

# Laocoon and his sons

[Literature](#), [Mythology](#)



This essay is an attempt to address the marble sculpture commonly known as Laocoon and His Sons, and why exactly I believe it to be a work of high art, of great value and significance to the species. Laocoon and His Sons is a marble sculpture representing a scene that is a part of the tale of the siege and invasion of Troy. Laocoon was the protagonist in a play by Sophocles that is now lost. He was also written about by Virgil.

The statue itself is one of the most famous sculptures of Greek and Roman antiquity, its subject is Laocoon, a Trojan high priest, who, along with his two sons, is - according to legend - attacked and killed by two snakes, or sea serpents. The tale is known as myth, but its content may have symbolic roots in actual historical happenstance. No one is quite sure as of yet how much of that myth may or not be so. The scene depicts Laocoon, the chosen priest of Neptune for the city of Troy, and his sons, in their death throes, overcome by an enormous serpent. Cursed by the gods for either impiety - according to Sophocles - or for warning the Trojans of the danger of the Trojan horse - according to Virgil, the serpents were dispatched to do away with Laocoon ' I tell you there are Greeks hiding in here, shut up in all this wood, or else it is a siege engine designed for use against our walls, to spy on our homes and come down on the city from above, or else there is some other trick we cannot see. Do not trust the horse, Trojans. Whatever it is, I am afraid of Greeks, even when they bear gifts. ' (Virgil, 2003, p. 26) The scene depicted is the wrath of the gods in action.

The turmoil of the scene, the hopeless agony on the faces of the figures, is so charged with emotion that the forms seem truly alive. This is the first time this caliber of realism is reached in Greek art, in all known human sculpture

up to this point in history; and many would submit that it has never been surpassed. The action addressed in this sculptural scene animates it to the point that one forgets that this is apparently an idealized figure born from myth. The despair and pain in Laocoon's eyes seem to be a pleading to the very gods that doomed him - in his final moments, asking ' Why have you forsaken me? Achieving this sort of beyond-human realism through the sculpting of marble is particularly remarkable, as marble is known as a notoriously difficult medium to deal with, especially considering the simple tools the artists would have at hand to form this creation. But, the medium, once utilized correctly by skilled hands, is like no other, and has a powerful tone to it. Marble is slightly radioactive, and with statues like Laocoon and His Sons, that radiation can truly be felt. This piece is indeed a testament to Greek craftsmanship, and to the classical Greek culture that is ensouled in this piece.

In Pliny the Elder's Natural History, Pliny describes the sculpture and retells of his experience of seeing it in Rome some time during the first century CE. However, Pliny doesn't give an exact date for the creation of the statue - which is unknown. He mentions it was in the palace of the Emperor Titus, and 4 describes it as Laocoon and his children being strangled. From his point of view it was a far superior piece of art to anything else made; paint, bronze or stone. It may have been originally bronze and the marble version a copy, but this is unclear.

Pliny states that it was carved from a single block of marble; by Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus of Rhodes. But, it is pretty clear that the sculpture is not made from one single piece of marble. Does this sully Pliny's

account? Was there another version which he was referring to? History is hearsay. We can't be sure. One of the pieces defining characteristics, what makes it such a marvel, is how the physique is anatomically perfect. This speaks of a highly developed culture, with an intricate understanding of anatomy and physiology. But, also of a culture that privileges physical strength and beauty.

The Greeks of the time were either artists or warriors, or often both, so strength and beauty were central in their world. Laocoon and His Sons is a much more naturalistic piece than earlier Greek works; in which the figures were often idolized; lacking luster, life, emotion, humanity. Cleobis and Biton, a set of sculptures from the Archaic Period, exemplify this quite well; posing, rigid, golem like figures; lacking the humanity they are supposed to represent. The Hellenistic baroque style of Laocoon and His Sons gives us a much more true-to-life representation in comparison to earlier works.

This work has inspired artists and regular humans alike down through the centuries, one of whom it is particularly well known to have influenced greatly was Michelangelo; as can be seen in some of his pieces; e. g: The rebellious Slave. In summation, I think this piece is truly of note to art historians. Above, I have highlighted some reasons I think this is the case.

Bibliography: Virgil, (reprint) 2003. The Aeneid. London: Penguin Classics.

Pollitt, J. J. 2006. Art in the Hellenistic Age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5 Pliny, Natural History XXXVI. iv. 37