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I

THE EMPEROR
ON THE MALL
AN INTRODUCTION

A Roman Emperor and an American President

For many years, an imposing marble sarcophagus was a fixture, and a curiosity, on the Mall in Washington, DC, standing on the grass just outside the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building (Fig. 1.1). It had been discovered in Lebanon, one of two sarcophagi found together on the outskirts of Beirut in 1837 and brought to the United States a couple of years later by Commodore Jesse D. Elliott, the commander of a squadron of the US navy on patrol in the Mediterranean. The story was that it had once held the remains of the Roman emperor Alexander Severus, who ruled between 222 and 235 CE.¹

Alexander has not remained a household name, despite a rather florid Handel opera, *Alessandro Severo*, woven around his life, and an overblown reputation in some parts of early modern Europe as an exemplary ruler, patron of the arts and public benefactor (Charles I of England particularly enjoyed comparison with him). A Syrian by birth, and a member of what was by this date a decidedly multi-ethnic Roman elite, he came to the throne aged thirteen, after the assassination of his cousin Elagabalus—whose legendary excesses outstripped even those of Caligula and Nero, and whose party trick of smothering his dinner guests to death under piles of rose petals was brilliantly captured by the nineteenth-century painter, and re-creator of ancient Rome, Lawrence Alma-Tadema (Fig. 6.23). Alexander was the youngest Roman emperor ever up to that point, and most of the twenty or so surviving ancient portraits of him (or believed to be of him)

depict a rather dreamy, almost vulnerable, youth (Fig. 1.2). Whether he was ever as exemplary as later ages imagined is doubtful. Nonetheless, ancient writers saw him as a relatively safe pair of hands, largely thanks to the influence of his mother, Julia Mamaea, the ‘power behind the throne’, who plays a predictably sinister role in Handel’s opera. In the end, while on military campaign together, mother and son were both assassinated by rebellious Roman troops; whether the soldiers’ anger was provoked by Alexander’s economic prudence (or meanness), his lack of martial skills or the influence of Julia Mamaea depends on which report you believe.²

All this happened more than a century after those first, and more familiar, Twelve Caesars. But Alexander was still an emperor very much in their style, even down to the seedier stories and allegations (the slightly too close relations with his mother, the danger of the soldiers, the outrageous predecessor and the brutal assassination). In fact, modern historians have often seen him as the last in the traditional line of Roman rulers, which had begun with Julius Caesar; and one sixteenth-century printmaker and publisher, by some creative counting and strategic omissions, managed to double the original Twelve and end up with a diagram of imperial succession that placed Alexander conveniently as emperor number Twenty-Four.³ What followed his murder was very different. It was decades of rule by a



1.1 Visitors in the late 1960s reading the information panel in front of the Roman sarcophagus outside the Arts and Industries Building on the Mall in Washington, DC: the ‘Tomb in which Andrew Jackson REFUSED to be Buried’.



1.2 Portrait bust of Alexander Severus from the line-up of Roman emperors in the ‘Room of the Emperors’ in the Capitoline Museums in Rome. The identification of individual emperors is rarely certain, but the incised pupils in the eyes of this statue, and the treatment of the close-cropped hair are typical of sculpture of the early third century, and there is a plausible match with some of Alexander’s images on coins.

series of military adventurers, many holding command for a couple years only, some of them barely setting foot in the city of Rome, despite being ‘Roman’ emperors. It is a change of character in Roman power nicely symbolised by the frequent claim—true or not—about Alexander’s immediate successor, Maximinus ‘the Thracian’: on the throne for three years between 235 and 238 CE, he has gone down in history as the first Roman emperor who could not read or write.⁴

The story of the sarcophagus makes a vivid introduction to some of the twists and turns, debates, disagreements and edgy political controversies in

my wider story of Roman imperial images, both modern and ancient. Alexander's name was found nowhere on the coffin that he was supposed to have occupied, nor were there any other identifying marks on it; but the name 'Julia Mamaea' was clearly inscribed on the other one. For Jesse Elliott, that made almost irresistible the connection between the pair of coffins he had acquired and the unfortunate young emperor and his mother. They had been murdered together and then must have been buried side by side, in appropriately imperial grandeur close to Alexander's birthplace, in what is now Lebanon. Or so he managed to convince himself.

He was wrong. As sceptics were soon pointing out, the assassination was supposed to have taken place some two thousand miles from Beirut, in Germany or even Britain (a geographical link that appealed to the court of Charles I, even if the murder did not); and, anyway, one ancient writer claimed that the body of the emperor was taken back to Rome for burial.⁵ If that were not enough to scotch the idea, the 'Julia Mamaea' commemorated in the inscription was firmly stated to have died at the age of thirty, making it impossible for her to have been Alexander's mother—unless, as one of Elliott's own junior officers later tartly observed, she had 'given birth to her son, when she was but three years old, which is, to say the least, unusual'. The woman who had once occupied the coffin was presumably one of the many other inhabitants of the Roman Empire with that same common name.⁶

Besides, none of the people engaged in these debates appear to have realised that there was at least one rival candidate for the burial place of the imperial couple; or if they did realise, they kept quiet about it. An elaborate marble sarcophagus over four thousand miles away in the Capitoline Museums at Rome—celebrated in a notable engraving by Piranesi and well known to keen eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tourists—was supposed to have been shared by Alexander and Julia Mamaea, shown reclining together in imperial splendour on its lid (Fig. 1.3). There was even a connection with the blue-glass 'Portland Vase', which is now one of the highlights of the British Museum—famous for its exquisite white cameo decoration, and also for being attacked by a drunken visitor in 1845. If the story is true (a big 'if') that this vase was rediscovered in the sixteenth century actually inside the sarcophagus, then maybe it was the original receptacle that had once contained the emperor's ashes (even though lodging a small vase of ashes inside a vast coffin obviously designed to hold an intact, uncremated body seems a little odd). In this case, the burial place just outside Rome is a better fit with some of the historical evidence. But overall, as the more scrupulous nineteenth-century tourist guidebooks con-



1.3 An alternative candidate for the last resting place of Alexander Severus. Piranesi's 1756 engraving of the sarcophagus, in the Capitoline Museums in Rome, shows the figures of the dead reclining on the lid, with scenes from the story of the Greek hero Achilles carved underneath.

ceded, this identification too was a combination of wishful thinking and outright fantasy.⁷

Unfounded as they were, the imperial associations of Elliott's sarcophagi lingered longer. That is largely because of the strange and slightly gruesome history of these trophies after they arrived in America. Elliott did not intend them to become museum pieces. That of 'Julia Mamaea' he planned to re-use as the last resting place of the Philadelphia philanthropist Stephen Girard; but, as he had long been dead and interred elsewhere, it passed into the collection of Girard College, and in 1955 was loaned to Bryn Mawr College, where it still stands in the cloister. After an abortive attempt to have 'Alexander's' re-used for the remains of James Smithson (illegitimate child of an English aristocrat, scientist and founding donor of the Smithsonian Institution), Elliott presented it in 1845 to the National Institute, a major collection of American heritage housed in the Patent Office, in 'the fervent hope' that it would shortly contain 'all that is mortal of the patriot and hero, Andrew Jackson'.

Despite his failing health (he died a few months later), President Jackson's reply to the letter from Elliott outlining this offer was famously robust: 'I cannot consent that my mortal body shall be laid in a repository prepared for an Emperor or King—my republican feelings and principles forbid it—the simplicity of our system of government forbids it. Every monument erected to perpetuate the memory of our heroes and statesmen ought to bear evidence of the economy and simplicity of our republican institutions and the plainness of our republican citizens . . . I cannot permit my remains to be the first in these United States to be deposited in a Sarcophagus made for an Emperor or King.' Jackson was in a difficult position. The accusations levelled against him of behaving like a 'Caesar'—in a style of autocratic populism that a few of his successors have copied—may have had added to the intensity of his refusal. He was certainly not going to risk an imperial burial.⁸

No practical use found for it, in the 1850s the sarcophagus went from its temporary lodgings in the Patent Office to the Smithsonian, where it remained on display outside on the Mall until finally demoted to storage in the 1980s. But even when the archaeological connection with Alexander Severus had been universally debunked (this was actually a typical East Mediterranean product of the Roman Empire, and could have belonged to anyone with enough ready cash), Jackson's rejection of it, as 'made for an Emperor or King', remained part of the object's history and mythology. In the 1960s, his words were incorporated into a new information panel placed next to the sarcophagus itself, headed 'Tomb in Which Andrew Jackson REFUSED to be Buried' (as the couple in Fig. 1.1 are attentively reading).⁹ It stood, in other words, as a symbol of the down-to-earth essence of American republicanism and its distaste for the vulgar bric-a-brac of monarchy or autocracy. Whatever taint of 'Caesarism' might have clung to Jackson, it is hard not to be on his side, against Elliott's 'fervent hope' of acquiring a celebrity occupant for his celebrity sarcophagus.

From Coffin to Portraits

Such stories of discovery, misidentification, hope, disappointment, controversy, interpretation and reinterpretation are what this book is about. The rest of this chapter will move beyond a couple of marble coffins, an over-eager collector and an uncompromising president. It will offer a first look at the vast and surprising range of portraits of emperors that once covered the ancient Roman world (in pastry and paint as well as marble and bronze), and at some of the art and the artists that have re-imagined and re-created

these emperors since the Renaissance. It will challenge some of the usual certainties about these images—exploring the very fuzzy boundary between ancient and modern portraits (what does, or does not, separate a marble bust made two thousand years ago from one made two hundred years ago?), and getting a taste of some of the political and religious *edginess* of these ancient rulers in modern art. And it will introduce Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus ('Suetonius' for short), the ancient writer who bequeathed to the modern world the very category of 'the Twelve Caesars' and who hovers over the chapters that follow.

But the tale of Elliott's trophy has already raised some important guiding principles for my subject as a whole. First, it is an important reminder of just how crucial it is—obvious as that might seem—to get things right. Ever since antiquity, images of Roman emperors have travelled across the known world, been lost, rediscovered and confused one with another; we are not the first generation who find it difficult to tell our Caligulas from our Neros. Marble busts have been re-carved, or carefully adjusted, to turn one ruler into the next, and new ones continue to be produced, even now, in an endless process of half-accurate copying, adaptation and re-creation. And, in more cases than it is comfortable to acknowledge, modern scholars and collectors from the Renaissance on have tendentiously re-identified portraits of anonymous worthies as bona fide Caesars, and given run-of-the-mill coffins or ordinary Roman villas a spurious imperial connection. The sarcophagus of 'Alexander' offers a classic example of the complicated trail of needless falsehood and fantasy that comes with attaching the wrong name to the wrong object.

Equally, it is a reminder that misidentifications cannot so easily be swept aside, and that archaeological purism can be taken too far. The mistaken identity at the heart of the story of the sarcophagus of 'Alexander' is historically significant in its own right (without it, after all, there *is* no story). And it is only one of many such mistaken identities—'emperors' in quotation marks—that have played a leading part over the centuries in representing to us the face of Roman power and in helping the modern world to make sense of ancient dynasts and dynasty. Piranesi's confident labelling of the Capitoline sarcophagus gave it an association with the imperial couple that was not entirely overturned by the fact that it was simply 'wrong'. My guess is that a number of the important and influential images in this book have no closer connection with their historical subjects than the real-life Alexander had with 'his' coffin(s). They have been no less important or influential for that. This is a book both about emperors and about 'emperors' in quotation marks.

The most striking aspect, though, of the story of the President and the sarcophagus is that, for Jackson, that lump of ancient marble so obviously *meant* something. Its imagined links with a Roman emperor signified autocracy and a political system at odds with the republican values that he himself claimed to espouse and it was the cause of as much fulmination as the dying man could muster. This is a powerful prompt for us, even now, not to take the representations of Roman emperors too much for granted. After all, just under a century after Jackson's death, Benito Mussolini conscripted the faces of Julius Caesar and his successor, the emperor Augustus, to his fascist project, as well as restoring Augustus's imposing mausoleum in the centre of Rome, as a monument—indirectly at least—to himself. This was not just window dressing.

It is true that most of us (myself included on occasion, I confess) tend to pass by the rows of emperors' heads on museum shelves without much more than a glance (Fig. 4.12). Even now, when the significance of some public statues has become increasingly—and sometimes violently—disputed, the sets of the Twelve Caesars that since the fifteenth century have decorated the homes and gardens of the European elite (and later, *pace* Jackson, of



1.4 German wallpaper, c. 1555. Two imperial heads in their roundels are supported by fantasy creatures among extravagant foliage. The sheet (about thirty centimetres high) was intended to be cut into strips and attached to walls or furniture to form a border, adding a touch of class.

the American elite too) are often assumed to have been little more than a convenient off-the-peg badge of status, an easy link with the supposed glories of the Roman past, or expensive ‘wallpaper’ for aristocratic or aspirational houses. Sometimes that is exactly what they were, quite literally. Even as early as the mid-sixteenth century paper prints were being produced with imperial heads ready to be cut out and pasted onto otherwise undistinguished pieces of furniture or walls, to give a ready-made veneer of class and culture (Fig. 1.4); and you can still buy something very similar from upmarket interior decorators, by the roll.¹⁰ But that is not all there is to it.

Throughout their history, images of ancient emperors—like some of those of more recent soldiers and politicians—have raised more awkward and more loaded questions. They have been as much a cause of controversy as they have been bland status symbols. Far from being merely a harmless link with the classical past, they have also pointed to uncomfortable issues about politics and autocracy, culture and morality and, of course, conspiracy and assassination. The reaction of Andrew Jackson (whose own statues are, as I write, being threatened with toppling for his connections with slavery, not Caesarism) prompts us to be alert to the destabilising edge of these imperial figures, dressed though they often are in apparently familiar clichés of power.

A World Full of Caesars

Representing Roman emperors kept ancient artists and craftsmen inspired, in business and, no doubt, occasionally bored or repulsed for hundreds of years. It was production on a vast scale, thousands upon thousands of images, going far beyond those marble heads or colossal full-length bronzes that the phrase ‘imperial portrait’ usually suggests.¹¹ They came in all shapes and sizes, materials, styles and idioms. Some of the most intriguing archaeological discoveries, found across the Roman world, are fragments of humble pastry moulds. At first sight their design is hard to make out, but a careful look shows that they feature images of the emperor and his family. Once part of the equipment of Roman kitchens or confectioners, they must have turned out biscuits and treats that put the face of imperial power straight into the mouths of Roman subjects (emperors that were good enough to eat).¹² But there were also exquisite cameos, cheap wax or wooden models, paintings on walls or portable panels (much like the modern painted portrait); not to mention all those miniature heads on coins in gold, silver and bronze.

Ancient artists were responding to different markets and to a wide range of patrons and consumers. They filled imperial residences, and imperial tombs, with the faces of dynastic power; they supplied images of the emperor and his family for the Roman authorities to send out to those distant subjects who would never see them in the flesh; they catered to local communities who wanted to erect imperial statues in their temples or town squares to demonstrate their loyalty to Rome (while also revealing their own sycophancy); and they provided for all those ordinary individuals who shopped for miniature emperors to take away as souvenirs or to display at home on the ancient equivalent of mantelpieces and dining room tables.¹³

Only a tiny proportion of these images has survived, even if, thanks to the efforts of antiquarians and archaeologists, considerably more have come to light by the twenty-first century than had done so by the fifteenth. That said, the raw numbers are impressive and ought to surprise us more than they usually do. Such is the peril of familiarity that we tend to take for granted our ability, a couple of millennia on, to look so many of these ancient rulers in the eye. Those twenty or so portraits of Alexander Severus (plus another twenty of Julia Mamaea) are only a small part of it. In the case of the emperor Augustus, who reigned for forty-five years, from 31 BCE to 14 CE, leaving aside coins and cameos, and plenty of *misidentifications*, the number of fairly certainly identified contemporary or near contemporary images in marble or bronze, found across the Roman Empire from Spain to Cyprus, is more than two hundred, plus around ninety of his (even longer-lived) wife Livia (Figs 2.9; 2.10; 2.11; 7.3). One reasonable guess, and it can be no more than a guess, puts these figures at one per cent, or less, of the original total—perhaps between twenty-five thousand and fifty thousand portraits of Augustus in all.¹⁴

Whether that is roughly right or not, what we have today is certainly not a representative sample of what there once was. Dilapidation and destruction do not strike evenly. Statues in metal are always vulnerable to being re-used; and, by definition, the more ephemeral the medium, the fainter the archaeological trace it leaves. Augustus refers in his *Autobiography* to ‘about eighty’ silver statues of himself in the city of Rome alone. But rows of marble heads now take a disproportionate place in imperial portraiture for the simple reason that almost all the gold and silver versions that once existed, as well as many of the bronze, were sooner or later melted down and recycled. They ended up as new works of art, hard cash or, in the case of the bronze, military machines and munitions.¹⁵

Other materials, such as paint, disappeared, without any such aggressive intervention. Painted portraits in general are one of the greatest



1.5 The family of Septimius Severus, the first Roman ruler from the continent of Africa (emperor 193–211): Septimius himself, back right; his wife Julia Domna, the great-aunt of Alexander Severus, back left; his elder son Caracalla, bottom right; and his younger son Geta, bottom left. The panel has had an eventful history. Currently about thirty centimetres in diameter, it has been cut down from a larger piece. The face of Geta, murdered on the orders of Caracalla in 211, has been deliberately erased.

casualties of classical art, surviving only in rare conditions—such as the dry sands of Egypt, which preserved those evocative, and often disconcertingly ‘modern’, faces that memorialised the dead on the decorative casing of Roman mummies.¹⁶ Also from Egypt comes a striking image of the emperor Septimius Severus and his family. Painted around 200 CE, this might easily be taken as an unusual imperial one-off, if a few written texts did not hint that it was part of a much wider, though now almost entirely lost, tradition (Fig. 1.5). One ancient inventory preserved on a fragmentary papyrus, for example, appears to list several ‘little paintings’ of emperors on display in the third century CE in a group of Egyptian temples; and the tutor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius on one occasion mentioned the



1.6 Nero on a small panel in the large, twelfth-century, east window (eight and a half metres high) in Poitiers Cathedral in France. Dressed as a medieval king, but labelled underneath (in what is a modern restoration of the original lettering) ‘Nero Imperator’ (Emperor Nero) he seems oblivious of the devil on his back. He is gesticulating towards the centre of the window, where Saint Peter is shown being crucified on his orders.

1.7 [FACING PAGE] This precious cross (half a metre high) is still used in ceremonies in Aachen Cathedral. It is a complicated composite. The base dates from the fourteenth century. The cross itself was made around the year 1000, incorporating a slightly earlier seal of King Lothar below and at the centre a first-century cameo of the emperor Augustus.

‘badly painted’ and the laughably unrecognisable portraits of his pupil that he saw ‘at the money lenders, in shops and stalls . . . anywhere and everywhere’. In doing so, he not only revealed his snobbish disdain for popular art, but also offered a fleeting glimpse of the once ubiquitous presence of emperors in paint.¹⁷

Most of the images of these rulers that we see today, however, are not ‘Roman’ in the chronological sense of the word, but were produced many centuries after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West. They include some striking medieval portrayals: the emperor Nero with a little blue devil on his back in a stained glass window in Poitiers Cathedral, for example, is a memorable vignette from the twelfth century (Fig. 1.6); and, in a wonderful process of creative re-invention, around 1000 CE the makers of the ‘Lothar Cross’ breathed new life into a cameo of Augustus, by incorporating it into an entirely new setting, and ‘rhyming’ it with a portrait below of the Carolingian King Lothar (hence the modern name), who ruled in the ninth century (Fig. 1.7).¹⁸ But it is since the fifteenth century, across Europe and then outside it, that emperors have been recreated, imitated

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1.8 Once considered authentic ancient pieces, the two groups of Twelve Caesars at Versailles were created in the seventeenth century. On the left, Augustus from one of those series, bought by King Louis XIV from Cardinal Mazarin's collection; on the right, an even more ostentatious Domitian, with gilded drapery, from the other series.

and re-imagined in numbers that cannot be far short of the ancient scale of production, and in yet more colourful variety.

Arrays of marble busts were certainly one element of this. Sculptors and patrons took their cue from some of the best-known survivals of Roman imperial portraiture, and kitted out palaces, villas, gardens and country houses with their own Caesars in stone: from the ostentatious porphyry and gilded creations that decorated Louis XIV's state rooms at Versailles (Fig. 1.8); to the more modest context of the Long Gallery at Powis Castle in Wales, where the display of emperors' busts seems to have come at the cost of basic amenities, such as carpets, decent beds and wine ('I should exchange the Caesars for some comforts' observed one grumpy visitor in 1793) (Fig. 1.9); or to the quirkiest setting of Bolsover Castle in northern England, where a large seventeenth-century fountain featured eight solemn emperors around its edge, standing guard over (or ogling) a naked Venus and four urinating *putti*.¹⁹



1.9 More than three hundred years after they had first been installed, the emperors at Powis Castle were removed from their pedestals in the early twenty-first century for conservation: here, these substantial marble busts, more than a metre tall, are in mid-transport. There is a striking contrast between the emperors displayed as art objects and their transformation on these ‘stretchers’ into almost human hospital patients.

At the same time, painters lined the walls and ceilings of rich houses with imperial portraits in fresco and on canvas—none more influential, as we shall see (Chapter 5), than Titian’s set of eleven *Caesars* painted for Federico Gonzaga of Mantua in the 1530s. And they re-imagined key moments in the history of imperial rule. These moments were not drawn from any ancient visual repertoire. Rarely in surviving Roman art was an emperor depicted in anything more than a standardised scene of



1.10 Michael Sweerts's painting of a *Boy Drawing before the Bust of a Roman Emperor* (c. 1661), just under fifty centimetres high. The Roman emperor concerned is Vitellius (Fig. 1.24), the emperor who had a lurid reputation for gluttony, immorality and sadism. Does the artist want us to feel uneasy at this innocent child being given such a monster for his drawing practice?

sacrifice, triumph, benefaction, procession or hunting; the narratives on the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, detailing the emperors' part in military campaigns, are some of the few exceptions. But modern artists gave a visual form to the stories of emperors they found in ancient literature. Some of the classics were: *Augustus Listening to Virgil recite the 'Aeneid'*; *The Assassination of Caligula*; or the always ghoulish *Nero Gazing at the Body of his Mother*, whose murder he had ordered (Figs 6.24; 7.12–13; 7.18–19).



1.11 A sixteenth-century bronze inkwell, copying the figure of Marcus Aurelius (emperor 161–80), that for centuries stood in the piazza on the Capitoline hill in Rome, and is now in the Capitoline Museums. The whole figure is only just over twenty-three centimetres high, and the ink was held in the small shell-shaped vessel at the horse's feet.

Until the nineteenth century at least, these emperors were so important an element in a painter's stock-in-trade that technical treatises on art gave instructions on how they should best be represented (alongside biblical figures, saints, pagan gods and goddesses and assorted later monarchs), students perfected their drawing technique by copying plaster casts of famous imperial busts (Fig. 1.10) and subjects taken from the lives of the Caesars were set in art exams and competitions.²⁰ In 1847, the novice artists in Paris competing for the top bursary known as the 'Prix de Rome' (Rome Prize) were asked to demonstrate their talents with a painting of *The Death of the Emperor Vitellius*, tortured and dragged by a hook into the river Tiber. This ghastly lynching of a disreputable, short-term occupant of the imperial throne, in the civil war that followed the fall of Nero in 68 CE, may have resonated with the revolutionary European politics of the 1840s; but it was a controversial choice, deemed by some reviewers of the competition as a subject bad for the minds and talents of the young painters (Fig. 6.20).

It is not, however, only a question of painting and sculpture. Emperors have found a place almost everywhere, in every medium from silver to wax. They have been turned into inkwells and candlesticks (Fig. 1.11). They



1.12 One of a set of imperial chairs made for the elector of Saxony, c. 1580, each carrying the portrait of a different emperor, making up the Twelve Caesars. Here Caligula is set against a luxurious background of gilding and semi-precious stones.

feature on tapestries, in pop-up decorations at Renaissance festivals and even on the backs of a notable set of sixteenth-century dining chairs (the question of which guest would be seated on Caligula or Nero must have added excitement to the *placement*) (Fig. 1.12).²¹ A set of exquisite Twelve Caesar cameos, which hung around the neck of one Spanish officer serving in the Spanish Armada as he went down with his ship, the 'Girona', in 1588 (Fig. 1.13), is as different as you could imagine from the vast maiolica impe-



1.13 Over a thousand people lost their lives when the Spanish ship 'Girona' sank off the coast of Ireland in 1588. Underwater archaeologists have recovered the showy neck-chain of one of the richer victims; it is made up of twelve imperial portraits (as the one here) in lapis lazuli, set in a gold and pearl mount, each one more than four centimetres in height.

rial busts produced in the nineteenth century by an Italian firm of celebrity ceramicists (Fig. 1.14).²² I suspect that no rulers in the history of the world have ever been presented more gaudily.

Nor is it a question only of elite patrons and their prestige possessions. Caesars have decorated the homes of the middle classes, on mass-produced prints and modest plaques, as well as the palaces of the super-elite. And they have been satiric and playful as well as impressively serious. William Hogarth chose Roman emperors to decorate the walls of his tavern in *The Rake's Progress* (appropriately enough, given the decadence depicted, it is only the face of Nero that is fully visible) (Fig. 1.15). Centuries before, a witty, or disgruntled, artist in fourteenth-century Verona left a marvellous imperial caricature in the plaster underneath a set of painted portraits of emperors that are among the earliest to survive from the modern world (Fig. 1.16).²³

These imperial characters have also played a role in a far wider range of cultural, ideological and religious debates than we often give them credit for. The main reason that Nero appears in the stained-glass window at Poitiers was that he was the emperor who supposedly, among his other persecutions, sent Saint Peter and Saint Paul to their deaths. And it is in



1.14 Emperors in colour. Tiberius (named on the base) is one of at least fourteen Roman rulers, produced in high-glazed earthenware by a firm of Italian ceramicists, Minghetti of Bologna, in the late nineteenth century. Overpowering display pieces, standing a metre tall, they are now split up across the world from the United Kingdom to Australia.



1.15 An engraving of William Hogarth's 1730s painting of the *Tavern Scene or Orgy*, in his *Rake's Progress*—a series of images documenting the decline of one Thomas Rakewell (sprawling on the chair to the far left). Just visible, high on the wall behind are portraits of Roman emperors: only the depraved Nero, second from the right on the rear wall (between Augustus and Tiberius) appears undefaced, as an emblem of what is going on below.



1.16 This small sketch of an emperor with his distinctive 'Roman' nose, found in the plaster underneath paintings in the Palazzo degli Scaligeri in Verona of the 1360s, including portraits of Roman rulers and their wives (Fig. 3.7g). Whether by the lead artist Altichiero or one of his team, this is not so much a preparatory drawing as a satire on the serious theme of the decoration.

that role that he features prominently also on the huge bronze doors of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, made by the sculptor, architect and theorist Filarete, for Old St Peter's in the fifteenth century, and one of its few elements that was reincorporated into the New.²⁴ But if it was emperor Nero as Antichrist, who greeted, and still greets, visitors to one of the most holy places in all Christendom, there were also constructive attempts to reconcile the story of Jesus with that of the emperors. One of the most popular subjects in early modern painting—examples lurk unrecognised in almost every major Western art gallery—is the emperor Augustus's vision of the baby Jesus. This marvellous pious fiction had Augustus on the day of Jesus's birth consult a pagan prophetess on the question of whether anyone would



1.17 Paris Bordone's large painting (more than two metres across), *Apparition of the Sibyl to Caesar Augustus* (mid-sixteenth century). In the centre of a grand architectural scheme, the emperor kneels, while the prophetess ('the Sibyl') stands next to him; in the sky there is a vision of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus. It is a painting well-travelled among the European elite: once owned by Cardinal Mazarin, it was later the property of Sir Robert Walpole at Houghton Hall in England (below, p. 105), before being sold to Catherine the Great of Russia.

be born in the world more powerful than himself, and whether he should allow himself to be worshipped as a god. The miraculous sight of the Virgin and Child in the sky above Rome gave him his answer (Fig. 1.17).²⁵

Even today emperors are being recreated and re-energised. Although most of the examples I have mentioned so far have been earlier than the twentieth century, the Caesars remain a recognisable idiom in modern culture. Ostentatious sets of imperial busts are still being made, and still mean something (in Federico Fellini's film *La dolce vita*, imperial heads, ancient and modern, are repeatedly used to link the decadence of contemporary Rome with its decadent past²⁶). And emperors play a role in popular image-making too, even now. Modern political cartoons depicting their unfortunate target with a laurel wreath and lyre, against the backdrop of a burning city, are only one part of it. The commercial power of the Caesars still works in 'Emperor' pub-signs or beer-bottle labels; and there is plenty of knowing self-irony in such jokes as 'Nero' trademark matches or boxer shorts. Meanwhile souvenir-makers are still producing chocolate coins emblazoned with the heads of the Caesars, just as Romans pastry chefs produced their imperial biscuits. Emperors have remained good enough to eat (Fig. 1.18g).

Ancient-and-Modern

This book is inevitably bifocal. It is concerned particularly with modern recreations of the Roman emperors over the last six hundred years or so, but ancient images will always be in sight too—simply because a modern Julius Caesar, Augustus or Nero can never be entirely separated from its ancient predecessors. That is for several reasons.

For a start, there is an inextricable two-way influence between the old and the new. Unsurprisingly perhaps, modern images of emperors have almost always been produced in imitation of (or in response to) ancient Roman prototypes. That is true, of course, for many classicising themes in art. Every modern version of Jupiter or Venus, of guileless Naiad or of raunchy satyr is the product of some kind of conversation with the art of antiquity. But with these imperial rulers that conversation is especially intense. Modern conventions in the 'look' of many individual emperors—from the cool classical profile of Augustus to the shaggy beard of Hadrian—have often been derived from detailed study of surviving Roman art and literature. At the same time, however, these modern representations of imperial rulers have influenced how we see, and recognise, their ancient counterparts. Before they have ever looked at a single ancient portrait of Julius

Caesar, the vast majority of even the most scholarly archaeologists and art historians today have come across his face in the cartoons of *Astérix*, or in popular comedy films (*Carry on Cleo* was my own introduction) (Fig. 1.18h and i). Three centuries ago, it was probably Titian's paintings of the Caesars (or one of the many sets of prints based on them) that provided the same kind of popular mental benchmark for their appearance (Chapter 5). For better or worse, most modern viewers have some template of the most famous imperial figures in their minds before ever casting an eye directly on any Roman sculpture, cameo or coin. We see the ancient through the modern.²⁷

But the connections between ancient and modern run even deeper than that, and they put a distinctive stamp on the whole subject. In marble sculpture in particular, it can prove impossible to decide whether an individual piece was made in ancient Rome, or anything up to two millennia later. More than two and a half centuries ago, the learned J. J. Winckelmann (who was the first to devise a reasonably plausible chronological scheme for ancient art) complained that it was very hard, especially in the case of 'heads' to 'tell the difference between the old and the new, the authentic and the restoration'. No amount of modern technical sophistication or scientific wizardry has made it any easier since.²⁸ That is why, in addition to the couple of hundred portraits of Augustus that are generally accepted as ancient, there are at least forty more which continue to shuffle backwards and forwards between the categories of 'ancient' and 'modern'; they are part of my tantalising hybrid category 'ancient-and-modern'.

One notorious sculpture in the Getty Museum is a striking example of that, still defying final, conclusive dating despite a special exhibition and an expert conference in 2006 having been devoted to that very question. This is a bust of the emperor Commodus (a keen amateur gladiator who was assassinated in 192 CE, and was more recently antihero of the film *Gladiator*, by Ridley Scott). After two hundred years or so in an English

1.18 [FACING PAGE]

- (a) The emperor Titus, as he appeared in Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960)
- (b) Chris Riddell, cartoon of Gordon Brown (UK prime minister) as Nero (2009)
- (c) Cambridge pub sign (based on a statue by Nicolas Coustou, commissioned 1696)
- (d) Augustus beer, from Milton Brewery, Cambridge
- (e) Advertisement for Nero boxer shorts (1951)
- (f) Capitoline Museums matches: 'Nerone's [Nero's] matches'
- (g) Head of Augustus on chocolate coin
- (h) Kenneth Williams as Julius Caesar in *Carry on Cleo* (1964)
- (i) Caesar, from R. Goscinny and A. Uderzo, *Astérix* series



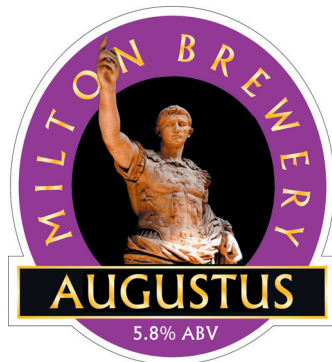
(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)



(g)



(h)



(i)

aristocratic collection, it was bought by the Getty in 1992, and at that point was considered to be a product of sixteenth-century Italy, imitating ancient portraits of the emperor. It has since been variously reclassified, both as a later, eighteenth-century piece and more radically as an original portrait of the second century CE, or in some uncertain limbo between the three (Fig. 1.19).²⁹



1.19 The 'Getty *Commodus*'. Whatever the horror stories told of Commodus, he is here represented, almost life-size, as an entirely conventional emperor of the late second century CE, dressed in a military outfit and with the beard characteristic of many second-century rulers (unlike their clean-shaven predecessors). But whether he is ancient, modern or a mixture of the two still remains uncertain.

There are almost no criteria that might beyond doubt clinch the date. The tools and techniques of sculptors remained more or less identical from the second century to the eighteenth, and they often produced more or less identical results (especially at this relatively compact scale, where there is less opportunity for give-away signs of date than in a full-length figure). The material does not help either, as the bust is made of marble from an Italian source that has been quarried through most periods of history since the late first century BCE. What is more, there is no record of how, when or from where the piece was brought to England. The arguments now rest on impressionistic hunch and microscopic evidence. Traces of mineral deposits in the cracks (indicating that it might have been buried) and signs that it had possibly been ‘resurfaced’ at some point (more likely if it is very old) are now taken to suggest that it probably goes back to the ancient Roman world. But this is no more than ‘suggest’. Although current consensus has nudged him towards antiquity (and, as I write, he is proudly on display in the museum’s Roman gallery), since being acquired by the Getty, Commodus has moved around the museum: sometimes on show alongside ancient, sometimes alongside modern works, according to the prevailing curatorial view of his date; and occasionally left out of sight altogether in the twilight of the storeroom.

Faking and forgery—that is, clearly fraudulent attempts to make a newly created piece appear ancient—add an extra dimension to such puzzles. The ‘Getty *Commodus*’, as it is usually known, is not a fake in that sense. Even supposing it were made in the sixteenth century, inspired by Roman antecedents, there is no indication that anyone was then trying to pass it off as ancient (if they were, it was an extremely unsuccessful attempt since, so far as we know, the possible second-century date has only recently been floated). But among those forty or so portraits of Augustus whose bona fide antiquity has been disputed, some were very likely sold under false pretences and really belong to the ‘modern’ category. The assumption usually is that they were produced mostly between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries by shrewd operators in Italy, aiming at the pockets of wealthy collectors and gullible mi’lords (especially, but not exclusively, English) who were chasing after ancient portraits for their ancestral homes and private museums. These were the men who ‘look with their ears’; or so one famous eighteenth-century restorer, sculptor and art dealer put it in his advice to potential buyers, referring to their woeful susceptibility to the salesman’s patter.³⁹

But it is still not so easy. Forgery is a much harder category to pin down than is often assumed—as one notable series of miniature imperial heads

vividly illustrates. These are found on replicas of Roman coins and medals produced in the sixteenth century by Giovanni da Cavino in Padua (Fig. 1.20). Many of them were once taken to be authentically antique, but in this case, unlike in that of so many marble busts, we can be sure that they are not: these ‘Paduans’, as they are sometimes called, are a different weight from the ancient prototypes, and made of a different metal alloy; they are more delicately worked; and—should there be any lingering doubt—some of the sixteenth-century dies and punches with which they were made still survive. Nevertheless, disagreement continues on the motives behind this. Was Giovanni da Cavino a forger, with fraudulent intent? Or was he producing elegant imitations involving no false pretences, to appeal perhaps to collectors who were unable to acquire the originals they wanted? Ultimately, it all depends on what terms they were represented or sold, and that might well have been different on different occasions. Whether sculpture or coin, cameo or medal, an honest ‘replica’ only becomes a dishonest ‘fake’ if, or when, it is knowingly claimed to be something it is not. One person’s shabby counterfeit may well be another’s valued facsimile.³¹

In other cases, the distinction between ancient and modern is further blurred, for different reasons. Despite their optimistic museum labels, most ancient marble sculptures rediscovered before the late nineteenth century are quite literally hybrids or ‘works in progress’. To be sure, they have an authentic Roman origin, but they have been aggressively cleaned up, altered, adjusted and imaginatively restored long after they were first made. Certainly, little of the original surface could have survived the procedures recommended for ‘cleaning’ ancient marble in one early nineteenth-century artists’ handbook—involving acid baths, chiselling and pumice.³² Very few marble emperors, apart from recent archaeological finds (and even they are not immune), have not had some such ‘work’ done. The Getty *Commodus* may well be a relatively minor instance of this: a second-century CE piece, resurfaced and repolished to produce a new, smooth finish a millennium and a half later—only adding, of course, to the difficulties of assigning it any single date.

Other instances include those many austere ancient Roman imperial heads that in the sixteenth century and later were inserted into new, lavish supports, with flamboyant drapery, making an altogether more showy impression (the basic rule is that the more splendid and brightly coloured the bust under any Roman portrait-head is, the less likely it is to be entirely ancient). But sometimes more imaginative adjustments have gone on. A controversial marble bust of a young woman, now in the British Museum, has often been identified as Antonia, the mother of the emperor Claudius



1.20 One of Giovanni da Cavino's sixteenth-century bronze 'Paduans', just over three centimetres in diameter. On one side a portrait of Antonia, the mother of the emperor Claudius; on the other, her son the emperor, dressed for religious ritual, with his name (Ti[berius] Claudius Caesar) and his imperial titles around the edge. 'S C', short for 'senatus consulto', marks the authority of the senate in minting Roman coins of this type.

(who also features in Fig. 1.20). One question has been: is it ancient or modern? It is probably both. For most likely a makeover in the eighteenth century has 'sexed up' an original first century CE sculpture by cutting it away to give the impression of much skimpier clothing and a plunging neckline (not how Romans usually portrayed imperial ladies, though appealing to a modern buyer).³³

Critics and restorers themselves, from the sixteenth century on, debated the role of restoration in completing fragmentary ancient sculpture. How many modern additions and improvements were legitimate? How far was the restorer to be seen as an artist in his own right?³⁴ But, in some portraits, hybridity became an end in itself. In the Capitoline Museums at Rome (standing, as it has done for centuries, in a grand room on the first floor of the Palazzo dei Conservatori) is a full-length figure in marble, the body clad in armour of Roman imperial type, arm outstretched as if to address his legions; the head, by contrast, in the fashion of a sixteenth-century dynast, appears to have come from another age (Fig. 1.21). And indeed it has. This is a statue of the warlord Alessandro Farnese (*Il Gran Capitano* as he was known, 'The Great Captain', or even 'Big Boss'), erected in 1593, the year after his death. The body was formed out of an ancient Roman statue, said at the time to be of Julius Caesar, its head completely replaced with the distinctive features of *Il Gran Capitano*.

There may have been practical reasons for this. To our eyes now, the amalgam appears awkward (and very few visitors today stop to admire it).



1.21 Both ancient *and* modern. The portrait head of Alessandro Farnese by the sculptor Ippolito Buzzi (d. 1634) has been inserted into the life-size body of an ancient statue believed to be that of Julius Caesar. As if to underline the connections between this sixteenth-century warlord and Roman antiquity, his portrait stood (and still stands) in front of a painting of a famous military victory from the myths of early Rome.

But it meant a very speedy and cheap commission, as the records of the payment to the sculptor make clear. More to the point, though, it was also a powerful visual way of parading a link between the modern hero and the ancient past. The comparison of Alessandro Farnese with Caesar had already been made in a eulogy at his funeral. Here that comparison was monumentalised in marble.³⁵

There were ancient Roman precedents for this practice. Caesar could hardly have complained at his treatment by those who wanted (literally) to ‘deface’ and ‘reface’ his portrait to honour some sixteenth-century follower. Centuries earlier, his own admirers had done much the same. By the end of the first century CE, on a famous statue of Alexander the Great that stood in the centre of Rome the head of Julius Caesar had been substituted for

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