

Head of Nero

Cast based on an original in the British Museum. Nero Claudius Caesar, born in Antium in 37 to Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus and Agrippina the Younger, was one of Rome's most intriguing emperors. His mother was the fourth wife of the emperor Claudius and she persuaded him to adopt her son Nero. Agrippina's malicious intentions were to kill Claudius so that her son would attain the position of emperor, so upon Claudius' untimely death, seventeen-year-old Nero ascended to the throne in the year 54.

Nero's personal accomplishments were numerous: he played the lyre, sang, recited his own poetry, competed in the Olympic games, and enjoyed painting and sculpture. Nero is most remembered by the quote, "Nero fiddled while Rome burned," which may hold some truth. Apparently after a devastating fire ravaged the city of Rome in 64, Nero took the opportunity to displace citizens and build a grand palace for himself called the Domus Aurea in the center of the city. By this time Nero was out of control, and in 65, many high ranking Romans planned the Pisonian conspiracy: a plot to assassinate Nero and name Gaius Calpurnius Piso as the new emperor. Nero unfortunately discovered their plans and put many people to death including his tutor Seneca. Many people died at the hands of Nero throughout his reign including his wife Poppaea, his mother Agrippina, and countless others. The extremely unpopular emperor eventually died at the age of thirty-two after committing suicide in the year 68, "reputedly lamenting, 'What an artist dies with me!'" (Hornblower and Spawforth, 1038).

Nero's portraiture is rather hard to study chronologically since so many of his portraits were destroyed or defaced after his death. Many coins have survived that show Nero as the emperor, but less than 25 sculptures remain and most of them depict Nero in his youth. His physical characteristics include, "high cheekbones, fleshy jaw and neck, and a full head of tousled hair that is brushed from the crown of his head, low on the forehead," (Kleiner 136). In later sculptures, like this replica at the Wilcox collection, which depicts Nero at about thirty years of age, his features are primarily the same as those in his youth with one exception: In these busts, his hair is styled in such a way that his wavy hair is curled tightly, especially around his face, and these curls are pushed up forming a wave or crown over his forehead. Nero's portraits are interesting because although Nero was young when he died, his portraiture reflects the aging process and his differing psychological states as he matures from a boy with youthful exuberance to a paranoid megalomaniac.