

Echoes *of* Antiquity
in Eighteenth-Century Art



Who is Laocoön?

This sculpture depicts a scene from the Roman poet Virgil's *Aeneid* (29–19 BCE) describing the death of the Trojan priest of Apollo, Laocoön, and his two sons. According to the epic poem, when the Greeks delivered the Trojan Horse to the gates of the city of Troy in the hope of breaching their defenses, Laocoön attempted to warn the Trojans of the ruse: "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." The goddess Athena, who sided with the Greeks, sent giant sea serpents to kill Laocoön and his sons for their interference.

FIGURE 1. Laocoön, 1st century CE, Roman, marble. Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican City.

The Original Sculpture and Its Rediscovery

The 1st-century CE marble sculpture in the Vatican Museum (Fig. 1) was made for a wealthy Roman patron and is traditionally attributed to the Rhodian sculptors Agesander, Athenodoros, and Polydorus after a bronze original. It was recorded as being in the palace of the Emperor Titus in the late 1st century CE. With its dynamic, asymmetrical composition, strained muscles, expressive facial features, diagonal thrust, heightened tension, and thick locks of hair, the *Laocoön* exemplifies the Hellenistic style.

Some scholars argue, however, that it was made by a Roman sculptor or sculptors rather than the Rhodian artists.

In 1506 the sculptural group was discovered while excavating for a well in a vineyard on the Esquiline Hill in Rome. The right arm of the central figure was missing. Learning of the discovery, and fascinated by ancient art and culture, Pope Julius II purchased the sculpture and displayed it in the Belvedere Court garden with other similar ancient works in his collection. Contemporary artists were excited to hear of the find and rushed to see it. Pope Julius convened a group of them, led by Raphael, to propose how the missing arm should be replaced. After much debate, they decided that the arm should be outstretched over the priest's head. Michelangelo dissented and proposed instead that the arm should be bent at the elbow.

The sculpture was looted by Napoleon in 1798 during the Italian campaigns of the French Revolutionary Wars. While it was in France, the restored sections were removed and replaced with new parts. The sculpture was returned to Rome in 1816 after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo.

In 1906 an archaeologist saw a marble fragment of an arm in a builder's yard in Rome. The fragment came from the same vineyard as the larger group. Speculating that it may be the *Laocoön's* missing arm, he purchased the piece and gave it to the Vatican Museum. Finally, in 1960, conservators found the fragment in storage, and after much study determined that it matched the marble and the original break of the *Laocoön*, proving that Michelangelo had been right about the position of the arm. This is the restoration that we see now on the original sculpture in Vatican City.

Later interpretations of the Laocoön

After its discovery in 1506, the *Laocoön* group became a source of inspiration and a model for artists across Europe; and patrons (other than Napoleon) who could not have the original, commissioned copies for their own collections. Baccio Bandinelli completed a marble copy in 1525 for Cardinal Giulio de' Medici (later Pope Clement VII) who sent it to the Uffizi in Florence. Another bronze cast by Francesco Primaticcio, now in the Louvre, was made for the French king, Francis I, for his château at Fontainebleau in 1543.

Prints of the ancient sculpture by Giovanni Antonio da Brescia (ca. 1506–08), Marco Dente (1515–27), Nicolas Beatrizet (1545–70) (Fig. 2), Pieter Perret (1581), and Jacques de Gheyn III (1619), among others, circulated throughout Europe, extending the sculpture's influence and renown. The sculpture was even subject to caricature in a print attributed to Nicolo Boldrini (ca. 1520–60) after Titian (Fig. 3) and reissued by the French collector Pierre Mariette in the eighteenth century. Artists studying in Rome—Ambrogio Giovanni Figino, Peter Paul Rubens, Edme Bouchardon, George Romney, and William Blake, among many others—made the requisite visit to the papal collections to sketch after antique sculptures there, including the famous *Laocoön* (Fig. 4). The *Laocoön* group was an icon of ancient art, a standard part of all artists' visual vocabulary, and a monument familiar to any educated person (Fig. 5).



FIGURE 2. Nicolas Beatrizet (French, 1507–ca. 1565) *Laocoön*, engraving on laid paper, 19.69 x 12.99 inches. Snite Museum of Art: Acquired with funds provided by the Estate of Edith and Dr. Paul J. Vignos Jr. '41, 2016.012.



FIGURE 3. Caricature of the *Laocoön*, after Boldrini, after Titian, ca. 1550–1600 engraving, published by Pierre Mariette, 9 x 13.1 inches. British Museum, London, 1902.1213.1.



FIGURE 4. Ambrogio Giovanni Figino (Italian, 1548–1608), *Studies of Heads after the Laocoön*, ca. 1577, black chalk on blue paper, 9.13 x 7.25 inches. Snite Museum of Art: Gift of John D. Reilly '63, 2014.061.258.



FIGURE 5. Unknown artist, *The Private Sitting Room of Sir Thos. Lawrence*, 1830, etching and aquatint on chine collé, 13 x 16.89 inches. British Museum, London.



Unknown artist, probably Italian, *Laocoön and His Sons*, 18th century?, marble, 62.25 x 53.75 x 27.25 inches.
Snite Museum of Art: On loan from Michael and Susie McLoughlin, L2016.016

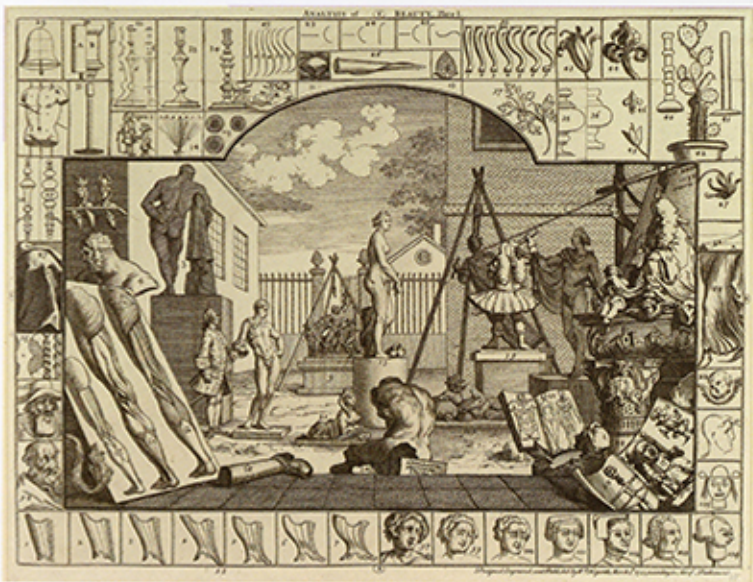
This slightly smaller copy of the *Laocoön* sculpture—the original is about 82 x 64 x 44 inches—has been dated to between 1650 and 1780 based on evidence of the kind of tools used to make the sculpture and on the type of marble. The precision of the details suggests the use of carving tools that were developed after 1650. Drill marks in the crevices of this sculpture (at the back of the sculpture, see the channels between the locks of hair) signal that a pointing machine was *not* used to determine how deep the sculptor should carve. Instead, drills were used to explore the depths of the block. Pointing machines were invented in 1775 and used widely after 1780, after which time these telltale holes disappear from sculptures entirely. The gray, matte quality of the marble from which this sculpture was made was depleted by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Later marble sculptures, such as the *Bust of Marie Antoinette* on display nearby, are whiter and have a higher sheen. The copy of the *Laocoön* on view here was probably made for a wealthy collector's private home and advertised the owner's superior taste and classical education.

The object of art is pleasure, and pleasure is not indispensable.

Laocoön in the Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth-century intellectuals' devotion to antiquity, the *Laocoön* loomed large in the codification of good taste. In his illustrated treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty* of 1753, British artist William Hogarth used the ancient sculpture as an illustration of his principle of simplicity and variety, which finds its perfect form in the pyramid (Fig. 6). Of the monument, he wrote:

The authors . . . of as fine a group of figures in sculpture as ever was made either by ancients or moderns, (I mean Laocoön and his two sons) chose to be guilty of the absurdity of making the sons of half the father's size . . . rather than not bring their composition within the boundary of a pyramid. Thus, if a judicious workman were employed to make a case of wood, for preserving it from the injuries of the weather, or for the convenience of carriage, he would soon find, by his eye, the whole composition would readily fit, and easily be packed up, in one of a pyramidal form.



The sculpture was shipped to the Snite Museum in a rectangular crate, not a pyramidal form, and it weighs 2,500 lbs. It took five men and a device called a gantry (horizontal crane) to lift it into place.

FIGURE 6. William Hogarth (British, 1697–1764), *Analysis of Beauty*, Plate I, 1753, engraving, 17 x 21 inches. Snite Museum of Art: Gift of Mr. S. Herman Klarsfeld, 1975.095.007.

To underscore the point, he placed the *Laocoön* (note its reversed position) in the center of the background of Plate 1 and erected a scaffold in the shape of a pyramid. French writers, too, cited it as a paradigm of correct proportions in their essay on *Dessein* (Design or Drawing) for the *Encyclopédie* in 1762–77 (Fig. 7).

Enlightenment philosophers looked to the *Laocoön* in forming their aesthetic theories. German archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann wrote his seminal treatise, *Reflections on the paintings and sculpture of the Greeks*, in 1755. Winckelmann championed Greek art over Roman art, identifying evolutionary stages for stylistic development, such as archaic, classical, and Hellenistic. He used the *Laocoön* as an example of classical harmony.

Despite the violence of the narrative, he wrote, the artists had captured a moment of balance and had elevated nature to the ideal. "The *Laocoön* expresses pain and distress in the highest degree, but in a still grander and nobler sense than in nature."

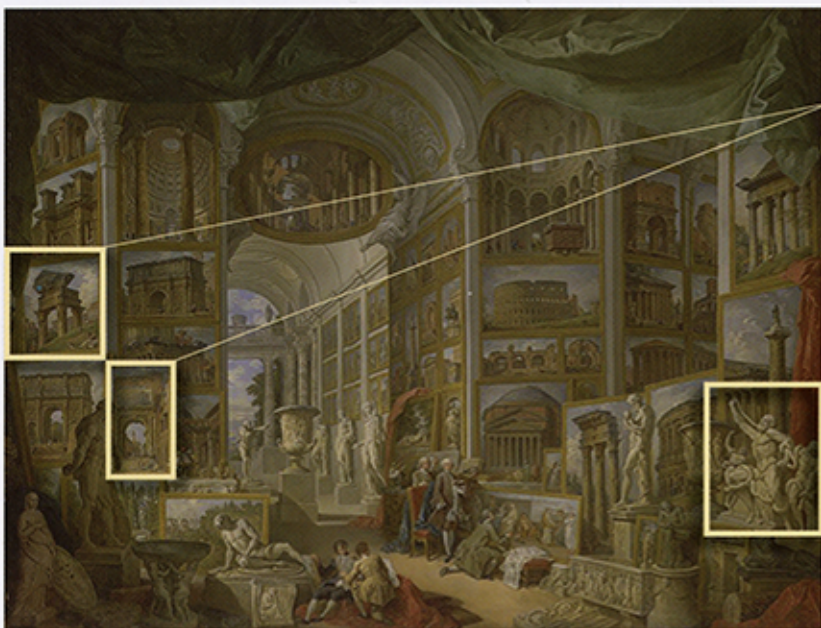
In *An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* written in 1766, Gotthold Lessing disagreed with Winckelmann's characterization of the *Laocoön* as noble simplicity and quiet grandeur. Lessing noted the difference between the poets' words which describe a scene of agony filled with screams and painful spasms and the artist's subdued portrayal of it. According to Lessing, the artists deliberately chose not to depict the agonized soul and to deviate from the literary description.

Why? "The object of art is pleasure, and pleasure is not indispensable," he argued. Pain and beauty were not compatible. Pain must be softened; the scream reduced to a sigh. It seems obvious to us now, but Lessing was the first to articulate that the pictorial arts are static while poetry, based as it is on words and sound, unfolds over time. The best artists, he believed, chose to depict the moment in a story that is full of anticipation and stimulates imagination.

All of these studies and ruminations on ancient art did, indeed, spur artists' imaginations. Giovanni Panini's painting *Imaginary Gallery with Sights from Classical Rome* is a fantastical view cataloging important antiquities (Fig. 8). In the lower right corner, the *Laocoön* anchors the composition across from the *Farnese Hercules* and the *Dying Gaul*. At the height of romantic fantasy, the French artist Hubert Robert dreamed up what the discovery of the famous sculpture looked like. Workers struggle to move the monument through a dimly lit vaulted interior; women and a few male onlookers watch with wonder and awe at the majesty of the ancient marble (Fig. 9).



FIGURE 7. A. J. Defehrt (French, active 18th century), Design: Proportions of the Laocoön Statue, from *Encyclopédie* [Volume 3, Plate XXXVII], Paris: Briasson, 1762/72. University of Notre Dame, Hesburgh Library, Rare Books & Special Collections.



Notice, too, the ruins in the paintings that the *Farnese Hercules* faces and the one above his head to the left. They are the same ancient monuments painted by Jean Barbault hanging in this gallery.

FIGURE 8. Giovanni Paolo Panini (Italian, 1691–1765), *Imaginary Gallery with Sights from Classical Rome*, 1757, oil on canvas, 67.75 x 90.5 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



FIGURE 9. Hubert Robert, *The Finding of the Laocoön*, 1773, oil on canvas, 47 x 64 inches. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond: Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund. Photo: Katherine Wetzel.



FIGURE 10. Alexandre Denis Abel de Pujol (French, 1785–1861), *The Fury of Achilles*, 1810, oil on canvas, 47.9 x 57.75 inches. Snite Museum of Art: Gift of Mr. John D. Reilly '63, 1987.051



FIGURE 11. Michel Garnier (French, 1753–1819), *Portrait of Josephine Beauharnais*, 1794, oil on canvas, 13 x 11 inches. Snite Museum of Art: Gift of Michael and Susie McLoughlin, 2015.079



FIGURE 12. Joseph Chinard (French, 1756–1813), *Portrait of J. P. de la Frenaye*, after 1800, plaster, 8.5 inches. Snite Museum of Art: Acquired with funds provided by The Butkin Foundation, 1989.009

Antiquity in the Eighteenth Century

Aside from the specific example of the *Laocoön*, elements of ancient culture more broadly found their way into the art of the long eighteenth century. Scenes of heroism and virtue or allegories of the consequences of irrationality or vanity, such as Alexandre Denis Abel de Pujol's *Fury of Achilles* or Jean Simon Barthélemy's *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus*, on view in this gallery, are typical of the subjects that Enlightenment artists and their patrons favored. Compositions, forms, and motifs—for example, the profile portraits on ancient coins and cameos—characterize the neoclassical style that prevailed in the late 1700s and early 1800s and illustrate the century's attitude towards antiquity summed up by Winckelmann when he said, "The only way for us to become great, or even inimitable if possible, is to imitate the Greeks." (Figs. 10–14).



FIGURE 13. Unknown artist, *Bust of Marie Antoinette*, marble, 32.5 x 21 x 12 inches (detail of medallion, above). Snite Museum of Art: On loan from Michael and Susie McLoughlin, L2015.051.002.



FIGURE 14. Sèvres Manufactory (Sèvres, France), *Cup and Saucer*, 1816, hard-paste porcelain, 3.63 x 6.25 inches (detail). Snite Museum of Art: Acquired with funds provided by the Marten Family and Mr. Thomas S. Corson, 2000.008.a-b.

Sources and Further Reading

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