A detailed oil painting of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba, showing a close-up of his face and upper torso. He has a stern expression, looking slightly to the right. His hair is dark and curly, and he has a prominent nose and a slight mustache. He is wearing a red garment. The background is dark and textured.

PORTRAIT OF
EMPEROR SERVIUS
SULPICIUS GALBA

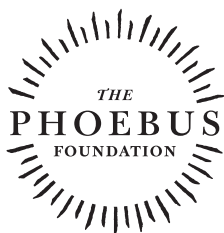
Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)
and the Series of Roman Emperors

NILS BÜTTNER

The past sets the context for the present. Understanding the past gives us a better insight into who we are today, as individuals and as a society. That's something we at The Phoebus Foundation care about. One of the ways to access the past is through the artefacts and works of art our forebears created.

The Phoebus Foundation art collection is structured around five diverse clusters that have evolved over time. They range from archaeological textiles of the pharaonic period and twentieth-century Latin American art to works from the CoBrA movement and even to port heritage. And to a collection of works of art from our own part of the world – the Low Countries – by masters of the Middle Ages with resounding names like Memling and Van der Goes and celebrity artists of the Baroque such as Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens. The list of local lads made good continues with late-nineteenth-century originals like Emile Claus, Léon Spilliaert, James Ensor and Edgard Tytgat, and the artists of the Sint-Martens-Latem schools – Gustave Van de Woestyne, Valerius De Saedeleer and George Minne, Frits Van den Berghe, Constant Permeke and Gust. De Smet. And thus, via the winding ways of art history, we arrive at the present.

Whether it's an early-Christian tunic, a Bruegel drawing, or a Karel Appel painting, every object attests in its own unique way to the context in which it was made. Each volume in the *Phoebus Focus* series tells the story behind the artefact or work of art, bringing what might seem merely a relic of the dim and distant past back to vivid and often surprising life.



**PORTRAIT OF
EMPEROR SERVIUS
SULPICIUS GALBA**

Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)
and the Series of Roman Emperors

NILS BÜTTNER

FOREWORD

Peter Paul Rubens must have been a bit of a nerd. Eyewitnesses describe how he had someone read the classics aloud to him while he painted. Tacitus, Thucydides, Vergil and Horace: they served as a radio of sorts playing in the background in his studio. But as a painter Rubens thought in images, and thus visually translated this bookish knowledge. One of his favourite themes was the ‘emperors’ heads’: semi-imaginary portraits of the Roman emperors of yesteryear. He painted them in series, as a sort of profane counterpart to the series of apostles. But what Rubens did was more than casually bring his collection of antique coins to life. In their literary works Tacitus and the like were eager to impart the emperors’ temperaments and characters, with strengths and weaknesses that coloured the tragedy or prosperity of a ruler’s life. A dream scenario for Rubens: in the wake of first Pythagoras, and later the Italian author Giambattista della Porta, the painter believed that human physiognomy was determined by someone’s personality. Show me your face and I will tell you who you are. Do you have a muscular body and an angular face? An obvious sign of a strong character. A large head? A bit of a mean streak. When animal traits – and thus physical characteristics – were added, this made it even more fascinating. According to Rubens, the ideal woman had a narrow face, large black eyes and a long, broad neck. She was elegant, vain, patient and well-proportioned – in short, she was like a horse. Perhaps the comparison was reinforced by the fact that the painter was a passionate rider. The teachings of physiognomy still proclaimed that a strong and steadfast person would resemble a lion, or a bull. It is no coincidence that Rubens painted Emperor Galba with the neck of a bull.

In his portrait by Rubens, Galba is not given the looks of a model. But he certainly has character! Finally, this is the General Galba who, during the Year of the Four Emperors, 68-69 AD, overthrows and succeeds wicked Nero – only to perish as a result of his unexpected success. Rubens captures Galba’s personality, his related achievements and his tragic fate in this single, striking portrait.

Nils Büttner knows better than anyone how the young Rubens strived to fulfil his ambitions. In this edition of *Phoebus Focus* he puts the powerful portrait of Galba in context and whisks the reader off to first-century Rome.

I hope you enjoy reading this *Phoebus Focus* as much as I have.

Dr Katharina Van Cauteren

Chief of Staff, Chancellery of The Phoebus Foundation



Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba, c.1598-1600

Oil on panel, 66.8 × 52.2 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

PORTRAIT OF EMPEROR SERVIUS SULPICIUS GALBA

He is gazing into the distance. The chiselled face contrasts starkly with the dark background. The man comes across as rugged, almost brutal. His eyes are sunken behind thick eyelids. His nose is large and the striking chin even more so. The corners of his wide mouth are bent downwards slightly. Together with the sceptical, raised eyebrows it affords the face a ruthless expression. The broad jawbones and the high, furrowed forehead appear to testify to his willpower. The receding hairline, grey in places, but mainly the skin of his cheeks and neck, indicate an advanced age. The man is wearing a red toga. The portrait is set in an oval, painted stone frame, which is intersected on all sides by the edge of the panel. At the bottom, the reddish-brown frame is decorated with a grey strip featuring the name of the man in the portrait in gold letters. The inscription identifies the rather plebeian-looking man as Servius Sulpicius Galba (Galba, 3 BC-69 AD), who held the fate of the Roman Empire in his hands the last two years of his life, as Roman *Caesar Augustus* ('Exalted Emperor').

In this *Phoebus Focus* we place this extraordinary emperor portrait, painted by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) early on in his successful career, in its context: ranging from an analysis of the support medium and painting method, to the connection with the emperor series in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, and its many reproductions. We discuss Rubens' fascination with Antiquity, his sources of inspiration and inventions, the long tradition of painting portraits of rulers and integrating them in Baroque interiors.



PAINTED ON OAK

The painting is neither signed nor dated. The documentation of its provenance is limited. It was part of a private English collection, auctioned at Christie's in London on 20 July 1990, and acquired by The Phoebus Foundation in 2015.¹ The most important sources for its provenance are the panel itself and the painting technique. They reveal much about the date and place it was created. They also provide decisive clues for identifying the painter who conceived of and executed this portrait.

Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba (rear side), c.1598-1600

Oil on panel, 66.8 × 52.2 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

The support medium is oak; its typical characteristics are easily recognisable on the unpainted rear side of the painting. The growth structure of oak makes it possible to produce thin panels just five to seven millimetres thick. Oak panels were very popular as support mediums for paintings in the Netherlands and in the sixteenth century, panel making had developed into a separate profession in Antwerp. The panel discussed here consists of two separate planks glued together along the vertical seam using a butt joint. As the x-ray clearly reveals, the panel maker drilled two holes and stabilised the panel at the top and bottom using pins. Once the panel was joined together the front and rear sides were planed smooth and at an unknown point in time, another strip of fabric was glued over the seam on the back. This may be a prefabricated panel, such as those produced in standard dimensions in Antwerp, and sold by the dozen.²

Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba (x-ray, detail), c.1598-1600

Oil on panel, 66.8 × 52.2 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



CVS GALBA



Before a panel like this can be painted, a base layer needs to be applied to the front. Just like the wood used, the composition, colour and thickness of the preparatory layers also reveal something about the date and place a painting was created. In the case of *Portrait of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba* the base layers point to Antwerp as the location where it was produced. Typical characteristics include pre-gluing, priming, applying an insulating layer and so-called *imprimatura*. First of all, a thin layer of glue was applied to the panel, in order to reduce the wood's absorption capacity. This was followed by a base layer containing chalk, glue and a little white lead. After drying this first base layer, a second layer was applied and the panel was then polished. It was the panel maker who applied this foundation, not the painter.

A colourless coating of oil was added in the painter's studio. The chalk-glue base layer is also highly absorbent. This is why an insulating layer was needed to ensure an even application of paint when the artwork was being executed. The final preparation involved using a wide brush to apply an *imprimatura* coloured with lead white and black, which is partially visible in the finished painting. On Galba's head you can see stripes of the *imprimatura*, which run from bottom-left to top-right. This also applies to the emperor's left eye; in the shadows in the corner of the eye the *imprimatura* and base layer show through. This specific method for using the base layer as a component of the finished painting is not typical for painting of this period, except in the work of one artist in particular: Peter Paul Rubens.



VITELLIVS.

RUBENS' ROMAN EMPERORS

When the *Portrait of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba* emerged in 1990, shortly before the auction in London, Gregory Martin and Elizabeth McGrath considered it was probably an original component of a series of emperor portraits of which countless copies existed and to which Michael Jaffé had devoted an essay in 1971.³ In 2016, Koenraad Jonckheere succeeded in reconstructing the complicated history of the series' existence in detail, based on notes by Ludwig Burchard (1886-1960), the ultimate pioneer in the study of Rubens.⁴ On 22 January 1932, Burchard had seen a portrait of the Emperor Aulus Vitellius Germanicus (Vitellius, 15 AD-69 AD) owned by the collector Eugen Abresch in Neustadt an der Hardt and he had told the owner that he thought 'the work was a typical painting produced by Peter Paul Rubens himself from circa 1614'.⁵ Afterwards, he gathered more evidence that was expanded considerably after Burchard's estate ended up in the Rubenianum in Antwerp. In his essay written in 1971, Jaffé argues that the date proposed by Burchard is certainly incorrect, because 'in stylistic terms it is not credible. The artificial design, which is highly reminiscent of Otto Van Veen (1556-1629), cannot possibly be compared with the studies of heads Rubens painted for the *Descent from the Cross* in Antwerp Cathedral.'⁶ That is certainly true, as Jonckheere rightly emphasises.⁷

Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Aulus Vitellius Germanicus (detail), c.1598-1600

Oil on panel, 68.5 × 52.5 cm

STUTTGART, STAATSGALERIE



.VITELLIUS.IX

The portrait of Vitellius is one of a series of eleven paintings, the others of which Burchard had not seen, or documented. Abresch sold the eleven portraits to the paper producer Heinrich Scheufelen (1866-1948). After the latter's death they ended up in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Jaffé did not doubt that Burchard had rightly attributed the *Portrait of Emperor Aulus Vitellius Germanicus* to Rubens. But what about the other ten portraits in Stuttgart? Were they copies of the originals by Rubens? Or should the design and execution be attributed to a different painter?

Jaffé referred to Rubens' teacher Otto Van Veen, which immediately hinted at another possible creator of the portraits. There is indeed an extensive series of emperor portraits that was previously considered the work of Rubens' teacher, but are now regarded as copies of originals by Rubens. This series, including a portrait of Vitellius, which now belongs to a private collection, contains fifteen portraits.⁸

These portraits, each measuring circa 71.2 by 53.8 cm appeared on the art market between 2000 and 2004. Jaffé had already seen and published about some of them in 1971.⁹ The oval frame of the portraits not only mentions the name but also a number. What's more, each portrait features a Latin motto in italics above the head against a dark background. A comparison of the portrait of Vitellius with the version preserved in Stuttgart and attributed to Rubens shows the superior quality of the latter. For these portraits, which are slightly larger, Rubens was not initially considered to be the creator at all; they were attributed to Otto Van Veen.

Unknown master after Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Aulus Vitellius Germanicus (detail), before 1625

Oil on panel, c.71.2 × 53.8 cm

PRIVATE COLLECTION

Around the same period, in 2004, eleven more copies of the original series were auctioned. The format of these panels is circa 64 by 51 cm and the portraits largely correspond to the works attributed to Rubens. They feature the names of the emperors in roman letters under the oval portraits. They demonstrate a lack of knowledge of Antiquity. The name 'Julius Caesar' is written as 'LVLIVS. CAESAR. I'. The series also contains a portrait of Emperor Galba, which is now part of a private collection. A comparison of his two portraits immediately reveals the superior quality of the example owned by The Phoebus Foundation.

Just like the other paintings, this portrait was certainly not created as an individual piece. It is part of a series that once consisted of eighteen portraits in all, each depicting Roman emperors who ruled during the so-called Year of the Five Emperors, i.e. before 192/193 AD. All the panels in the series were probably the same size: circa 68.5 by 52 cm. In chronological order they portray: Julius Caesar (1), Augustus (2), Tiberius (3), Caligula (4), Claudius (5), Nero (6), Galba (7), Otho (8), Vitellius (9), Vespasian (10), Titus (11), Domitian (12), Nerva (13), Trajan (14), Hadrian (15), Antoninus Pius (16), Marcus Aurelius (17) and Commodus (18).¹⁰

Unknown master after Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba (detail), before 1625

Oil on panel, c.64 × 51 cm

PRIVATE COLLECTION



GALBA · VII ·

Circle of Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Augustus (detail), c.1600-1640

Oil on panel, 66 × 50.8 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION





The series was very popular and there are numerous known copies and reproductions, which were usually produced as series, but also as individual works. From their numbers we can deduce that at least ten or more complete series existed. Most of these works lack the pictorial quality of the *Portrait of Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba* owned by The Phoebus Foundation, or of the emperor portrait of Vitellius in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Many faces are depicted in an almost caricatural fashion. With their stark, unconvincing plastic flesh tones, they are inferior copies of the portraits cited above. Most are indeed contemporary copies, which can be dated back to the first quarter of the seventeenth century. One example is the *Portrait of Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus*, now part of a private collection, on which his name is integrated in the architectural frame.

This portrait of Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus (Domitian, 51 AD-96 AD) measures 64.5 by 49.8 cm and is painted on a panel that bears the quality mark on the back, of the St Luke's Guild of Antwerp and the mark of the panel maker Lambert Steens. He was registered in the St Luke's Guild in 1608.¹¹ Dendrochronological research dates the panel between 1616 and 1626.¹² This is consistent with the date of the marks on the back: the brand stamp was in use between 1617 and 1626.¹³ It is a high-quality reproduction in pictorial terms, executed with technical precision which, however, does not possess the quality of the works attributed to Rubens. The same applies to the 'wooden' copies attributed to Otto Van Veen. It is hard to believe that these served as an example for Rubens' works, which were painted quickly, delicately and vividly. A painter with the skill to integrate the preparatory process so vibrantly in his painting, would certainly not have based it on such a stiff model.



Unknown master after Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus, c.1618-1625

Oil on panel, 64.5 × 49.8 cm

PRIVATE COLLECTION



Unknown master after Peter Paul Rubens

Portrait of Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus (quality mark on the back), c.1618-1625

Oil on panel, 64.5 × 49.8 cm

PRIVATE COLLECTION