

Peter Paul Rubens

1577-1640 | Flemish



The Emperor Marcus Aurelius

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Oil on panel | Circa 1600

Panel: 25 3/4" high x 19 3/4" wide | 65.41 cm x 50.17 cm

Frame: 33 1/2" high x 27 5/8" wide x 2 1/8" deep

85.09 cm x 70.17 cm x 5.4 cm



MARCUS AVRELIVS XVII

“

*I'm just a simple man
standing alone with my
old brushes, asking
God for inspiration.*

- Peter Paul Rubens

”



The Baroque master Peter Paul Rubens redefined the representation of the human form, leaving an indelible mark on art history. His intense and virtuosic approach to painting transformed the depiction of the body, texture and fabrics, a style now appropriately titled, "Rubenesque." Most of his revered works are held in prestigious museums and rarely appear on the market without making headlines. Thus, this portrait of *The Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, done by the Rubens' own hand, is both a captivating and monumentally important painting.

The remarkable portrait is one of the rare masterpieces completed entirely by Rubens, created in the late 1590s during his tutelage under Otto van Veen. Inspired by van Veen, the young artist joined his teacher in an exploration of the fascinating world of Roman emperors, and brought his unique artistic vision to life. Only four known paintings from this emperor series exist today, and this is one of them.

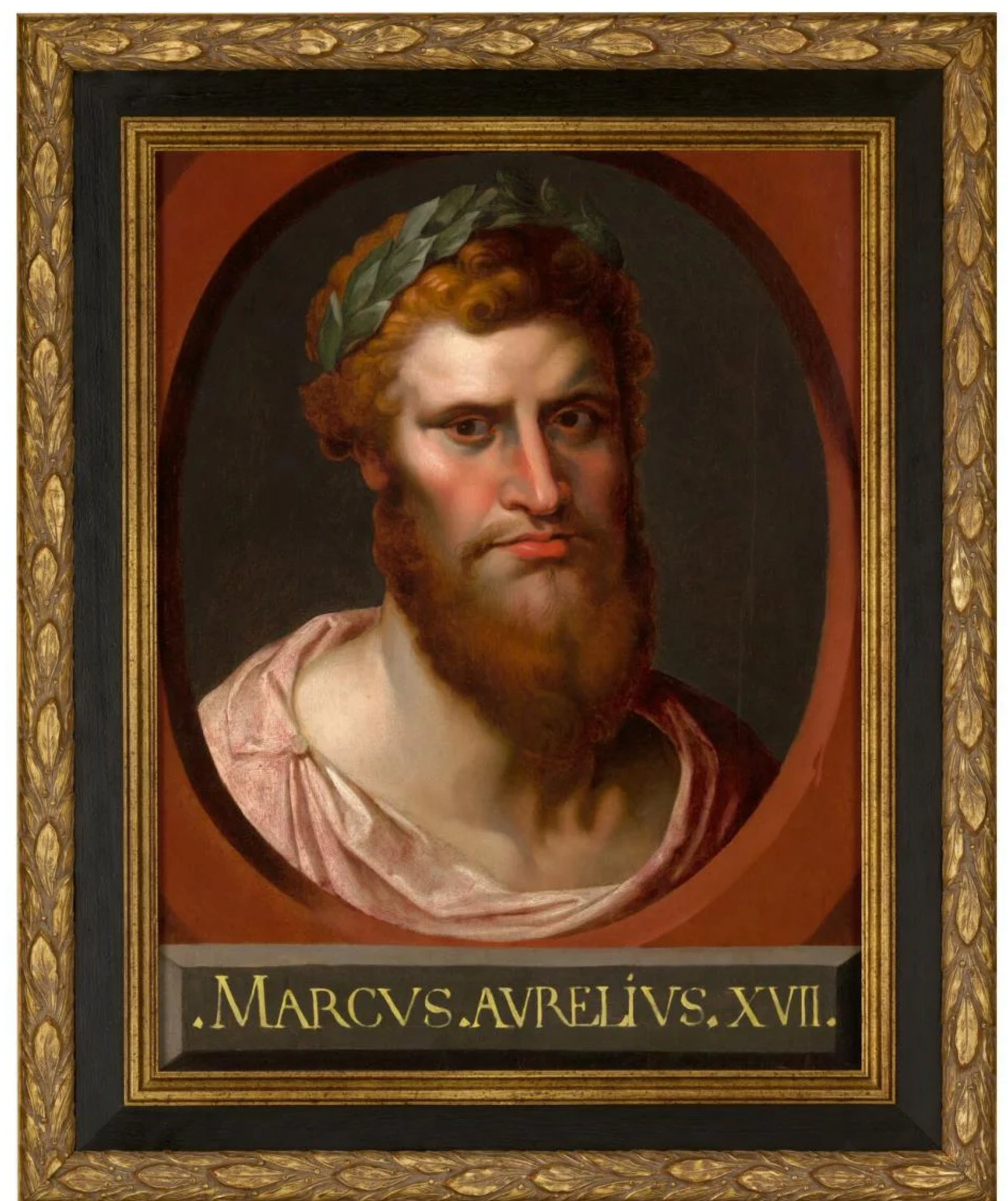
Perhaps more than the others, which are all held in museums, Rubens devoted exceptional time to perfecting the subject's visage—Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE). As one of the most famous and revered Roman emperors, Marcus Aurelius was a staunch defender of Stoicism—a philosophy emphasizing fate, reason and self-restraint. This philosophy deeply resonated with Rubens, who was both an artist and a student of great works. This particular portrait of the innovative emperor showcases the precision and anatomical mastery that would come to define Rubens' entire oeuvre. One can easily see his command of chiaroscuro, texture and expression, establishing a uniquely "Rubens" feel to his paintings.

Works completed solely by Rubens command the highest attention, not only due to their extreme rarity on the market but also because of their invaluable insights into the mind of one of history's greatest artists. This portrait comes with a letter of authenticity by Professor Emeritus Julius Held of Columbia University, New York.

Born in 1577 in Siegen, Germany of Flemish parents, Rubens moved back to Antwerp with his mother after his father's death in 1589. He was a student of humanism and the arts, beginning his first artistic

apprenticeship at 14 studying under Tobias Verhaeght and was influenced by the works of Hans Holbein and Raphael. At this time, Rubens was also appointed a position as a page for a noble lady in Oudenaarde, which provided him with early exposure to aristocracy. He continued to study painting and eventually became a free master in a guild by the time he was 21.

Rubens would go on to work in the most prestigious courts throughout Europe, executing an important series of portraits for rulers such as Phillip III, Albert VII, and Marie de Medici. He was knighted by both Philip IV of Spain and by Charles I of England. His involvement in royal circles made him an influential courtier, and he was assigned many important diplomatic missions as well as artistic commissions. Today, his history-defining paintings can be seen in the world's most prestigious museums, including the Louvre in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. ●



OVERVIEW

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Florida

M.S. Rau, New Orleans

Private Collection, Texas

M.S. Rau, New Orleans

LITERATURE

Professor Emeritus Julius Held, Columbia University, Authentication Letter, December 27, 1989



DEC-22-1998 TUE 07:17 PM

P. 02

JULIUS S. HELD
81 Monument Avenue · Old Bennington, Vt. 05201
(802) 442-3164

December 27, 1989

Dear

It had been clear to me when I wrote you a note about Rubens's early portrait of Emperor Commodus (May 25, 1982) that the young master had not confined himself to only one item of such a series of Roman emperors - a rather popular subject at his time.

I am now quite certain that the portrait of Emperor Marcus Aurelius which you have shown me, and of which you have also furnished an X-ray photograph, is indeed part of such a series and that it was painted by Rubens before he left for Italy in May 1600.

The painting, on panel, 66.4 x 51 cm., is in satisfactory condition; the join of the two boards on which it is painted is visible but as far as I can tell has not been covered up by any effort to hide it (a fact which I welcome).

From the X-ray one can see that the name of the emperor (the seventeenth in the sequence of Roman emperors) had first been painted slightly higher and somewhat more to the left.

Rubens has evidently aimed at conveying the serious and thoughtful character of this philosopher among the Roman emperors, giving also also particular attention to the laurel wreath crowning his head.

A very inferior copy of this painting (without the numerals XVII) is in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, Germany, Inv. No. 2257.

With my best greetings,

Sincerely yours,

Julius S. Held.



LITERATURE

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius

by

Peter Paul Rubens

- Medium:** Oil on uncradled oak panel. The panel is beveled, of two sections joined vertically down the center of the painting.
- Size:** 26 1/8 x 20 inches (66.4 x 51 cm.). Now framed to 23 x 20 inches.
- Date:** Circa 1598.
- Authenticated:** Professor Emeritus Julius Held, Columbia University, New York, letter December 27, 1989. The related painting of Marcus Aurelius's son, the eighteenth Roman Caesar Commodus was discussed by Professor Held in lectures at The International Rubens Symposium, Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Florida, April 14, 1982 (see below), and at the Rubens Colloquium, Columbia University, September 24, 1982.
- Bibliography:** See Julius S. Held, "Thoughts on Rubens' Beginnings," *The Ringling Museum of Art Journal*, 1983 (papers presented at The International Rubens Symposium), Sarasota, Florida, pp. 20, 27, 29, fig. 3, for a discussion of the portrait of Commodus.
- For information about Peter Paul Rubens' lost series of Roman Emperors, see Michael Jaffe "Rubens Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine*, CXIII, 1971, pp. 300 - 303, and Michael Jaffe, Rubens and Italy, Ithaca, New York, 1977, pp. 17, 18, 66, 74, 79, fig. 1.

Professor Emeritus Julius Held, Columbia University, Authentication Letter, December 27, 1989



DEC-22-1998 TUE 07:18 PM

P. 03

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius

by

Peter Paul Rubens

Siegen 1577 - 1640 Antwerp

On May 8, 1600, when young Peter Paul Rubens was twenty-three years old, he left Flanders for what was to be an eight year period of travel, study, vigorous work, and growing confidence and mastery as a painter. He went to Italy as an independent member of the painter's guild in Antwerp, having been admitted in 1598 after finishing four years of apprenticeship with the court painter Otto Van Veen. The Rubens we know well is the Rubens of the Italian period and later years.

In Antwerp during the span 1598 - 1600, however, Rubens had produced a body of work, almost all of which is now lost to us. We know of its existence because his mother certified that he had left her many beautiful paintings at the time. Unfortunately, there are less than ten paintings still extant from that period, and the majority of these are in museums.

Professor Emeritus Julius Held, Columbia University, Authentication Letter, December 27, 1989



Now an extremely early portrait done by Rubens in that rare period before he left for Italy has appeared. It is of the seventeenth Roman Caesar, Marcus Aurelius. Professor Julius Held, the dean of Rubens scholars whose two-volume The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens (Princeton University Press, 1981) is the standard catalogue, has authenticated the painting. It is directly comparable to the celebrated Portrait of a Geographer in the Belle and Jack Linsky Collection, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and to the wonderful panel of Adam and Eve at Rubens House, Antwerp. A matching painting of Aurelius's son, The Emperor Commodus, is now in an important New York private collection.

In the painting Marcus Aurelius gazes thoughtfully from a porthole cut into porphyry. The scene is similar to that of an antique bust in a niche, and here the emperor has come to life.

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121 - 180 A.D.) was undoubtedly one of the most famous and best of the "good emperors." His rule as Caesar (161 - 180 A.D.) was marked both by an ongoing external turmoil and an internal striving to give full meaning to the nobility of man and to the practice of virtue in the highest civic affairs. During his reign there were invasions at the borders of the empire, revolts in Britain and Asia, and severe outbreaks of the plague. Yet under Marcus harsh anomalies in the civil law were abolished, and his approach to civic difficulties was as a devoted practitioner of the role of ombudsman.

As a youth Marcus Aurelius was trained by the best teachers in Rome, and he felt that law and philosophy were his true calling. Marcus Aurelius saw himself as a calm bringer of peace rather than as a military hero. He wrote his famous Meditations, his reflections upon living a detached Stoic life of virtue and duty, while acting under the most severe political pressures. The Meditations were written in Greek, and Marcus Aurelius wore a beard in Hellenic fashion, for he wished his realm to be an embodiment of Greek philosophic ideals; in the generations since it is Marcus Aurelius who has been admired as coming closest to the ideal of the philosopher-king.



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P. 05

Did Rubens have any special attachment to Marcus Aurelius? Perhaps, for one of the people Rubens felt closest to was the neo-Stoic scholar and master of Roman history Justus Lipsius, Professor at the University of Louvain. Lipsius had been his brother Philip's teacher, and Rubens included him and Philip in his famous painting of friends at the court of Mantua (Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne). Similarly, Rubens was to portray himself and Philip, along with their friend Jan Woverius, studying philosophy with Lipsius (The Four Philosophers, Palazzo Pitti, Florence). Further, Rubens later designed two bookplates which featured portraits of Lipsius for books on Stoic philosophy (Rubens and the Book, edited by Julius Held, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1977, catalog nos. 27 and 52). Thus Rubens must have been quite familiar with Stoicism and the Meditations.




For this imaginary portrait the artist referred to ancient images of Marcus, especially that of the equestrian statue of the emperor set upon Michelangelo's pedestal on the Capitoline, which had been reproduced many times in small portable bronzes in the sixteenth century. Marcus Aurelius was and remains one of the most famous of Roman Emperors. Ancient classical images of Marcus in marble and bronze formed an important exhibition in central Switzerland in early 1996.

The painting foreshadows for Rubens what was to be a lasting interest in ancient civilization and history. Aside from the subjects he painted, the artist built up a notable collection of classical sculpture, coins and gems; in fact, a Hellenistic carved agate vase once owned by Rubens is now the centerpiece of the ancient art collection at The Walters Museum in Baltimore. Marcus Aurelius is thus an important and welcome addition to a very rare portion of Rubens' oeuvre.

Professor Emeritus Julius Held, Columbia University, Authentication Letter, December 27, 1989







AUCTION COMPARABLES

	1	Peter Paul Rubens
	Title	The Massacre of the Innocents
	Medium	Oil on Panel
	Year of Work	1609-1611
	Size	Height 55.9 in.; Width 71.7 in. / Height 142 cm.; Width 182 cm.
	Misc.	Stamped
	Sale of	Sotheby's London: Wednesday, July 10, 2002 [Lot 00006] Old Master Paintings: Part One
	Estimate	4,000,000 - 6,000,000 GBP (6,183,336 - 9,275,004 USD)
	Sold For	49,506,648 GBP Premium (76,529,056 USD)
	2	Peter Paul Rubens
	Title	Salome presented with the head of Saint John the Baptist
	Description	Lot 5Baroque: Masterpieces from the Fisch Davidson CollectionSir Peter Paul Rubens
	Medium	oil on oak panel
	Size	Height 37 in.; Width 40.1 in. / Height 94 cm.; Width 101.8 cm.
	Sale of	Sotheby's New York: Thursday, January 26, 2023 [Lot 00005] Baroque: Masterpieces from the Fisch Davidson Collection
	Estimate	25,000,000 - 35,000,000 USD
	Sold For	26,926,000 USD Premium
	3	Peter Paul Rubens
	Title	Portrait of a Man as Mars
	Description	Lot 133Lot 133Lot DetailsProperty from the Fisch Davidson CollectionSIR PE
	Medium	oil on Baltic oak panel
	Year of Work	Circa 1620
	Size	Height 33.6 in.; Width 26.7 in. / Height 85.4 cm.; Width 67.9 cm.
	Cat. Rais.	John Smith
	Misc.	Signed
	Sale of	Sotheby's New York: Tuesday, May 16, 2023 [Lot 00133] Modern Evening Auction
	Estimate	20,000,000 - 30,000,000 USD
	Sold For	26,187,000 USD Premium



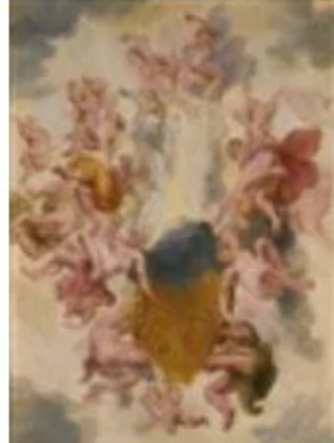


AUCTION COMPARABLES

	4	Peter Paul Rubens	<p>Title Portrait of a commander being dressed for battle</p> <p>Medium oil on panel</p> <p>Size Height 48.3 in.; Width 38.7 in. / Height 122.6 cm.; Width 98.2 cm.</p> <p>Sale of Christie's London: Tuesday, July 6, 2010 [Lot 00016] Old Master & 19th Century Paintings, Drawings & Watercolours Evening</p> <p>Estimate 8,000,000 - 12,000,000 GBP (12,115,338 - 18,173,008 USD)</p> <p>Sold For 9,001,250 GBP Premium (13,631,648 USD)</p>
	5	Peter Paul Rubens	<p>Title THE VIRGIN AND CHRIST CHILD, WITH SAINTS ELIZABETH AND JOHN THE BAPTIST</p> <p>Description Property from a Private Collection, New YorkSIR PETER PAUL RUBENSSiegen 157</p> <p>Medium oil on panel</p> <p>Size Height 47.9 in.; Width 37.6 in. / Height 121.6 cm.; Width 95.5 cm.</p> <p>Sale of Sotheby's New York: Wednesday, January 29, 2020 [Lot 00019] Master Paintings Evening Sale</p> <p>Estimate 6,000,000 - 8,000,000 USD</p> <p>Sold For 7,098,000 USD Premium</p>
	6	Peter Paul Rubens	<p>Title The Annunciation</p> <p>Description oil on panel42 by 31.4 cm.; 16 1/2 by 12 3/8 in.PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION</p> <p>Medium oil on panel</p> <p>Size Height 16.5 in.; Width 12.4 in. / Height 42 cm.; Width 31.4 cm.</p> <p>Sale of Sotheby's London: Wednesday, July 9, 2014 [Lot 00055] Old Master & British Paintings Evening Sale</p> <p>Estimate 2,000,000 - 3,000,000 GBP (3,425,830 - 5,138,746 USD)</p> <p>Sold For 3,162,500 GBP Premium (5,417,095 USD)</p>
	7	Peter Paul Rubens	<p>Title Saint Michael subduing Lucifer</p> <p>Medium oil on panel</p> <p>Size Height 25.5 in.; Width 19.5 in. / Height 64.8 cm.; Width 49.6 cm.</p> <p>Sale of Christie's London: Thursday, December 7, 2006 [Lot 00010] Important Old Master Pictures - Evening Sale</p> <p>Estimate 1,200,000 - 1,800,000 GBP (2,357,563 - 3,536,345 USD)</p> <p>Sold For 1,800,000 GBP Premium (3,536,345 USD)</p>



AUCTION COMPARABLES

	8	Peter Paul Rubens
	Title	The Adoration of the Magi
	Description	oil on oak panel
	Medium	oil on panel
	Size	Height 19.9 in.; Width 25.5 in. / Height 50.5 cm.; Width 64.8 cm.
	Sale of	Sotheby's New York: Thursday, January 26, 2012 [Lot 00028] Important Old Master Paintings and Sculpture
	Estimate	2,000,000 - 3,000,000 USD
	Sold For	2,994,500 USD Premium
	9	Peter Paul Rubens
	Title	Head of a bearded man in profile holding a bronze figure
	Description	oil on panel 28¾ x 24 in. (73 x 61 cm.), including additions by Jan Boeckhorst (Münster
	Medium	oil on panel
	Year of Work	1605-1668
	Size	Height 28.7 in.; Width 24 in. / Height 73 cm.; Width 61 cm.
	Sale of	Christie's London: Tuesday, July 2, 2013 [Lot 00030] Old Master & British Paintings - Evening Sale
	Estimate	1,500,000 - 2,500,000 GBP (2,275,485 - 3,792,475 USD)
	Sold For	1,741,875 GBP Premium (2,642,407 USD)
	10	Peter Paul Rubens
	Title	THE CHARIOT OF APOLLO
	Description	oil on oak panel, marouflaged 99 x 73 cm.; 39 x 28 3/4 in
	Medium	oil on oak panel
	Size	Height 39 in.; Width 28.7 in. / Height 99 cm.; Width 73 cm.
	Sale of	Sotheby's London: Wednesday, July 6, 2016 [Lot 00007] Old Masters Evening Sale
	Estimate	1,000,000 - 1,500,000 GBP (1,291,155 - 1,936,733 USD)
	Sold For	1,145,000 GBP Premium (1,478,373 USD)



Peter Paul Rubens | *Emperor Commodus as Hercules*

Circa 1600

Medium: Oil on panel

Dimensions: 25^{3/4} x 21^{1/2} inches | 65.5 x 54.4 cm



THE LEIDEN
COLLECTION

The Leiden Collection
New York, United States



Peter Paul Rubens | *Julius Caesar*

Circa 1625

Medium: Oil on panel

Dimensions: 13 x 10^{1/2} inches | 33.1 x 26.8 cm



THE LEIDEN
COLLECTION

The Leiden Collection
New York, United States



Peter Paul Rubens | *Emperor Otho*

Circa 1625

Medium: Oil on panel

Dimensions: 12^{1/4} x 9^{7/8} inches | 31 x 25 cm



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