

T O M A S S O



Roman (c. 1600 - c. 1690)

Portrait Head of Emperor Trajan (53 – 117 A.D.), after the Antique

17th century

Porphyry

38 x 0 cm (15 x 0 inches)

This finely carved porphyry head is a portrait of Emperor Trajan, the just ruler and highly successful conqueror under whom the Roman Empire famously reached its greatest level of territorial expansion. He governed from 98 AD until his death in 117 AD and was celebrated by the Senate as *Optimus Princeps*, “the best ruler”.

Carved in Rome during the 17th century, this head is closely related to a specific representation of the emperor, which our artist could have accurately studied from life in the form of a 2nd century AD white marble portrait of Trajan, now in the Louvre Museum, Paris (inv. MA 1250) and formerly in the renowned collection of antiquities of the Albani family in Rome. The same collection held a second version of this composition, now in the Musei Capitolini, Rome (inv. 438).

For influential aristocratic families such as the Albani, the display of vestiges of Ancient Rome’s power, like the effigy of an emperor, was intended to draw a parallel, and signal a continuation, between the great Roman patricians of the

past and those of the present. This notion is distinctively embodied in Villa Borghese, the residence of another prominent Roman family, where the aptly named Sala degli Imperatori houses the porphyry and alabaster busts of the Twelve Caesars (Julius Caesar and Rome's first eleven emperors). These were executed in the 17th century and, like the present head, would have functioned as both reminders of the city's illustrious past and celebrations of their present Caesars.

The present portrait's iconography, depicting the young Emperor as serene and yet with all the gravitas commanded by his role, was created at the beginning of his reign, a phase that was welcomed as the end of a period of political insecurity and strife for the Empire. Indeed, instead of inheriting the reign, Trajan had been chosen by Emperor Nerva as his successor for the valour he had displayed as an army officer, and his rule was characterised by stability and prosperity throughout the Roman provinces.

Literature:

Related Literature

K. de Kersauson, *Catalogue des portraits romains*, II, Paris, 1996, no. 25, p. 70