

Peter Paul Rubens

Siegen 1577 – 1640 Antwerp

Hercules as a Gladiator

Koenraad Jonckheere

SALOMON LILIAN
DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

Peter Paul Rubens
Siegen 1577 – 1640 Antwerp

Hercules as a Gladiator

Oil on panel
65.5 x 54.4 cm.

Provenance:
Belgium, with an aristocratic family for several generations
New York, Jack Kilgore & Co, by 2010, by whom sold to
New York, Leiden Collection, until 2023

Literature:
P.C. Sutton, *Peter Paul Rubens, Emperor Commodus as Hercules and Gladiator, circa 1597-99*, unpublished factsheet Jack Kilgore & Co., New York 2011
P.C. Sutton, *Peter Paul Rubens : Portrait of the Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba (3 BC – 69 AD)*, Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian Dutch Old Master Paintings 2014, pp. 4-5, fig. 1
K. Jonckheere, *Portraits after Existing Prototypes* (*Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* XIX/4), Turnhout/London 2016, pp. 85, 102, cat. no. 35a, fig. 139
I. van Tuinen, 'Emperor Commodus as Hercules and as a Gladiator '(2017), in: A.K. Wheelock Jr., L. Yeager-Crasselt (eds.), *The Leiden Collection Catalogue* (3rd ed.), New York 2020 (see https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/the-emperor-commodus-as-hercules-and-as-a-gladiator/, accessed April 2022)
L. Yeager-Crasselt, 'The Leiden Collection and the Dutch Golden Age', in: P. Lyubimova (ed.), *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer : Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection*, exh. cat. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum 2018-2019, pp. 16-27, p. 18, note 12; pp. 28-33, p. 29, note 12
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A.T. Woollett, 'Toward a living past: Rubens and the antique Triumph', in: A.T. Woollett, D. Gasparotto, J. Spier (eds.), *Rubens : Picturing Antiquity*, exh. cat. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum 2021-2022, pp. 70-84, p. 75, and p. 106, cat. no. 20, ill.
J. Wood, B. Schepers, in: E. McGrath, B. Schepers, B. Vanoppen (eds.), *Mythological Subjects : Hercules to Olympus* (*Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* XXI/2), 2 vols., Turnhout/London 2022, 1, pp. 106-107, note 32

Exhibited:
Wellesley (MA), Davis Museum at Wellesley College, on loan 2016-2017
Shanghai, Long Museum, 2017-2018
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum (Malibu, Getty Villa), 2021-2022, no. 20



Introduction

This well-preserved panel is an important benchmark in the oeuvre of the young Peter Paul Rubens.[1] Datable to the very last years of the sixteenth century (c. 1599-1600) on the basis of dendrochronology and stylistic analysis, its marks the end of his youth and the beginning of what was to become a stellar career.[2] Both its obvious quality and its enigmatic position within the oeuvre of the master make it very appealing.

Little is known about the young Rubens.[3] He was registered in the guild of Saint Luke in 1598 as "Peter Rubbens vrymeester, scilder", meaning that he was allowed to start his own workshop. In fact, this brief note in the *liggeren* (ledgers) of the Antwerp guild is the very first indication of Rubens' activity as a painter. While later biographies – such as the one by his nephew Philip (1611-1678)[4] – give some more specific information about his training in the workshops of Tobias Verhaecht, Adam van Noort and eventually Otto van Veen, verified knowledge on his youth is frustratingly scarce. We have no clue whatsoever on what Rubens did in the workshop of Adam van Noort for instance and as for his training with Tobias Verhaecht, it is highly enigmatic. One of the few remnants of his training would be the sheet of paper preserved in Rotterdam on which he drew copies after Tobias Stimmer (fig. 1). According to the German biographer Joachim von Sandrart, Rubens personally told him on a joint boat trip in the Netherlands that he made such drawings at the time.[5]



Fig. 1 Peter Paul Rubens after Tobias Stimmer, *Sheet with Various Figures*, pen and brown ink on paper, 20 x 14 cm., Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen

Perhaps among the biggest mysteries of the young Rubens, are the origins of his remarkable erudition and his love for antiquity, something of which this panel testifies as we will see. No doubt stimulated by his brother Philip Rubens' (1574-1611) scholarly career and the learned background of his father Jan – a lawyer in the service of William of Orange – Rubens briefly attended the 'Papenschool' of the humanist Rumoldus Verdonk after the return of the family to Antwerp around 1590; yet he had to leave school within a year or so for financial reasons. While Philip thrived in dedicating his life to the study of antiquity as a teacher to the sons of Jean Richardot, and flourished in the ambient of Justus Lipsius, Peter Paul moved to Oudenaarde to enter the service of Marguerite de Ligne-Arenberg, the widow of the count of Lalaing as a page. Only a couple of years later he started his training as painter in Antwerp. He must have been 16 or 17 at the time, which was quite late to start an artistic training.

Since Rubens' scholarly career was very short lived, his uncommon knowledge of Latin, Greek and antiquity must have stemmed from self-study and erudite conversations mostly. Tobias Verhaecht, his first teacher, will not have thwarted him from further developing his humanist interests, but he probably wasn't the most stimulating factor either. Adam van Noort and Otto van Veen, on the other hand, had both spent several years in Italy and must have stimulated the young man to pursue his interests in Greco-Roman culture and combine his painterly talent with humanist goals.[6] Especially Otto van Veen, who had served as the court painter to Alessandro Farnese until 1592, proved to be one of the most knowledgeable painters in the Low Countries; an artist whose ambitions reached far beyond the 'noble liberal art of painting'. Van Veen, much like Rubens himself used his artistry as a means to understand the complexities of life and the world. His paintings, prints and emblems were as much an invitation to think as they were pictures to enjoy. When Rubens joined the workshop of Otto Van Veen in the mid 1590's, the latter had only just been appointed free master (1593) in Antwerp, meaning that the workshop must have burst with ambition.[7] Rubens spent a couple of years there, before eventually becoming a master himself in 1598 at the age of 21. Two years later, on May 9, 1600, he left for Italy only to return in 1608. By that time had made a name for himself and he could boast important Roman commissions.[8]



Fig. 3 Otto van Veen, *Allegory of the Temptations of Youth*, oil on panel, 146 x 212 cm., Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

Ambition

Several panels have been linked to Peter Paul Rubens and/or Otto van Veen which might have been produced in the 'workshop' of Otto van Veen and/or the young Rubens.[9] Best known and the least contentious is the *Adam and Eve* (fig. 2) now in the Rubens house.[10] Other panels such as the *Allegory of the temptations of youth* (fig. 3) in Stockholm or the *Lamentation of Christ* in the Louvre have also been associated with the young Rubens, here as a collaborator to Otto van Veen.[11] Much can be said about these and other paintings, but none of those bear such clear indications of painted by Rubens himself as this panel, which is partially related to the ambitious series of emperor portraits produced sometime between 1598 and 1600 (fig. 4) yet also stands apart from it because of its superior quality.[12] While some of the portraits we know of this 'first emperor series' – Rubens devised another series much later in life (fig. 5)[13] – still lack Rubens' ground-breaking qualities, others do show the blossoming talent of an exceptional master in the making. The panels of this first series are now preserved in Stuttgart and the Phoebus Foundation.



Fig. 2 Peter Paul Rubens, *Adam and Eve*, 1598-1599, oil on panel, 182.5 x 140.7 cm, Antwerp, Rubenshuis

To get a grip on the extraordinary position of this panel and why it is outstanding (literally and figuratively), let us however start with explaining the range of the emperor series project as devised by Rubens and the complicated attribution questions surrounding some of the different versions of the series. To do so, the panels which can be attributed quite securely to Rubens are to be dealt with first. They consist of eleven panels now in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart and the portrait of Galba in the Phoebus collection, thus twelve in total.[14] In other words, not all panels have been preserved. Originally, the series as devised by Rubens must have consisted of at least 19 panels, as the portraits preserved in Stuttgart include the busts of Caesar to Commodus. While Julius Caesar was not an emperor himself, the later emperors were named after him, and thus he was often included in such lists.[15] The fact that the series stops with Commodus



Fig. 4 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Stuttgart / Phoebus Emperor Series*, c. 1598-1600, all oil on panel, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie / Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation (*Galba*)



Fig. 5 Peter Paul Rubens, *Julius Caesar* (from the Second Emperor Series), c. 1618-1620, oil on panel, 33 x 26.6 cm., Europe, private collection

means that the list included Caesar, the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the emperors of the Four Emperor Year, the Flavian dynasty and the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, which ended with Commodus indeed in 192. All are of nearly the exact same sizes and characterized by the same color setting and oval, trompe-l'oeil frames. At the bottom the names of the emperors are inscribed in gold on a grey background. Not all panels are by Rubens though. Caesar's portrait lacks the swiftness and quality of the brushwork one would associate with Rubens, even at this young age, and must have been made by a workshop assistant of some sort. In how far the others are fully singlehanded is sometimes hard to discern, but several do show the traces of the aspiring artist. Especially the portrait of Galba, an emperor who would keep on fascinating Rubens throughout his life, is illustrative of the inquisitive mind of the artist, and the seeking, virtuous brushwork. It marks the mindset of an artist who did not take the physiognomy of a face for granted, but took it as canvas to sketch a character, as we will see.

To further complicate things, of this series several copies were made (fig. 6). Some were preserved in full, others fragmentary, but non bare the quality of the Stuttgart series, let alone the panel under discussion here. Some of these copies were attributed to Otto van Veen or even Rubens himself, but none of these copies testify of Rubens' own input.

The reasons to attribute the Stuttgart-series, including the Galba portrait in the Phoebus-collection to Rubens are manyfold and were painstakingly described in the Corpus Rubeninianum Ludwig Burchard XIX, 4 on *Portraits after existing prototypes*, and supplemented with technical and other data by Nils Büttner in the exhibition catalogue and a booklet on the Galba portrait.[16] Both material-technical research and stylistic analysis point to Peter Paul Rubens. Especially when compared to one of the most secure attributions to the young Rubens, *The Judgement of Paris* in the National Gallery (fig. 7), the analogies in painterly technique are self-evident. What's more, the Stuttgart series clearly



Fig. 6 After Peter Paul Rubens, *Emperor Series*, all oil on panel, c. 63.5 x 48.2 cm., private collection (formerly sale New York, Christie's, 12 June 1981, lots 222-226)



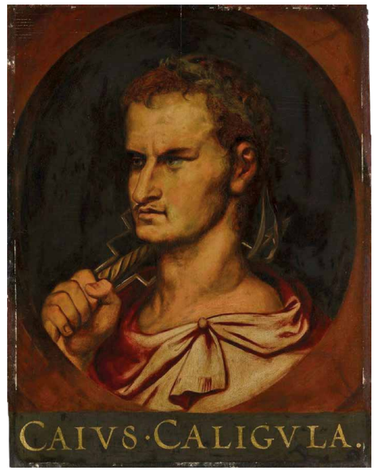
Fig. 7 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgement of Paris*, c. 1597-1599, oil on panel, 133.9 x 174.5 cm., London, National Gallery

testify of a painter 'thinking'. Instead of lazily taking over the generic facial feature and attributes, as they could be found in illustrated overviews of Roman emperor's lives, such as Hubert Goltzius' *Lebendige Bilder nach aller Keysern* (1557), Rubens came up with new idiosyncratic physiognomic characteristics and uncommon attributes. That goes for Caligula or Trajan (figs. 8-11) for instance. In these cases, the iconography is completely altered when compared to the woodcuts in for instance Goltzius' book – which definitely served as an example for other portraits such as Antonius Pius (figs. 12, 13)

Outstanding / standing out

This panel actually stands out as a maverick panel, lacking for instance the epigrams of the Stuttgart series. Given the epigrams on the preserved copies, it clearly served as the model used for the portrait of Hadrian yet does not fit into the series as we know it from the Stuttgart/Phoebus panels. The trompe-l'oeil oval frame is rendered substantially differently, and the panel lacks the inscriptions at the bottom, and the dimension of the painted figure is different. As technical research gave no indication of any overpainting or paint-loss, it seems fair to assume it was never there, especially since the panel has been very well preserved. Moreover, it is painted much swifter and virtuous than all panels in the Stuttgart series. And on top of that, its iconography was, as we will see very highly learned and innovative.

Generally speaking, there are a couple possible lines of reasoning to explain the exceptionality of this panel, when compared to the series and the copies. The first would be that Rubens made a copy himself of one painting. Given the extraordinary painterly quality and the pentimenti (for instance in the fingers of the right hand, fig. 14), that option is highly unlikely. Another line of reasoning would be that Rubens



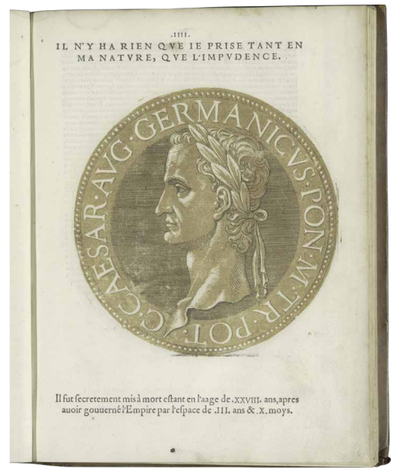


Fig. 8 left
Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Emperor Caligula* (from the Stuttgart/Phoebus Emperor Series), c. 1598-1600, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie

Fig. 9 right
Portrait of Emperor Caligula, etching and woodcut, in Hubert Goltzius, *Lebendige Bilder nach aller* Keysern, Antorf 1557, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



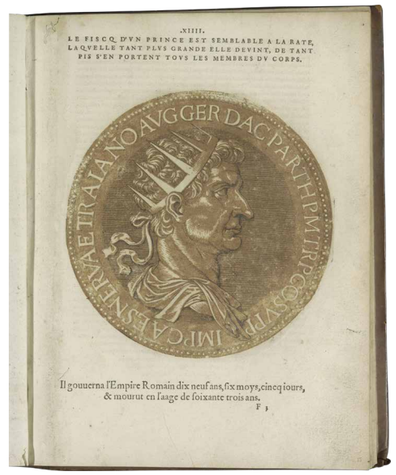


Fig. 10 left
Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Emperor Trajan* (from the Stuttgart/Phoebus Emperor Series), c. 1598-1600, oil on panel, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie

Fig. 11 right
Portrait of Emperor Trajan, etching and woodcut, in Hubert Goltzius, *Lebendige Bilder nach aller Keysern*, Antorf 1557, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



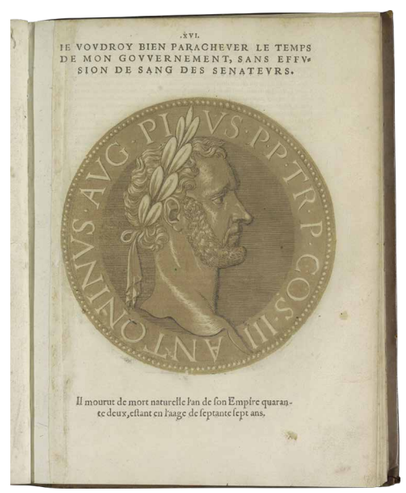


Fig. 12 left
Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Emperor Antoninus Pius* (from the Stuttgart/Phoebus Emperor Series), c. 1598-1600, oil on panel, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie

Fig. 13 right
Portrait of Emperor Antoninus Pius, etching and woodcut, in Hubert Goltzius, *Lebendige Bilder nach aller Keyser*, Antorf 1557, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

devised another, first series (supposedly without the identifying captions), on which the Stuttgart series was based. In that case the present paining would be the only surviving panel of such a hypothetical series. In other words, all but one panel – in excellent condition – would be lost; an equally unlikely option thus.

This portrait stands out in so many ways, that it might be worthwhile to consider another, more plausible option. Let us, to make that point, compare the depiction of the bronze shield in the Portrait of Trajan in Stuttgart (fig. 10) with the panel under consideration here. On this 'portrait', the reflection of light is so carefully conceived that it even seems to bare the hammer marks on the bronze, in the form of small yellowish cross marks.[17] The much more mechanical execution of Trajan's shield does not testify of the same determination to understand the reflection of light. Moreover, given the clearly visible pentimenti – for instance at the thumb – its more than fair to assume that the panel was the masters own work, while the Trajan was conceived and probably partially executed by Rubens, yet not necessarily singlehandedly.[18]

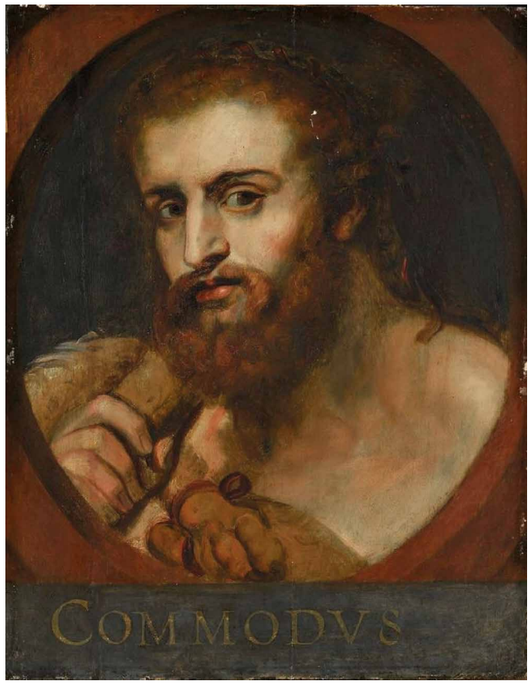


Fig. 15 Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Emperor Commodus* (from the Stuttgart/Phoebus Emperor Series), c. 1598-1600, oil on panel, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie

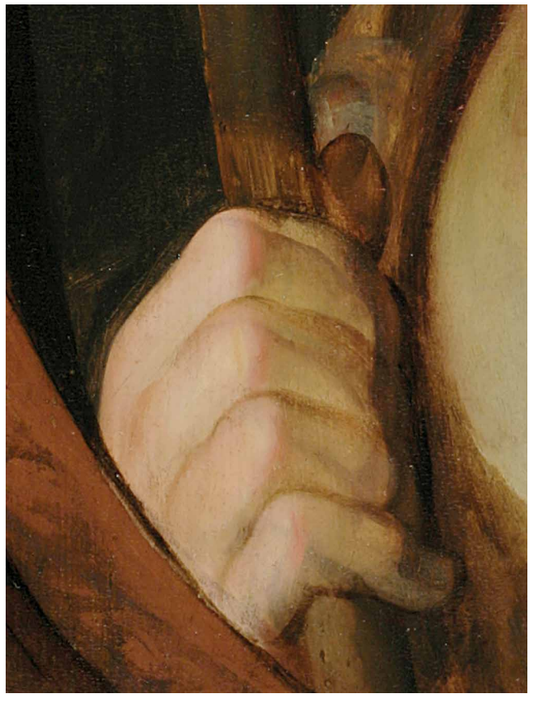


Fig. 14 Peter Paul Rubens Salomon Lilian, detail of pentimenti in the fingers of the right hand

Yet another argument to assess this panel here as outstanding, especially when compared to the emperor series is, as briefly mentioned, the iconography. While the iconography of such portrait bust seems very straightforward, in this case it actually is not. That shows in the history of the identification of the depicted. When the portrait was acquired by Jack Kilgore & Co. from a private collection in Belgium around 2010, the man was identified by Peter Sutton as Commodus, the son of Marcus Aurelius and emperor of Rome from 177 to 192.[19] According to the Roman Historian Cassius Dio, Commodus lacked the stoic talents of his father and loved to dress up as Hercules and join gladiator fights.[20] Given the Lion's skin, it was too easily assumed that this portrait could be identified as Commodus. Since an entirely different *Portrait of Emperor Commodus* (fig. 15) is preserved as part of the Stuttgart series, whereas the present man resembles Hadrian in copies of the same series, the identification as Commodus cannot be accepted any longer.

Although there's no evidence to identify this portrait as Commodus indeed, the association with gladiators is an important one. In ancient Rome, there were different types of gladiators and various emperors identified themselves with them. To understand what's happening on this panel, it is important to bear that in mind and to understand that the weapons gladiators used were the denominator of their standing. Here weaponry of the *Hoplomachus* is referenced. This type of gladiator was first introduced during the reign of Augustus and used the *hast*a (kind of spear), a dagger and a small bronze shield as weapons. Their typology was derived from the Greek *hoplites* who fought with similar armor.

Whether Rubens knew about the *Hoplomachi* at this young age is of course hard to verify, but the fact that he had the combination of weapons right would suggest so. Where he would have gathered these facts is equally puzzling, but since his brother's mentor Justus Lipsius wrote extensively about gladiators in his *Saturnalian dialogues* (*Saturnalium sermonum libri II, qui de gladiatoribus,* 1582) (figs. 16, 17), the possibility must not be ruled out at all that he received his knowledge first hand, either from Philip or from Justus Lipsius himself.[21] In chapter 11 on *Hoplomachi,* the humanist referred to Cassius Dio, Seneca, Suetonius and Martialis, Cicero and many others and provided an explanation on the kind of warriors these gladiators were expected to be. At the very end of the booklet, the dialogue on Roman gladiators tuned into an impassioned monologue on the courage on constancy of gladiators despite the hardship of their profession and thus were forwarded as a prime example for Lipsius beloved stoic ethics. As is well known, Rubens was an adept of Lipsius and via Lipsius of stoicism.[22]

A possible answer for Rubens associative thinking and using Hoplomachus' weaponry in the depiction of gladiators, might be found in the anonymous *Historia Augusta*, a recognized source on the history of the empire in Rubens' time.

Wearing an animal skin on the head was common in the Roman army and does not necessarily refer to an emperor. Especially the *Aquilifer,* responsible for bearing the eagle standard, often wore a lion's pelt. Holding on to this standard was a huge responsibility as the loss of it was considered the biggest disgrace in battle.

The lion skin however, also referred to the demi-god Hercules, who killed the Nemean Lion and wore its skin a as a trophy of war. Besides Commodus, several Roman emperors associated themselves with Hercules and the lion's pelt. Trajan for instance placed his renowned 'Legio II Traiana' under the protection of Hercules, using the image of the hero on the army's emblem. Yet, since Trajan was beardless, the chances that Rubens intended to depict the conqueror of Dacia


I. LIPSI
SATVRNALIVM
SERMONVM
LIBRI DVO,
Qui de Gladiatoribus.
ANTVERPIÆ,
Ex officina Christophori Plantini.
M. D. LXXXII.

Fig. 16 Title page of Justus Lipsius, *Saturnalium sermonum libri II, qui de gladiatoribus,* Antwerp 1582



Fig. 17 *Gladiators in the Arena*, engraving in Justus Lipsius, *Saturnalium sermonum libri II, qui de gladiatoribus,* Antwerp 1582



Figs. 18, 19
Roman aureus with Hadrian and Hercules, 119-122 AD, London, British Museum

here are nil. Moreover, his *Portrait of Emperor Trajan* as preserved in Stuttgart (fig. 10), was substantially different. Hadrian too, who served as Trajan's successor from 117 to 138 AD and was considered one of the so-called good emperors, was fond of Hercules. On coins (figs. 18, 19) issued during his reign, he was associated with *Hercules Gaditanus* (Hercules of Gades – i.e. modern day Cadiz). He did so to celebrate his Iberian roots, as Hercules was particularly popular in the province of Hispania.[23] Given that Rubens studied Roman coins intensely – and used some to devise some other emperor portraits such as Domitian (figs. 20, 21) he must have been well-aware of this. Yet even Alexander the great was often depicted with a lion's pelt, as can be observed on some of his Tetradrachms (coins minted during his reign) (fig. 22). Moreover, it might well have been this type of coin which inspired Rubens to depict the lion's skin without the beak and teeth – as was more common – but with a decorative shell-like curl instead as on the coins minted during Alexander's reign. However, for the time being, this is merely an educated assumption.

Depictions of Roman soldiers or emperors dressed up as Hercules with lion skins draped over their heads were, as a result, well known in the Renaissance, even



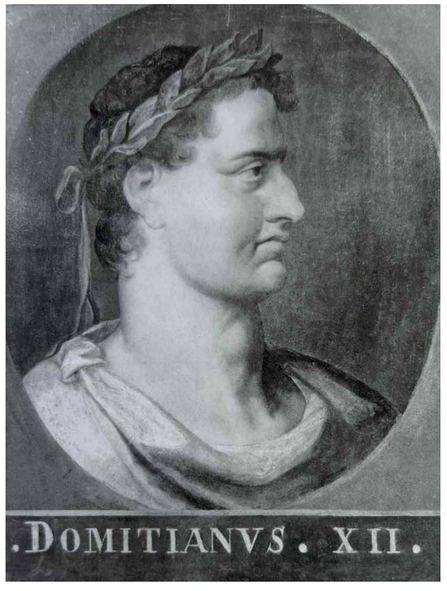


Fig. 20 left
Peter Paul Rubens, *Emperor Domitian* (after a Roman Aureus), pen on paper, 6.1 x 4 cm., Chatsworth, The Devonshire collection

Fig. 21 right
After Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Emperor Domitianus*, oil on panel, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., private collection (formerly sale New York, Christie's, 12 June 1981, lot 224)



Fig. 22 Tetradrachm with Alexander the Great as Hercules, c. 325-323 BC, London, British Museum

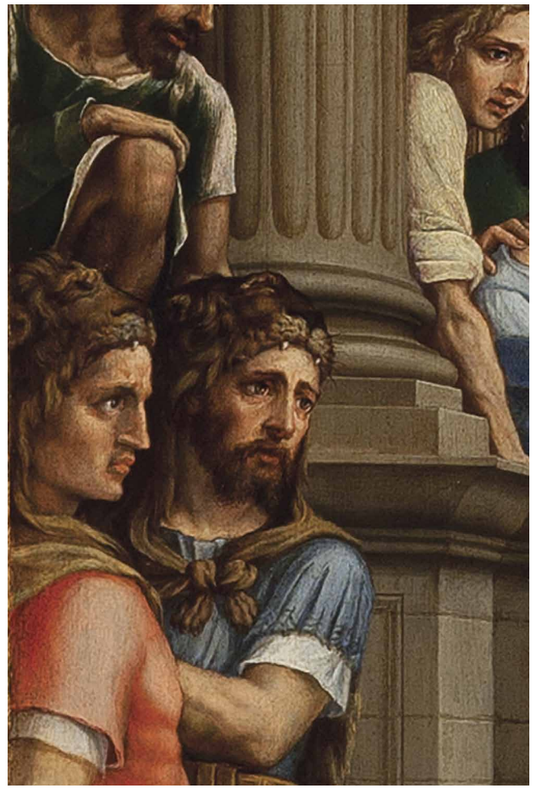


Fig. 23 Michiel Coxcie, *The Martyrdom of Saint John the Evangelist*, c. 1540, oil on panel, 230 x 90 cm., Prague, Národní Galerie (on loan from St. Vitus Cathedral chapter), detail of two Roman soldiers

in the low countries and already used in the 1540's by such painters as Michiel Coxcie (fig. 23). On *The martyrdom of Saint John the Evangelist*, painted by Coxcie on the left wing of Jan Gossart's Saint-Luke altarpiece, two Roman bystanders are presented as such.[24] The altarpiece was bought in the 1580's by emperor Matthias von Habsburg and moved to Prague – so Rubens probably did not know it – but it demonstrates how the iconography of the lion skin was well known in the Netherlands since the middle of the sixteenth century. Interestingly, the titled head and the physiognomy of Rubens' hero match Coxcie's depiction, but the lions skin differs strongly, as here too the beak is clearly distinguishable.

Typical for Rubens is that he extents his thinking. When somewhat later he devised *Aeneas leaving burning Troy* (fig. 24), he clearly reused some of the physiognomic threats in the face of the Greco-Roman hero. Again, when thinking of Hercules in his *Hercules and Omphale* (fig. 25) around the same time (c. 1602), the facial characteristics were sampled.

Physiognomy like Hercules

As might be clear by now, Rubens' panel shows the work of an artist who studied the physiognomy of Hercules, the Roman emperors and other rulers, but lacked the opportunity to study the original busts or statues and at the time – before his departure for Italy – had to suffice with coins or derivative imagery. Yet, all of these sources were two-dimensional and in profile, so he could not fully grasp the actual physiognomy of his subjects. Two extreme examples of this quest are Vitellius and Caesar in the emperor series (figs. 26, 27), which when opposed show how Rubens succeeded in depicting Vitellius quite lifelike, while failing on reconstructing the physiognomy of Caesar. He must have seen a plaster cast of the famous Grimani bust of Vitellius somewhere (fig. 28), as he was able to conceive a portrait in this case that matched the emperor's known facial features well. In the case of Julius Caesar however, there was a strong mismatch between Rubens' construction of an identity and the actual facial features of the Roman general.

In the case of the present panel, the 'portrait' does not resemble any known effigy of Hadrian in print, such as Hubert Goltzius' profile (fig. 29), nor any known marble bust. The rectangular shape of chin and beard do not match the emperor's known curved jawlines, meaning Rubens' initial ambition with the panel probably lay elsewhere.



Fig. 24 Peter Paul Rubens, *Pius Aeneas*, 1601, oil on canvas, 146 x 227 cm., Fontainebleau, Musée National du Château de Fontainebleau (on loan from the Louvre)

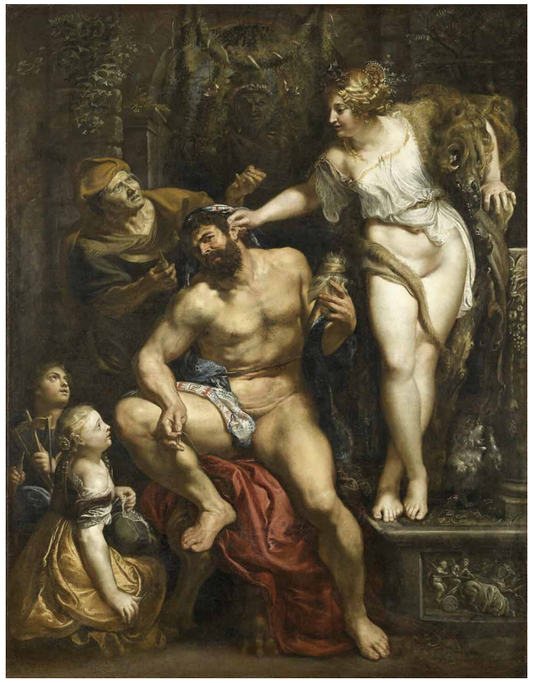


Fig. 25 Peter Paul Rubens, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1606-1607, oil on canvas, 278 x 215 cm., Paris, Musée du Louvre

What Rubens' exact process in devising such effigies factually was is hard to fully grasp, but important to realize is that in the last quarter of the sixteenth century several books on physiognomy had been published which had caught his interest, the most famous being Giambattista della Porta's *De humana physiognomonia—libri sex*, first published in 1584. Based on very ancient theories linked to Aristotle at the time, this 'conste' (art), aimed to understand human nature by analyzing physiognomic characteristics, such as the shape of the head, hair, skin complexions, et cetera. While Physiognomy is today mostly approached as a pseudoscientific discipline of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, based on ancient, occult knowledge of all sorts – ranging from Hippocrates' and Galen's medicinal theories to astrology – it was common for scholars and artists in Rubens' age to take the 'art' seriously. That goes for Rubens too. After all, it is well known that Rubens studied physiognomy as he made notes on it in his notebook.[25] In this book, that he kept in his younger years and of which some original pages and four copies are preserved, Rubens made

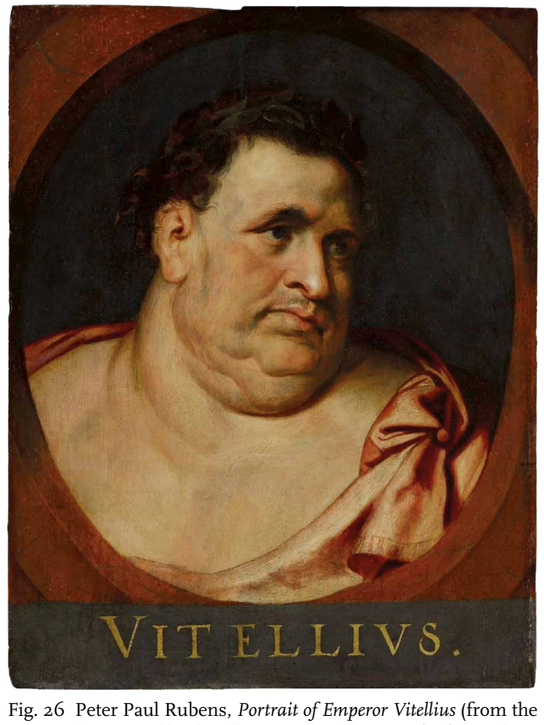


Fig. 26 Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Emperor Vitellius* (from the Stuttgart/Phoebus Emperor Series), c. 1598-1600, oil on panel, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie



Fig. 28 *So-called Grimani Bust of Emperor Vitellius*, second century AD, marble, Venice, National Archaeological Museum



Fig. 27 Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Julius Caesar* (from the Stuttgart/Phoebus Emperor Series), c. 1598-1600, oil on panel, c. 68.5 x 52.5 cm., Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie



Fig. 29 *Portrait of Emperor Hadrian*, etching and woodcut, in Hubert Goltzius, *Lebendige Bilder nach aller Keysern*, Antorf 1557, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 30 After Peter Paul Rubens, *Heads of Julius Caesar and a Bull*, black chalk, pen and brown ink on paper, 21.3 x 16.2 cm., London, The Courthauld, Johnson Manuscript

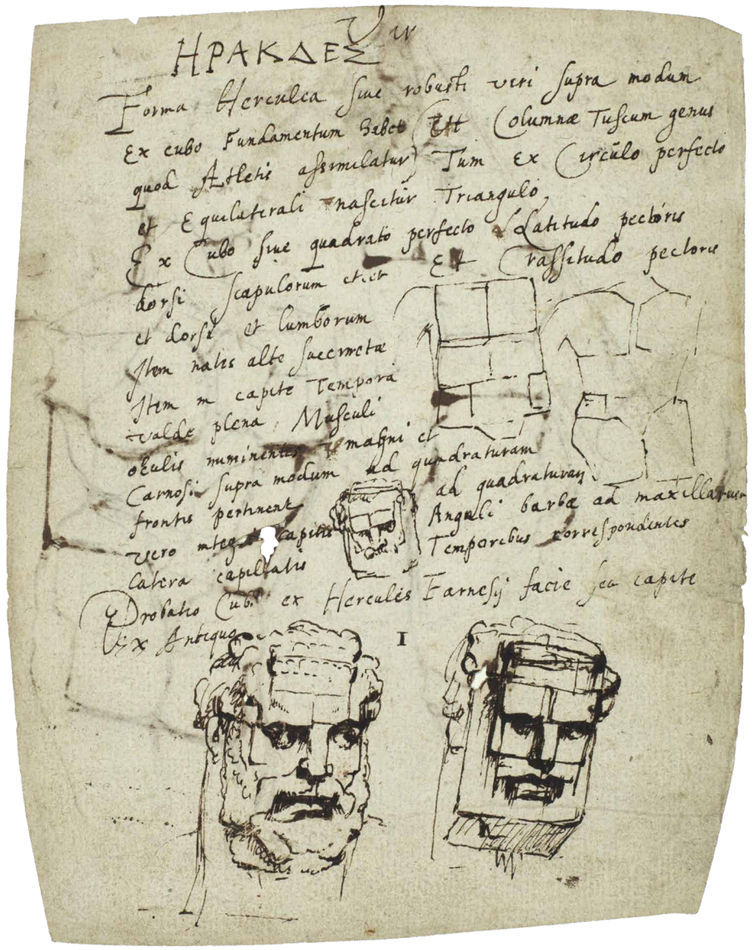


Fig. 31 Peter Paul Rubens, *Study of the Farnese Hercules*, c. 1600, pen and brown ink on paper, 19.6 x 15.3 cm., London, The Courthauld (part of Rubens' original notebook)

physiognomic studies and compared animal heads to emperor faces, making notes on the physiognomic similarities and dissimilarities (figs. 30, 31). That young and ambitious painters like Rubens would show interest in such physiognomic treatises, should not come as a surprise as some of the examples published in Dutch were published with specifically this goal in mind. An excellent case in point is the *Chiromantia* attributed to the fifteenth century monk and reformer Johannes de Indagine (Johannes Bremer von Hagen). It was first published in Dutch in 1536 and often republished throughout the sixteenth century. In the introduction to the 1554 Dutch edition, painting, and especially portrait painting are extensively discussed and linked to the art of physiognomy with references to the work of Apelles as well as Albrecht Dürer and many others. Not surprisingly, the *Chiromantia* is illustrated with woodcuts which bare resemblance to contemporary portraits, including works by Dürer. When describing the 'meaning' of people who do not close their mouth ('eene open mont'[26]), a woodcut which seems to be based on a portrait engraving of Emperor Maximilian serves as an illustration (fig. 32). An open mouth, according to De Indagine was an indication of a 'oncuysch, logenachtig' (impure, deceitful) person.

What's often neglected in the study of the relationship between Physiognomy and art is that, when inversed, the analytical method of analyzing someone's bodily features to get a grip on his or her character, it could also serve to construct an identity. In Hermannus Follinus' take on physiognomy (*Physiognomia ofte Menschen-Kenner*) of 1613 for instance, the final part is devoted to just that, a description of the physical characteristics specific characters would ideally display. In the work discussed here the square jawlines coincide with the study Rubens made of Hercules in his notebook (fig. 31), yet another indication of the fact that he aimed to capture Herculean, heroic features.

Rubens' interest in Hercules's and other faces coincided with his interest in physiognomy.[27] In his notebook, or when reading Suetonius' lives of the Caesars later in life he made note about their physical appearances, trying to understand their character via their physiognomies and vice versa. To Rubens, in other words, Hercules and the Roman emperors did not solely serve as an illustration of a fact in history worthy of depiction. They were also exempla of a whole range of different temperaments worthy of contemplation. If the specifics of a certain individual were lacking, then one could reconstruct the facial features based on the study of similar characters. Such notions were quite common in the 1590s. Even theologians would argue for it, as Joannes à Porta did in 1591, arguing that one could depict one's character by studying humankind.[28] It



Fig. 32 Illustration in Johannes de Indagine, *Chiromantia*, Antwerp 1554 (ed. Jan Roelants)

would seem that Rubens did just that in this 'portrait'. He built a character-sketch. Later in life, he would repeat that quite often, for instance when devising a face for Saint-Peter in the Apostle series he made for the Duke of Lerma, which he clearly constructed along the line of Seneca's features (figs. 33, 34). Thus when developing this interest as an apprentice and a young master, Rubens set the marks for a habit he would further develop throughout his life. The dozens of *tronies* (head studies) he and his workshop assistants painted during his long career testify to some extent of the same preoccupation with the physical embodiment of personality and character.[29] And surely, in this panel, the square physiognomy of Hercules' face, which Rubens likewise studied in his notebook, comes to the front. Rubens saw Hercules as the archetype of the strong man. In his notebook (1595-1598) he quoted Quintilian's idea that 'everything that is manly, virile and hence heavy, strong, robust, compact and athletic derives from the cube'. Hercules's extraordinary strength, according to Rubens, was also expressed in the physiognomic resemblance to strong creatures: the



Fig. 33 Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Peter* (from the Duke of Lerma Series), c. 1610/12, oil on panel, 107 x 82 cm., Madrid, Museo del Prado

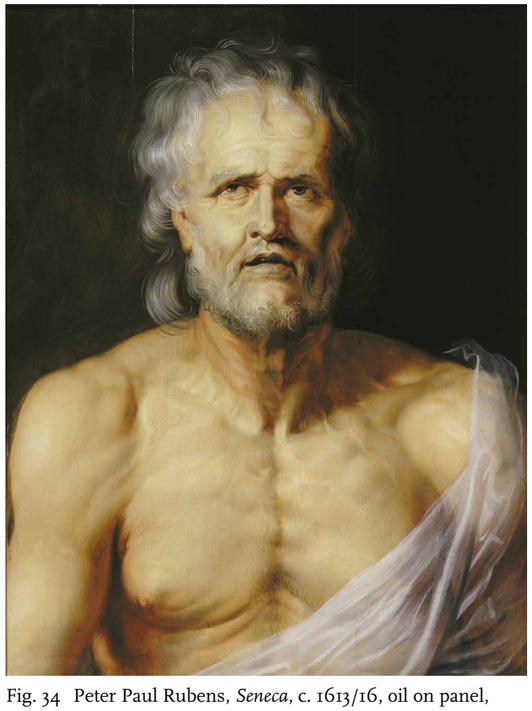


Fig. 34 Peter Paul Rubens, *Seneca*, c. 1613/16, oil on panel, 65 x 50 cm., Antwerp, Museum Plantin Moretus



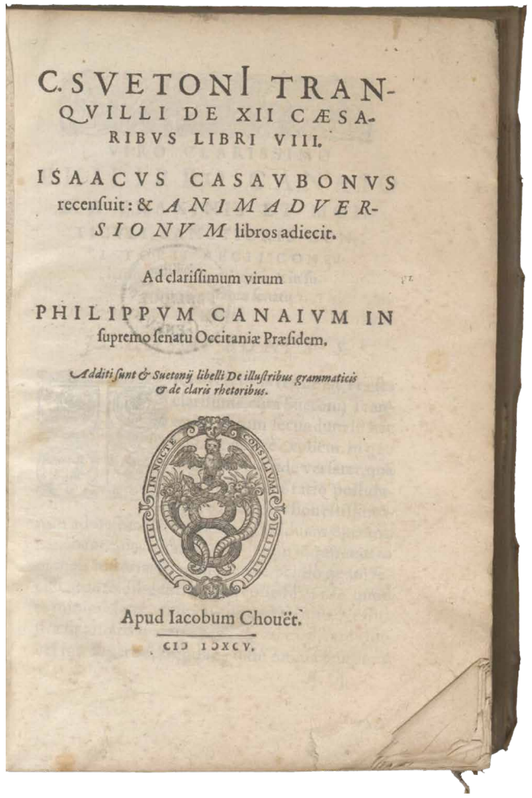
Fig. 35 After Peter Paul Rubens, *Head of Hercules Compared with a Bull and a Lion*, graphite, pen and brown ink on paper, 20.6 x 16 cm., London, The Courthauld, Johnson Manuscript

deep-set eyes were like a lion's and the muscular neck like a bull's (fig. 35). This is exactly what we can see in the present painting: the deep-set eyes, the muscular neck, the face like a cube.

Sign of the times

Why Rubens decided to conceive such faces at this very young age, shall most probably remain a mystery, but given his humanist interests and his talent to sense the market, it should not be too much of a surprise. In 1595, the famous humanist Isaac Casaubon had published Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus' – or in short Suetonius – *De XII Caesaribus* (fig. 36). He was not the first to do so. In 1591 another edition by the hand of the Liege scholar Laevinus Torrentius had already seen the light of day in the *officina Plantiniana* ran by *Ioannus Moretus* in Antwerp. Several decades earlier, the very popular Spanish author Pedro Mexia had published his *Historia imperial y cesarea* (Antwerp, 1552) which saw many reprints and translations.

Whether Peter Paul Rubens owned a copy of Casaubon's edition of Suetonius or any other named author is unknown, but that he studied the work of Casaubon is certain, as he definitely owned copies of other publications by this famous contemporary of Justus Lipsius.[30] Besides, Rubens' knowledge of some of his favorite topics such Satyrs and Sileni, was much indebted to the works of this French reformed scholar. Equally certain is that Rubens read Suetonius


C. SVETONI TRAN-
QVILLI DE XII CÆSA-
RIBVS LIBRI VIII.

ISAACVS CASAVBONVS
recensuit: & ANIMADVER-
SIONVM libros adiecit.

Ad clarissimum virum

PHILIPPVM CANAIVM IN
supremo senatu Occitaniæ Præsidem.

Additi sunt & Suetonij libelli De illustribus grammaticis & de claris rhetoribus.

Apud Iacobum Chouët.

CIↃ IↃXCV.

Fig. 36 Title page of Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (ed. Isaac Casaubon), *De XII Caesaribus Libri VIII*, Geneva (Jacques Chouet) 1595

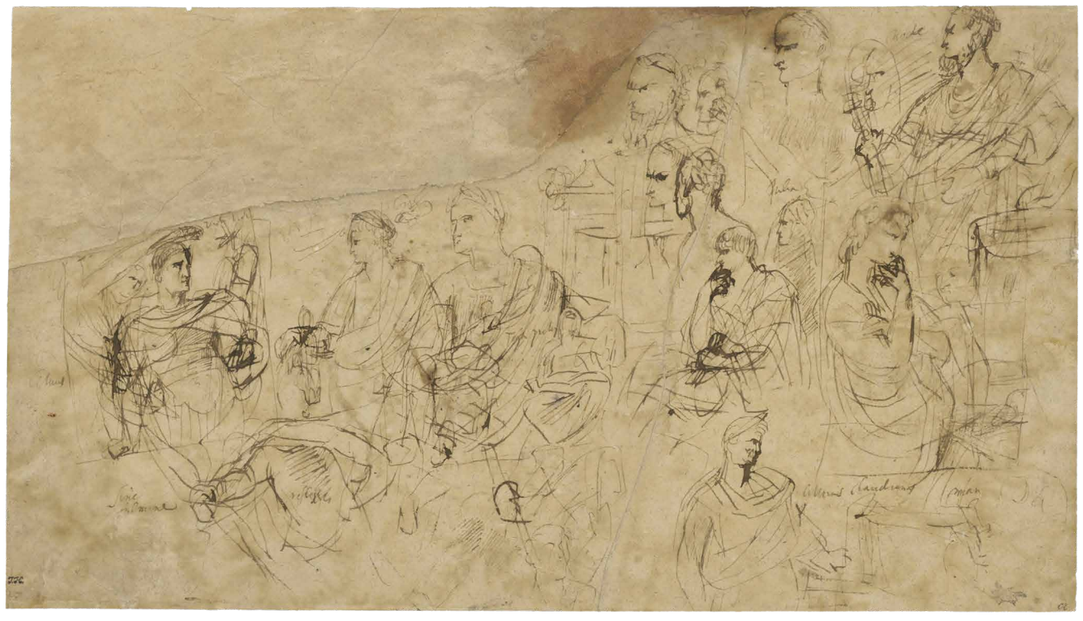


Fig. 37 Peter Paul Rubens, *Roman Emperors after Suetonius*, c. 1620, pen and brown ink on paper, 23.6 x 41.9 cm., Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett

and even made drawings and notes while doings so, trying the capture the particularities of the different Roman emperors as defined by the Roman author. On an exceptional drawing preserved in Berlin (fig. 37), he sketched some of the Caesars as satirically characterized by Suetonius, while at the same time making notes on their remarkable physical features.[31] Differently stated, Rubens here used words to devise visual characters. He constructed a visual, facial identity even, based on descriptions solely. Ekphrastic inversion, that is.

The named publications, and Goltzius' named *Lebendige Bilder gar nach aller Keysern* – are indicative for the taste of the scholarly community in the Low Countries for the Roman *Augusti* and more specifically their physiognomies. In Italy too, the emperors had long been of interest to some of the major painters of the sixteenth century, in particular Titian who had conceived a series for Frederic II Duke of Mantua and a series of profile portraits, published in engravings by Battista Angolo del Moro (fig. 38). While the painted portraits in Mantua caught Rubens' interest while living and working there, he could not have known them before he left for Italy. Only much later, they were published in print by Aegidius II Sadeler (fig. 39). Rubens eventually used them when devising his



Fig. 38 Battista Angolo del Moro after Titian, *Emperor Nero*, etching, 17.8 x 12.5 cm, London, The British Museum.



Fig. 39 Aegidius II Sadeler after Titian, *Emperor Claudius*, engraving, 34.8 x 24.4 cm., London, The Wellcome Institute

portrait of Charles the Bold (fig. 40), now in Vienna. Interestingly, Titian showed as little interest in the verisimilitude of the faces as Rubens.

Rubens. A painter thinking

As Theodulf of Orléans already mentioned in the *Libri Carolini* written around 800 A.D., every *titulus* you add to a work of art similarly enables and limits is perception. It offers an indication of what is depicted and at the same time thwarts further inquiry. Taking all of the issues discussed above into account, it is fair to say the present panel is the vestige of the painter thinking, reading, puzzling, conceiving, considering and reconsidering and, especially, creating a hallmark of his talent. Depicting Hercules / Gladiator / a Hoplomachus all at the same time, it is an impressive demonstration of Rubens ability to allegorize, that is to turn something as simple as *a tronie*, a face, into a never-ending metaphor.[32] He did this more often. When puzzling with the heads of *Nero and Seneca* (fig. 41) somewhat later in life, he built in conundrum to create



Fig. 40 Peter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Charles the Bold*, c. 1618, oil on panel, 118.5 x 102 cm., Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

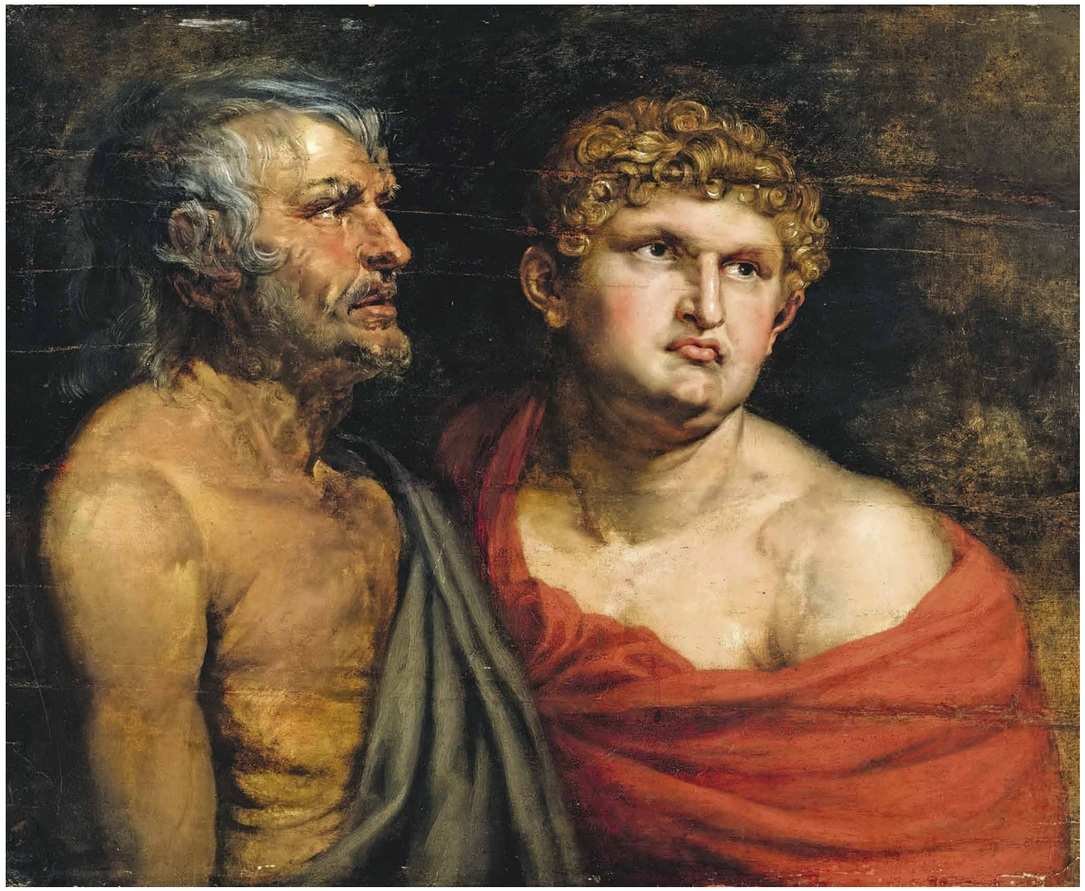


Fig. 41 Peter Paul Rubens, *Double Portrait of Seneca and Nero*, c. 1616-1617, oil on panel, 72 x 89 cm., present whereabouts unknown (with Sotheby's, London, July 2012)

a lasting interest in the subject, too.[33] This likeness is of a similar nature. Much like the *Nero and Seneca*, it seems to have been painted as a showpiece, a discussion piece, a riddle to demonstrate what he, Rubens, even at this young age was capable of. Staring in the eyes of the bearded hero, he could boast his painterly skill and his outstanding knowledge of antiquity, his ability even to explore the very foundations of human nature.

Notes

1 Jonckheere 2016, no. 35a.
2 The dendrochronological research has shown that the panel, consisting of two planks was made of Baltic oak wood stemming from a three that was felled after 1598. Depending on the estimation of the transport of the oak to Antwerp and the preparation of the wood, the panel on which Rubens painted, was made sometime after 1599. Interestingly, the sapwood was not removed on one of the planks; since sapwood is of poorer quality, it was typically chiseled off before the panels were assembled by a panel maker. Rubens, it must be noted though, regularly used planks of poor quality, even later in life when he was a rich established master, yet mostly for panels which were of special meaning and interest to him, such as 'Het Pelsken'.
3 On Rubens' youth see N. Büttner, *Rubens*, Munich 2007, pp. 9-20.
4 P. Rubens, *Vita Petri Pauli Rubenii*, Antwerp 1676.
5 See J. von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der Edlen Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste*, 3 vols., Nuremberg/Frankfurt 1675-1680, 1 (1675), II, Buch 3 (niederl. u. dt. Künstler), p. 252: "so erinnere ich mich/ daß/ als Anno 1627. der hochberühmte Paul Rubens auch Utrecht/ allda die Virtuose sonderlich den Hundhorst zu besuchen kommen/ und ihn allda und von dannen auf Amsterdam begleitet/ auch unterwegs im Schiff in dem Büchlein Holbeins über dem gezeichneten Toden-Tanz speculirt/ Rubens selbigen sehr hoch gelobt/ mit Vermelden/ ich/ als ein Jüngling solte es mir wol befohlen seyn laßen/ danner selbst habe dieses/ wie auch des Tobias Stimmers Büchlein in der Jugend nachgezeichnet/ hiervon Ursach nehmend/ daß er fast den ganzen Weg von Holbein/ Albert Dürer/ Stimmer und andern alten Teutschen/ gar löblich und schöne Discurs geführt. Endlich wer seine Arbeit siht/ wird bekennen müßen/ daß er in allen seinen Werken eine schöne Invention, Stellung und Ordinanz gehabt/ und seine Gemälde viel anders."
6 On Adam van Noort and Otto van Veen see: L. van Puyvelde, 'Het oorspronkelijk werk van Adam van Noort, meester van Rubens', in: *Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal en Letteren : Verslagen en mededelingen* 1929/5, pp. 378-392.
7 On Van Veen see: J. Müller Hofstede, 'Zum Werke des Otto van Veen, 1590–1600', in: *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* 1957/3-4, pp. 127-174; J. Müller Hofstede, *Otto van Veen, der Lehrer des P.P. Rubens*, doctoral dissertation, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 1959; N. de Brézé, *Otto Vaenius: Pictor Doctus*, Thèse de doctorat en Histoire de l'art moderne, Paris 2018.
8 M. Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy*, Oxford 1977.
9 H. Vlieghe, 'Rubens and Van Veen in Contest. A Marginal Note', in: A. Dyczek-Gwizdz et al. (eds.), *Ars Auro Prior : Studia Ioanni Białostocki: Sexagenario dicata*, Warsaw 1981, pp. 477–482; D. Jaffé, 'From Youthful Violence to Pleas for Peace: Rubens's Political Development, and the Influence of his Master, Otto van Veen', in E. Leuschner (ed.), *Rekonstruktion der Gesellschaft aus Kunst : Antwerpener Malerei und Graphik in und nach denKatastrophen des späten 16. Jahrhunderts*, Petersberg, 2016, pp. 167-183.
10 F. Baudouin, 'Een jeugdwerk van Rubens, 'Adam en Eva', en de relatie Van Veen en Rubens', in: *Antwerpen : Een tijdschrift van de stad Antwerpen* XIV (1968), pp. 3-19.
11 J. Müller Hofstede, 'Zur Antwerpener Frühzeit von Peter Paul Rubens', in: *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* XIII (1962), pp. 179-216, p. 207. Otto van Veen and Peter Paul Rubens?, *Lamentation of Christ*, oil on panel, 154 x 195 cm., Paris, Musée du Louvre.
12 Jonckheere 2016, nos. 21-38.
13 Jonckheere 2016, nos. 39-50.
14 N. Büttner, S.-K. Diefenthaler, *Peter Paul Rubens : Becoming Famous*, exh. cat. Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart 2021-2022.
15 On the Roman emperors see recently M. Beard, *Emperor of Rome : Ruling the Ancient Roman World*, New York 2023.
16 Stuttgart 2021-2022; N. Büttner, *Portret van Keizer Servius Sulpicious Galba : Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) en de Romeinse keizerreeksen* (*Phoebus Focus* XXIV), Antwerp 2021.
17 The shield itself is interesting as Hesiodos had written the famous epos, *The shield of Heracles*, well known in the sixteenth century.
18 Jonckheere 2016, nos. 21-38.
19 Sutton 2011; Sutton 2014.
20 Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, book 73, 15.
21 J. Lipsius, *Saturnalium sermonum libri II, qui de gladiatoribus*, Antwerp 1582, p. 102.
22 M. Morford, *Stoics and Neostoics : Rubens and the Circle of Lipsius*, Princeton 1991.
23 This was the main theme of the exhibition *Hadrian Metamorphosis: The birth of a new Rome*, Seville, Museo Arqueológico de Sevilla 2017-2018.
24 K. Jonckheere (ed.), *Michiel Coxcie (1499-1592) and the Giants of His Age* (*Studies in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art History*), exh. cat. Leuven, Museum M 2013-2014, pp. 132-133.
25 A. Balis, 'Rubens und Inventio : der Beitrag seines theoretischen Studienbuches', in: U. Heinen, A. Thielemann (eds.), *Rubens Passioni: Kultur der Leidenschaften im Barock*, Göttingen 2001, pp. 11-40; T. Meganck: 'Rubens on the Human Figure: Theory, Practice and Metaphysics', in: J. Vander Auwera et al., *Rubens : a genius at work*, exh. cat. Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium 2007-2008, pp. 52-64.
26 Johannes de Indagine, *Chiromantia*, Antwerp 1554 (ed. Jan Roelants), s.p.
27 M. Kwakkelstein (N. Büttner, B. Vanoppen, eds.), *Study Heads And Anatomical Studies : Anatomical Studies* (*Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* XX/1), Turnhout/London 2021, pp. 30-42.
28 K. Jonckheere, ''Insettinghe' and 'yegelijcx conversatie': Understanding of the Image on the Eve of Baroque', in: R. Dekoninck, A. Guiderdoni, W.S. Melion, *Quid est Secretum? : Visual Representation of Secrets in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700* (*Intersections* 65/2), Leiden 2020, pp. 380-396.
29 N. van Hout (B. Schepers, B. Vanoppen, eds.), *Study Heads And Anatomical Studies : Study Heads* (*Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* XX/2), Turnhout/London 2020.
30 P. Arents (A.K.L. Thijs et al., eds.), *De Bibliotheek van Pieter Pauwel Rubens : een reconstructie* (*De Gulden Passer* 78-79), Antwerp 2001.
31 E. McGrath, '"Not even a Fly": Rubens and the Mad Emperors', in: *The Burlington Magazine* 133 (1991), pp. 699-703.
32 Erasmus called allegory never-ending metaphors in *De Copia*.
33 K. Jonckheere, 'Aertsen, Rubens and the *questye* in early modern painting', in: E. Jorink, A.-S. Lehmann, B. Rademakers (eds.), *Lessons in art : art, education, and modes of instruction since 1500* (*Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 68) (2018), Leiden/Boston 2019, pp. 72-99. Rubens' painting was inspired by a so-called 'quaestio' formulated in Juvenal's eighth Satire, verses 211-212. Using nothing more than two iconic figures from antiquity, he confronted the world with a question: 'If the people were given a free vote, who would be so depraved as to hesitate about choosing Seneca over Nero?'

Colophon

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