil on panel, 64.6 x 50 cm, indistinctly inscribed "DOMINITIANUS NERO.6," which was in a private collection in Paris at the time, but came up for sale at Christie's, London, 7 July 2010, no. 133.
10. Because Commodus was the last emperor of the Nervan-Antonian dynasty, and as no paintings by Rubens depicting later emperors have surfaced, there is no reason to believe that Rubens went further than depicting 19 emperors.
11. The author wishes to thank Elke Allgaier of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart for sending a photograph of the otherwise unpublished *Commodus* in their collection. See Julius Held, "Thoughts on Rubens' Beginnings," *Ringling Museum of Art Journal: Papers Presented at the International Rubens Symposium, April 14–16, 1982* (1983): 14–35, fig. 3, for what seems to have been the prototype for the Stuttgart copy. Held attributed this painting to Rubens, but did not make the connection with the copy in Stuttgart, presumably because he was not familiar with the composition of the unpublished *Commodus* in Stuttgart. Held also mentions, but does not illustrate, a slightly different version of this painting, in which the head is slightly more inclined to the left, which in 1962 was in a private collection in Pennsylvania. See also Michael Jaffé, *Rubens: Catalogo Completo* (Milan, 1989), 146, no. 5, for a *Commodus*, oil on panel, 65 x 50 cm, which he dates to ca. 1598 and attributes to the young Rubens.

12. See Michael Jaffé, "Rubens's Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine* 113 (June 1971): 297–303, who reproduces the Stuttgart *Vitellius* and the Brussels *Nero*. In the Stuttgart paintings, the inscriptions identifying the names of the emperors run in a straight line at the bottom of the paintings (fig. 4), whereas in the Brussels paintings they are painted into the bottom rim of the oval. It is unclear whether these inscriptions are authentic or later additions, and thus whether the differences in inscriptions point to two different original sets. Considering how fresh and intact the inscriptions look in the photographs, they must, at the very least, have been reinforced.
13. See the Technical Summary.
14. The auction catalogue (sale, Christie's, London, 30 October 1987, no. 157, unsold) does not offer any additional provenance, or any information about this *Commodus*.
15. This painting was first published in David Jaffé, ed., *Rubens: A Master in the Making* (Exh. cat. London, National Gallery) (London, 2005), 54, under no. 7, "Study of a Distressed Man." Jaffé here attributed the painting to Rubens, and Peter Sutton, in his unpublished essay kept on file at the Leiden Collection, suggested that *Galba* belonged to the original series of the copies in Stuttgart and Brussels. See also Michael Jaffé, "Rubens's Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine* 113 (June 1971): 297–303, who lists all the emperors represented in Stuttgart and Brussels. Missing from both series are no. 7, *Galba*, and no. 17, *Lucius Aurelius Verus*.
16. Otto van Veen and Rubens remained in close contact and even appear to have collaborated up until Rubens's departure for Rome in May 1600. See Michael Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* (Oxford, 1977), chapter 2, "Preparations for Italy," 14–19.
17. Titian's series, which depicted Julius Caesar and the first 11 emperors, was based on Suetonius Tranquillus's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (AD 121). As a consequence it did not include Commodus and the Nervan-Antonian dynasty. For a discussion and depictions of this important series, see Lisa Zeitz, *Tizian, Teurer Freund: Tizian und Federico Gonzaga, Kunstpatronage in Mantua im 16. Jahrhundert* (Petersberg, 2000), 59–102. Titian painted the series in the Camerino dei Cesari of the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua. The paintings were destroyed in a 1734 fire. See Dieuwke de Hoop Scheffer, *Hollstein's Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*, vol. 21, *Aegidius Sadeler to Raphael Sadeler II*, ed. Karel G. Boon (Amsterdam, 1980), 77–78, nos. 346–70, for a list of the contents of this 25-part print series, containing a title page, the 12 portraits of Julius Caesar and the first 11 emperors after Titian, and the 12 portraits of their wives (not after Titian). The prints, 34.7 x 24.1 cm, are not depicted.
18. See Lisa Zeitz, *Tizian, Teurer Freund: Tizian und Federico Gonzaga, Kunstpatronage in Mantua im 16. Jahrhundert* (Petersberg, 2000), 61.
19. See David Jaffé and Minna Moore Ede, "Rubens: A Master in the Making," in *Rubens: A Master in the Making*, ed. David Jaffé (Exh. cat. London, National Gallery) (London, 2005),

11–20, esp. 11–13, for a discussion of Rubens's pre-Roman contact with Italian art in Otto van Veen's workshop. The fact that Rubens's *Fall of Man* (fig. 2 above) is based partially on a print by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael gives us some kind of impression of the availability of Italian prints in Rubens's artistic surroundings in Antwerp.

20. For a comprehensive overview of Rubens's Italian drawings after the antique, see Marjon van der Meulen and Arnout Balis, *Rubens, Copies After the Antique: Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part 23*, 3 vols. (London, 1994). See, for instance, vol. 2, 119–21, nos. 109a–b, for a drawing of Rubens after a bust of *Julius Caesar*, pen in brown over black chalk, brown and gray wash, white highlights, 262 x 192 mm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. L1886, which Rubens later used for his painting of Julius Caesar commissioned for Jagdschloss Grunewald near Berlin; see Maria Kapp, *Die niederländischen und flämischen Gemälde des 17. Jahrhunderts im Jagdschloss Grunewald* (Berlin, 1989), 42, fig. 15. See also Michael Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* (Oxford, 1977), 17, who similarly observed that compared to his post-Roman works, Rubens's early emperors are “harshly mannered and immature embroilment[s] with Roman antiquity, a remote world which in the Flanders of his youth was accessible only to fancy.”

## Provenance

- Private collection, Belgium [Jack Kilgore & Co., New York, 2011].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2011.

## Exhibition History

- Wellesley, Davis Museum at Wellesley College, on loan with the permanent collection, 1 August 2016–1 August 2017 [lent by the present owner].

## References

- Sutton, Peter C. *Peter Paul Rubens: Portrait of the Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba*. Sales cat. Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian Dutch Old Master Paintings. Amsterdam, 2014, [n.p.], no. 1.

## Versions

### Versions and Copies

1. Circle of Peter Paul Rubens, *Commodus as Hercules*, oil on panel, 58.2 x 47.4 cm, current whereabouts unknown (formerly sale, Christie's, London, 30 October 1987, no. 157, unsold).

### Versions Notes

## Technical Summary

The support is a rectangular composite panel comprising two vertically grained oak planks. The vertical panel join, located left of center, passes through the inner corner of the figure's proper right eye, and a horizontal dowel bridges the join by the figure's mouth.<sup>[2]</sup> Viewed from the reverse, the panel is unthinned and uncradled. Glue residues indicate the previous location of two fixed horizontal boards, and the right plank is considerably thicker than the left along the join. A bevel extends across the upper edge of both planks, and narrow bevels extend along the left and right edges, but there is no bevel along the lower edge.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied with wide diagonal brushstrokes, which remain visible through the flesh tones. The portrait has been executed within a feigned oval frame with paint applied in thin, smooth glazes. The paint and ground along the lower edge form an irregular border. This, along with the lack of bevel along the lower edge and the fact that the feigned oval frame is narrower along the midpoint of the lower edge than along the upper edge, suggests the lower panel edge may have been trimmed slightly.<sup>[3]</sup>

The painting is unsigned and undated.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images, pentimenti, and X-radiograph reveal minor compositional changes. Both the figure's proper right hand and the lion's paw have been shifted lower in the painted composition.

The painting underwent panel work along the join since its acquisition and remains in a good state of preservation. Damage along the lower portion of the right plank was restored prior to the painting's acquisition.

### Technical Summary Endnotes



1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.
2. Visible in the X-radiograph.
3. Feigned oval frame width along midpoints: 2.5 cm along upper edge, 1 cm along lower edge, 2 cm along left edge, 2.3 cm along right edge.