



THE LEIDEN
COLLECTION



Julius Caesar

Peter Paul Rubens
Siegen 1577 – 1640 Antwerp

ca. 1625/26

oil on panel

33.1 x 26.8 cm

PR-100

How To Cite

Alexandra Libby, "Julius Caesar", (PR-100), in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., Ed., New York, 2017

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Few Old Master artists admired antiquity as much as did Peter Paul Rubens. Its stories and figures, philosophy and literature, arts and culture, which espoused strength, heroism and constancy, captivated Rubens and had a profound impact on both his personal and professional life. He became a passionate collector of all things antique, amassing an impressive collection of books, coins, medals, gems, cameos, architectural artifacts, portrait busts and sculptures.^[1] Rubens's admiration for and study of the ancient world were, indeed, so extensive that, after meeting him in 1622, the antiquarian Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), a man who would develop a deep and lasting friendship with the painter, commented that “in matters of antiquity [Rubens] possesses the most universal and remarkable knowledge I have ever seen.”^[2] Rubens's great love for antiquity emerges throughout his artistic career in the quotations of ancient sculpture that routinely appear in his compositions, as well as in the themes he chose to depict. Both in subject matter and execution, this passion is fully manifest in the Leiden Collection's bust-length portrait of Julius Caesar.

Seen in three-quarter profile, the Roman general and statesman gazes to the right. His laureate head is fixed and proud, befitting his status as one of the most famous men of all antiquity. His bright red cloak swags across his chest, revealing only a glimpse of his silver cuirass, a symbol of his illustrious military career. Rubens modeled Caesar's face with a smooth, flowing brush, but executed his cloak and laurel crown with a swifter, sketchier stroke which, through the contrast, helped to capture the qualities of Caesar's living flesh.

The face's crisp modeling and the deep folds in the cloak, paired with the bust-length cropping and oval format, suggest that Rubens based this portrait on a classical bust of Caesar, perhaps the marble Rubens acquired in 1618 from the English diplomat Sir Dudley Carleton (1573–1632). Rubens purchased the entirety of Carleton's sculpture collection that year, and listed among the contents of the shipment to the painter were 18



Fig 1. Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sense of Sight*, 1617, 64.7 x 109.5 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P01394



Fig 2. Peter Paul Rubens, *Bust of Julius Caesar*, ca. 1624, pen and brown ink over main drawing in black chalk, brown and gray washes, heightened with white, 262 x 190 mm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Cabinet des Dessins, inv. no. 20225, © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

marble portraits of emperors, including “[una] testa di Giulio Cesare.”^[3]

Rubens displayed this collection in a special gallery he constructed at his home in Antwerp. A fictive display of the busts is found in his *Sense of Sight*, a painting on which he collaborated with Jan Brueghel the Elder (fig 1).^[4] Prior to selling the sculpture collection in 1626 to the Duke of Buckingham, Rubens made a drawing of a bust of Caesar presumably based on the one in his collection (fig 2). This drawn portrayal of the sculpture later served as the model for an engraving by Boetius Adams Bolswert (1580–1633) (fig 3), to which the Leiden Collection painting bears a striking resemblance; it, too, was probably based on the same drawing.

Despite its reliance on antique sculpture, Rubens’s image of Julius Caesar is lively—a characteristic on which the master prided himself for works he had adapted from stone. As Rubens wrote in his now-lost treatise, “I am convinced that in order to achieve the highest perfection one needs a full understanding of the statues, nay a complete absorption in them; but one must make judicious use of them and before all avoid the effect of stone.”^[5] Indeed, *Julius Caesar* feels nothing like its cool marble prototype. Through a combination of highly finished passages and unblended strokes, Rubens enlivened Caesar’s visage. Around the right eye, for example, he loaded the brush with paint and applied it thickly down the side of the nose, both to suggest the presence of light hitting the skin’s surface and to model the face’s contours. The carefully choreographed rhythm of Rubens’s brush, for example in the abbreviated strokes of Caesar’s wispy hair, further animates the emperor by conveying spontaneity and immediacy.

Julius Caesar likely belonged to a series of Roman emperors painted around 1625/26. Six emperor paintings by Rubens were sold together in the sale of Thomas Jodocus Loidon de Ghellinck’s collection in 1821, including an image of Julius Caesar (probably the present work).^[6] Records also exist for three other paintings of emperors.^[7] Given the number of known portraits of emperors, Rubens’s series originally must have included 12 paintings, as was customary with the rise in popularity of *De Vita Caesarum* by the second-century author Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (70–130 A.D.). More commonly known as “The Twelve Caesars,” Suetonius Tranquillus’s biographies appeared in numerous editions over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and provided a font of evocative details and anecdotes regarding the lives of emperors. These texts proved particularly appealing to painters, printmakers, and sculptors interested in representing the classical past.



Fig 3. Boetius Adams Bolswert after Peter Paul Rubens, *Bust of Julius Caesar*, ca. 1633, engraving, 285 x 210 mm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Harry L. Calvin, 1972.429



Fig 4. Peter Paul Rubens, *Julius Caesar*, 1619, oil on canvas, 69 x 52 cm, Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Berlin, inv. no. GK I 972

They also had widespread appeal among their patrons, for whom owning a series of emperors was a demonstration of their sophistication and learning.

Princely courts, in particular, enthusiastically embraced the subject. Titian famously painted a Twelve Caesars series for Duke Federico II Gonzaga (1500–40) to decorate his Gabinetto dei Cesari in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, a series Rubens would have seen when he was in Mantua in the first decade of the seventeenth century.^[8] Philip II of Spain (1527–98) purchased a copy of Titian's series to hang in his own imperial gallery in Madrid, which he augmented with a sculptural series. Either Maurits, Prince of Orange (1567–1625), or his stepbrother and successor, Frederik Hendrik, (1584–1647), also commissioned a caesars series to which a number of Dutch and Flemish artists, including Rubens, contributed between 1615 and 1625.^[9] Rubens's *Julius Caesar*, painted in 1619 for that series (**fig 4**), presents a much sterner and more sober image than is found in the present picture.^[10]

The patron of the Roman emperor series to which the Leiden Collection *Julius Caesar* belongs is not known. The small size of the paintings suggests that they could have been cabinet pieces for a patron with an interest in classical history. Jaffé has suggested that they may have been created for one of Rubens's antiquarian friends, possibly one of the men who formed part of Cardinal Francesco Barberini's retinue: Girolamo Aleandro (1574–1629), a noted Italian scholar, Giovanni Doni (ca. 1593–1647), a musicologist who specialized in ancient music, or Cardinal Barberini's secretary, Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588–1657), all of whom Rubens had met in Paris in the mid-1620s and with whom he shared a love of classical art and culture.^[11]

The subject of Roman emperors occupied Rubens throughout his life. Jaffé proposes that before Rubens left Antwerp in 1600 for his eight-year stay in Italy, he created a series of caesars, which are today known primarily through copies in the Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, and a private collection in Brussels.^[12] Only one original survives, *Emperor Commodus as Hercules and as a Gladiator* of ca. 1599–1600 (PR-101). Much later, in 1630, Rubens returned to the subject of Roman emperors when he employed Bolswert to create engravings after a series of drawings he had made in the mid-1620s. Bolswert completed only five plates before his death in 1633. The project was revived in 1638 with Lucas Vorsterman (1595–1675) as the printmaker.^[13]

Whether produced for a princely patron, an antiquarian associate, or an unknown private collector, the Leiden Collection's *Julius Caesar* offers a special look into Rubens's ongoing meditations on the theme of the Twelve Caesars. In subject and execution, it stands as one of the great examples of Rubens as artist and antiquarian, demonstrating his remarkable inventiveness and bearing witness to the profound impact that the classical past exerted on his artistic life.

-Alexandra Libby

Endnotes

1. See "Appendix C: Documentation of Rubens's Collection of Ancient Sculpture," in Jeffrey Muller, *Rubens: The Artist as Collector* (Princeton, 1989), 81–88.
2. "En matière d'antiquités surtout, il possède le connaissances le plus universelles et les plus remarquables que j'aie jamais recontrées." Nicholas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc to Giovanni Francesco Guidi di Bagno, 26 February 1622. See M. Rooses and C. Ruelens, eds., *Codex diplomaticus Rubenianum (Correspondance de Rubens et documents épistolaires concernant sa vie et ses oeuvres)*, 6 vols. (Antwerp, 1887–1909), 2:336.
3. The shipping list of Carleton's collection to Rubens lists: "Nella cassa no. 23 sono... 37. Testa di Giulio Cesare." See Jeffrey Muller, "Rubens's Museum of Antique Sculpture: An Introduction," *Art Bulletin* 59 (December 1977): 582.
4. Marjon van der Meulen and Arnout Balis, *Rubens, Copies After the Antique: Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part 23*, 3 vols. (London, 1994), 1:143.
5. "Je conclude néanmoins que pour la dernière perfection de la Peinture, il est nécessaire d'avoir l'intelligence des Antiques, voire même d'en être pénétré, mais qu'il est nécessaire aussi que l'usage en soit judicieux, & qu'il ne sente le pierre en façon quelconque." Rubens quoted in Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes* (Paris, 1708), 139–40. English translation is taken from Wolfgang Stechow, *Rubens and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, 1968), 26.
6. The other five were: *Augustus* (location unknown), *Tiberius* (location unknown), *Vespasian* (private collection), *Titus* (location unknown), and *Vitellius* (sold at Sotheby's, 29 January 2009, lot 14). See Michael Jaffé, "Rubens's Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine* 113 (June 1971): 300–3.
7. *Nero* (location unknown, sold Giroux, 15 June 1926, lot 40), *Galba* (location unknown, sold Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 27 June 1889), and *Otho* (Scunthorpe Museum and Art Gallery, Scunthorpe). I would like to thank Elizabeth Nogrady for preparing the provenance research on these paintings.

8. Titian's series gained widespread fame after being engraved by Aegidius Sadeler around 1593. See F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*, 72 vols. (Amsterdam, 1949–2010), 21:77–78, nos. 346–70.
9. See Rudolf Oldenbourg, "Die niederländischen Imperatorenbilder im Königlichen Schlosse zu Berlin," *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 38 (1917): 203–12; Peter van Duinen, "Keizers in de Republiek een serie Romeinse keizerportretten door twalf Nederlandsche schilders (ca. 1615–ca. 1625)" (Ph.D. diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 1989).
10. The other artists involved in this project were Abraham Janessens (*Nero*), Gerard Seghers (*Tiberius*), Hendrick Goltzius (*Vitellius*), Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem (*Augustus*), Paulus Moreelse (*Galba*), Abraham Bloemaert (*Domitian*), Hendrick ter Brugghen (*Claudius*), Dirck van Baburen (*Titus*), Gerrit van Honthorst (*Otho*), Werner van Valckert (*Caligula*), and Michiel van Mierevelt (*Vespasian*).
11. Michael Jaffé, "Rubens's Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine* 113 (June 1971): 300.
12. Michael Jaffé, "Rubens's Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine* 113 (June 1971): 300 n. 7.
13. *Peter Paul Rubens, 1577–1640*, 2 vols. (Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Cologne, 1977), 2:103.

Provenance

- Possibly Thomas Jodocus Loridon de Ghellinck, Ghent, by 1790 (possibly his sale, Goesin, Ghent, 3 September 1821, no. 63, as manner of Rubens [to Murphy]).
- Joseph Schnell, Paris (his sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 18–19 May 1922, no. 95, as School of Peter Paul Rubens).
- Alvin-Beaumont Collection, Paris.
- Dr. Ludwig Burchard (1886–1960), Berlin and London, from 1925; by descent to his son Wolfgang Burchard, London (sale, Christie's, London, 11 April 1986, no. 7 [to Stephen Mazoh]).
- Stephen Mazoh, New York (sale, Sotheby's, New York, 25 January 2007, no. 25).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, "*Olieverfschetsen van Rubens*," 19 December 1953–14 February 1954, no. 48 [lent by Dr. Ludwig Burchard].
- New York, National Academy of Design, "*Dutch and Flemish Paintings from New York Private Collections*," September 1988, no. 40 [lent by Stephen Mazoh].
- Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University, Fogg Art Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, 2000–6 [lent by Stephen Mazoh].
- Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University, Fogg Art Museum, "Calming the Tempest with Peter Paul Rubens," 22 December 2001–17 March 2002 [lent by Stephen Mazoh].
- Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences, "Drawn by the Brush: Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens," 2 October 2004–30 January 2005; Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, 2 March–15 May, 2005; Cincinnati, Cincinnati Art Museum, 11 June–11 September 2005, no. 16 [lent by Stephen Mazoh].

References

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- Adams, Ann Jensen and Haverkamp-Begemann, Egbert. *Dutch and Flemish Paintings from New York Private Collections*. Exh. cat. New York, National Academy of Design. New York, 1988, 89, 105, no. 40.
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by *Peter Paul Rubens*. Edited by Peter C. Sutton and Marjorie E. Wieseman, 148–51, no. 16. Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum of Arts and Sciences; Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum; Cincinnati, Cincinnati Art Museum. New Haven, 2004.

- Sutton, Peter C. *Peter Paul Rubens: Portrait of the Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba*. Sales cat. Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian Old Master Paintings B. V. Amsterdam, 2014, [n.p.], no. 3.

Technical Summary

The support is an oval composite panel comprising two planks of vertical, straight-grained Baltic oak of different widths.^[1] The vertical panel join, located right of center, passes through the inner corner of the figure's proper left eye. A horizontal wood dowel bridges the join.^[2] The panel is unthinned and uncradled, and has no bevels; the wider plank is thicker than the narrower plank along the join on the reverse. Both planks have mechanical tool marks, paper labels, and paper label remnants, a black stencil, and chalk inscriptions, but no wax seals, import stamps or panel maker's mark.

A light-colored thinly and evenly applied ground has been applied with diagonal brushstrokes, which are visible through the figure's cheek and neck. The paint has been applied in thin transparent glazes, which allow the light underlayer to show through along the background, top of the figure's head and laurel wreath, along the figure's brown drapery, and along the right side of the red garment. The figure's face and neck have been applied opaquely but smoothly, with no use of impasto. Only the contours of the figure's nose and lips and the upper edge of the red garment are slightly raised.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

No underdrawing or compositional changes are readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition, although a vertical split along the left side of the background, which has been secured with a metal staple along the upper panel edge, and restoration along the length of the split indicate previous panel work and conservation. The panel remains in a good state of preservation.