

Head of Commodus

Cast based on original portrait in the British Museum, London. Born while his father, Marcus Aurelius, was emperor, Commodus co-ruled with him (177-180) before reigning solely (180-193). His reign was fairly peaceful but marked by the emperor's rising megalomania. Declaring himself a new Hercules (many statues of him refer to this), he began fighting in the arena as a gladiator. In November 192, he was assassinated.

Lucius Aurelius Commodus, son of Marcus Aurelius and Annia Galeria Faustina, was born in August of 161. One of the only emperors “born in the purple,” or from the reigning emperor, (most were adopted by their predecessors), he assumed control of Rome March 17, 180, upon Marcus Aurelius’ death. During his reign, major wars were avoided, with the exception of an uprising in Britian and some minor disturbances along the Danube. However, there was little peace in the city of Rome with Commodus in charge. This tyrannical ruler is described as, “quite fierce with sexual desire and greed, with cruelty, faithful to no one...” (Banchich 15). There was a thwarted assassination attempt in 182, which implicated the emperor’s sister and many others, but their plans were foiled and many were killed at the hands of Commodus. By this time Commodus, who was, “obsessively devoted to performing as a gladiator, [and] appeared to be dangerously deranged,” (Hornblower and Spawforth 374). Commodus’ assassination attempts were many, even his favorite concubine Marcia tried to kill him by offering him a drink of poison after bathing, but his end finally come when he was strangled on the night of December 31, 192 by a wrestling instructor.

Most portraiture depicts Commodus as having, “[a] long, oval face, arched brows, and half-closed eyes, large nose, small mouth, and arrogant expression. His high forehead is crowned with a halo of tousled hair that is deeply drilled, and he wears a plastically tendered full beard,” (Kleiner 277). The artists of Commodus’ portraits, like those of Marcus Aurelius, tried to describe the emperor’s psychological states as well as his physical appearance. They often capture the emperor’s arrogant personality in their portrait busts. The bust on display at the Wilcox collection depicts Commodus at approximately age thirty, with a thick mass of hair, a full beard and moustache, thick lips, and large oval eyes.