

Grades 6-8
LEARNING GUIDE

EXPLORING

ANCIENT PORTRAIT BUSTS AND PROPAGANDA THEN AND NOW



Getty



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FEATURED ART OBJECT

Bust of Commodus



Object Name: [Bust of Commodus](#)

Date Created: 180-185 CE

Place Created: Rome, Italy

Culture: Rome

Material: Marble

Maker: Unknown

Dimensions: 69.9 × 61 × 22.8 cm,
92.9874 kg

(27 1/2 × 24 × 9 in., 205 lb)

Getty Museum

At 16 years old, Commodus became co-ruler of the Roman Empire with his father Marcus Aurelius. Two years later his father died, and he became sole emperor at an age when some students start college. This **portrait bust** celebrated his new status. The portrait was likely painted and would have looked more lifelike, but over the centuries, colors fade. Remaining traces would have been rubbed away by over-cleaning probably in the 1700s.

Rulers' portraits helped their subjects recognize them. Portraits were sent from Rome to be copied in cities all across the empire. Distinctive **attributes** identified each emperor, including facial features, hairstyles, and

Portrait

Image of a person, usually the head and face. Some portraits include part of the chest or show the whole body. The image may closely resemble a person or emphasize, idealize, or invent characteristics.

Bust

Portrait of a person including the head and neck, and sometimes the shoulders and part of the chest.

Attributes

Object, clothing, symbol, or physical characteristic associated with a specific person, hero, or god. An attribute can identify a figure in an artwork.



FEATURED ART OBJECT

Propaganda

Visual or written communication used to persuade someone or encourage an opinion.

symbols. Members of the royal family showed their relationship by copying the ruler's hair and beard. In this portrait, Commodus has a long face and slightly protruding eyes with his eyelids lowered. He looks calm and serious. The sculpture's deeply carved curls and pupils were popular in portraits of this time. Commodus's hair and beard are similar to his father's. His cloak suggests military leadership, although the young emperor abandoned Marcus's war against Germanic tribes.

Imperial portraits influenced public opinion by sending a desired message (**propaganda**), such as strength, military experience, or wisdom. Many emperors, like Commodus, copied the smooth, idealized faces of heroes in Greek art. Other rulers emphasized life skills shown by age. An emperor's portrait was remade many times during his lifetime. A new type was often created for special occasions, such as this one made in honor of his rise to sole ruler.



FEATURED ART OBJECT

Scholars describe the five rulers before Commodus as the “Five Good Emperors,” including his respected father. Unfortunately, Commodus became known as a bad emperor. Within two years, his sister tried to assassinate him. This made him suspicious of everyone. He survived another attempt on his life five years later. Over time, his behavior became cruel and bizarre. Commodus fought in the arena as a beast fighter and gladiator, which was considered disgraceful. He renamed Rome after himself, which offended many citizens. Finally, he began to present himself in sculpture as the hero Hercules. This was too much. A third effort to assassinate him in 192 CE succeeded. Commodus was only 31 years old when he died.



VOCABULARY

Attribute

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Propaganda

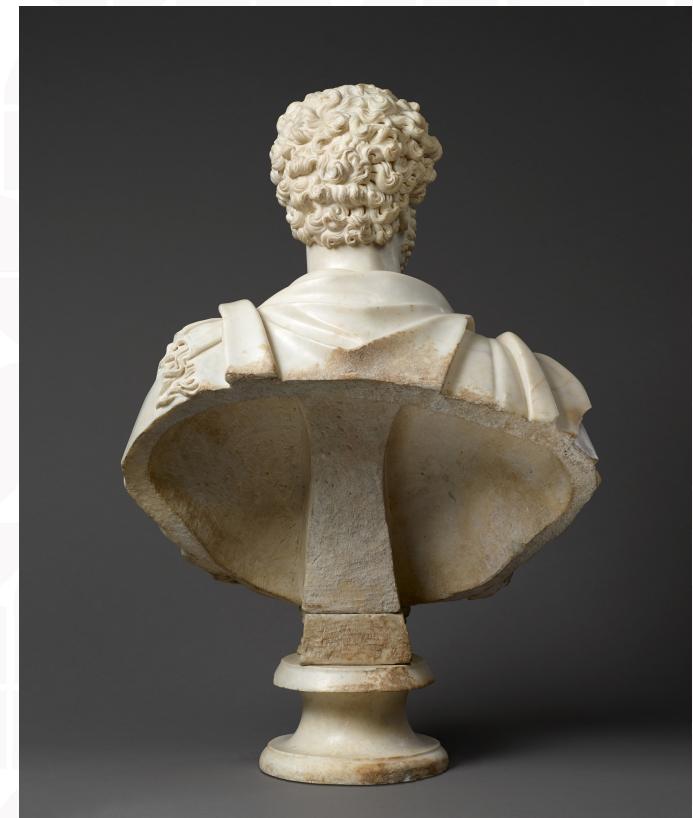
Visual or written communication used to persuade someone or encourage an opinion.



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Closeup of Bust of Commodus



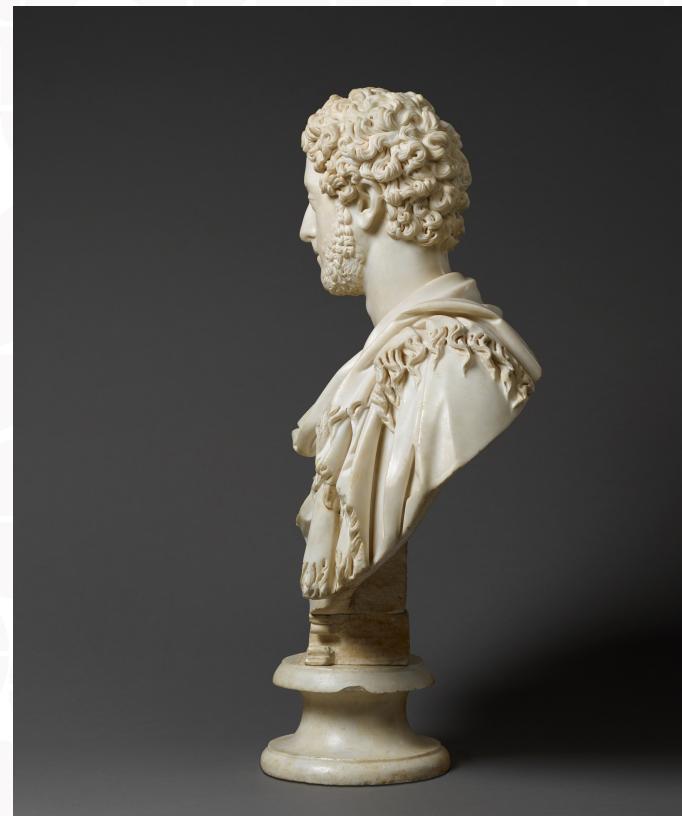
Back of Bust of Commodus



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Bust of Commodus - Right



Bust of Commodus - Left



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



3/4 View of Bust of Commodus



ANALYZE & DISCUSS

Analyze a Marble Bust

45
MINS

Note for Teachers:

This activity works best as a lead-in activity before students read about or research the object and focus specifically on what can be discovered through visual analysis.

Use close looking and discussion to analyze the function of imperial portraiture, including how an emperor used his image to influence the Roman people.

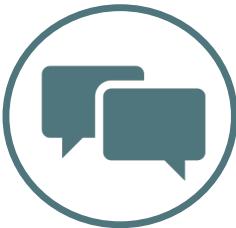
OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Examine and describe an ancient object
- Identify visual clues and explore how Commodus was depicted
- Listen to others' perspectives about an ancient object

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- High-resolution digital images of Bust of Commodus, including images from different points of view.
- 3D image of Bust of Commodus



ANALYZE & DISCUSS

DIRECTIONS:

1. Begin by looking closely at Bust of Commodus and/or the 3D image of Bust of Commodus.
2. Make sure to zoom in and out to notice small details.
3. Then discuss the following questions as a class or in small groups.

Discussion Questions:

- What do you see? Take inventory of the elements of this portrait.
- What do you think the portrait communicates about this person?
- Where do you think this bust might have been displayed?

- What does the facial expression tell us about the person?
- How do you think the maker created this portrait?
- Why do you think this detailed bust was made?
- Do you think this portrait accurately reflects how the person was in real life or shows an idealized image of the subject? What do you see that supports your opinion?



RESEARCH REPORTER

What is Propaganda?

90
MINS

Work in groups to research propaganda and pick a method to report
What you learned.

OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Define propaganda using examples from ancient and contemporary society

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Video: [Bust of Commodus](#)

Did You Know?

The life-size marble bust of Commodus weighs a whopping 205 pounds. In contrast, a hollow-cast bronze bust of about the same size might weigh as little as 20 pounds.



RESEARCH REPORTER

DIRECTIONS:

1. Begin by watching the [Bust of Commodus](#) video.
2. Split into small groups to explore the question at the end of the video: "Why is art sometimes used as propaganda?"
3. Use the following questions to guide research about propaganda:
 - What are the goals of those who create propaganda?
 - What is an example of propaganda?
 - Can you find a portrait from today used as propaganda?
 - Why do you think portraits are used as propaganda?
 - How are portraits used for propaganda shared today?
 - What are the differences between how they are shared today versus in ancient Rome?
 - What do you think about the use of portraits for propaganda?
4. Choose a way to report your findings, either individually or in small groups. You can create a presentation, news report, large poster, etc. Get creative! Your presentation should include the answers to the research questions. All team members should contribute.



ART-MAKING ACTIVITY

Make a Bust Portrait

90
MINS

Create a bust portrait of someone important to you.

OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Create a bust portrait
- Use features and attributes to portray a person
- Reflect on the creative process of making a bust portrait

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- High-resolution digital image of [Bust of Commodus](#)
- [Audio: Bust of Commodus](#)
- Drawing materials such as colored pencils or markers
- A large piece of drawing paper (at least 11" x 17")



ART-MAKING ACTIVITY

Directions:

1. Before getting started, listen to the [audio about Bust of Commodus](#) while viewing an image of the object to get ideas about how the attributes and features of Commodus were used to portray him in a particular way.
2. Choose a person important to you to feature in your bust portrait. They might be someone you know or someone famous you admire. Brainstorm why they are important and what you want to communicate about them. Write a list of features and attributes of that person.
3. Choose a few features and attributes from your list, then decide on attributes to include in the portrait. For example, what kind of facial expression might the person have? Are they wearing any jewelry? Do they have any unique features or attributes to include?



ART-MAKING ACTIVITY

4. Draw a pedestal on a large piece of paper. For ideas, look at the Bust of Commodus.
5. Use markers or colored pencils to add at least three features and attributes of the person.
6. Reflect and write about your creative process. Write down your answers to the following questions.
 - Why did you choose this person for your portrait?
 - What attributes or features did you include and why?
 - What part of making your bust portrait did you enjoy the most? Why?



RELATED LINKS

- [Bust of Emperor Commodus](#) 3D Image from Arc/k Project
 - [The Getty Commodus](#) from Getty Museum
 - Video on [Carving Marble with Traditional Tools](#)
 - Roman Portrait Sculpture: The Stylistic Cycle from Metropolitan Museum of Art
 - Propaganda definition from Encyclopedia Britannica
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STANDARDS

National Core Arts Standards:

- 6.VA:Cn11** Analyze how art reflects changing times, traditions, resources, and cultural uses.
- 6.VA:Cr2.1** Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches to making art and design.
- 6.VA:Cr3** Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.
- 6.VA:Re7.1** Identify and interpret works or art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.
- 6.VA:Cn11** Analyze how art reflects changing times, traditions, resources, and cultural uses.

Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

- SL.6.1.A** Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.
- SL.6.1.C** Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.



STANDARDS

Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

SL.6.2 Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

SL.6.5 Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.

RI.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

W.6.1A Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly.

W.6.1B Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.

W.6.2.D Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.

W.6.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

W.6.8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources; assess the credibility of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and providing basic bibliographic information for sources.

California Social Studies Standards:

6.7.8 Discuss the legacies of Roman art and architecture, technology and science, literature, language, and law.