

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

Teaching Support Sheet

Presenter: Dr Kathleen Christian

Laocoön and his sons, The Vatican Museums, Vatican City

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-laocoon-group-vatican-museums>

In this film Kathleen Christian discusses key moments in the remarkable history of the ancient marble statue of Laocoön and his sons. Originally it was made by Greek sculptors for the imperial palace in Rome. With the fall of the Roman empire the statue was lost, until 1506, when a farmer accidentally discovered it while tilling his fields. News spread through Rome and artists, including Michelangelo, were brought to witness its unearthing. The figure was brought to the statue court of the popes, the Belvedere, at the Vatican. Here it became a master artwork which artists, pilgrims and tourists could visit. Prints were made of the Laocoön to circulate its imagery far and wide. The figure of the Laocoön was missing its right arm, and a competition was held to restore it. Remarkably, the original arm was discovered in the twentieth century and reattached to the statue.

Before watching the film

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here that you can use to show to your class:

<http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-clementino/Cortile-Ottagono/laocoonte.html>

Questions to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know about ancient sculpture? What do you know about the Renaissance?
2. What do you think this sculpture depicts or represents? Which figures are these? Describe what you see (you might think of things like scale, how a viewer might interact with it) Can you identify what is happening to the figures?
3. How are figures represented in the work?
4. What function do you think this work might have served?

After watching the film

Questions to ask your students after watching the film. Before you ask them to respond you may wish to share with your students the text of Virgil's *Aeneid* 2.40-240, a poetic description of the story of Laocoön and his sons written in the first century AD. A translation can be found at:

<http://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilAeneid2.html>

1. What emotional effects do you think the artists were trying to achieve in this work?

The artists were trying to convey grief, surprise, pain, and the agonies of death. They were also trying to convey the nobility of the figures: all are nude and the main figure (the Laocoön) has a heroic and idealised body.

2. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work? Consider scale, subject matter, medium, and other formal elements

The figures are shown near life-sized and sculpted out of several blocks of marble. Note that the ancient author Pliny claimed that the Laocoön was sculpted out of one, single block of marble, and there was a heated debate in the Renaissance as to whether this could be true. In the end technical analysis has shown that it was sculpted out of multiple blocks. Consider how the figures twist in agony and how the serpent coils around them, wrapping their bodies: the composition is made up of dramatic turns and twists.

3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

The statue showed off the sophistication and wealth of its owner and his appreciation for Greek art, which was a highly-prized foreign import in Rome at the time. The sculptors wished to convey their mastery over the technical processes of composing in marble, a hard and difficult medium in which the figures' ability to extend outwards is constrained by the size of the block and marble's rather limited tensile strength. In the wide composition which extends laterally the virtuoso sculptors test the limits of the medium.

1. How has this film helped your understanding of sculpture, of antiquity, and of the Renaissance?

Students were likely interested in the composition of the sculpture and the way in which the artists used twisting forms to express the intense emotion of the figures. They were also likely interested in the story of how the statue emerged from the ground by accident, making it seem almost miraculous to Renaissance observers. They may know that the word 'Renaissance' means 'rebirth' and describes the revival of Greek and Roman antiquity in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The Laocoön is a canonical expression of 'Renaissance' culture, when new attitudes towards antiquity developed (particularly fifteenth-century Italy), leading to the first collections of antiquities and the first humanist editions of antique texts. The Laocoön group is the best-known example of the widespread, highly competitive practice of collecting antique sculpture in Renaissance Rome, which had a profound effect on the work of Michelangelo and others.

2. What is its relevance for today?

Looking at the statue should remind students how long classical art has endured and how powerful classical models have been for artists of past centuries, up to the present. The Laocoön is still quoted in popular advertisements, for example. Artworks from the past have a long life beyond the time of their creation and their reception by other artists continues to be a source of inspiration. Students can think about why it was inspirational and what has made antique art a source of ideas for artists over the centuries. They can consider what inspires artists today, and why.

Comparative analysis

El Greco, The Laocoön, 1610-14, oil on canvas, 137.5 x 172.5 cm, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC: <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.33253.html>

The comparison shows how El Greco, who knew the ancient sculpture of the Laocoön, interpreted the story and the statue, making very significant changes to its style and subject. The artist was a Greek Renaissance artist who worked in Italy and Spain. His work is a painting, rather than a sculpture, and can express the agony of the scene (Laocoön in the centre and his sons on either side, devoured by snakes)

through landscape, clouds and colours. The artist included other figures, whose identity is uncertain but who may represent the gods, shown on the right.

The style of the painting is very different from that of the statue, and the bodies are elongated and emotive, to suggest their suffering. At the same time, the painter's source of inspiration, the statue, is still recognisable, for example in the facial expression of the Laocoön and in the figures' nudity.

Note the contrast between light and dark in the painting, the nervous emotion of the figures' poses, the acidic colours and the sense of anticipation and doom that these elements produce. In the background is the Spanish city of Toledo, and it is thought that the artist may have painted this picture as an allegory of the Inquisition, which was then going on in Toledo. The figures are judged unfavourably and punished with death, like some of those who were punished by the Inquisition.

Online Activity

Search Google with the words 'Laocoön parody' and then click on 'images' to refine your results. The images which show up are many different parodies of the famous statue over the centuries. There is even a sixteenth-century print that shows the Laocoön and his sons as apes. Ask your students: what is a parody? Why do you think the Laocoön would become a statue that others parodied? Chose one or two examples and try to find out what the message is behind your selected parodies.

Bibliography

Beard, Mary, *Confronting The Classics*, (Profile Books, 2014) Chapter 4 'Arms and the Man'

Haskell, Francis and Penny, Nicholas, *Taste and the Antique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 243–247.

Brilliant, Richard, *My Laocoön - Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks*, University of California Press, 2000.

Resources online

Mary Beard on BBC4 Front Row on Laocoön (six minutes)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p019c25f>

A summary of the statue's history and meaning:

<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/sculpture/laocoon.htm>

Annotated chronology of the statue's history:

<http://www.digitalsculpture.org/laocoon/chronology/>

Comparative Analysis Table

Works of art	Laocoön and his sons, ancient sculpture	The Laocoön by El Greco
date	1 st century BC- 1 st century AD	1610-14
What is it?	Original composition from antiquity	Later work of art that uses the original ancient statue as a source of inspiration

material	marble approximately life-size	oil paint on canvas 137.5 x 172.5 cm
Size/scale	208 cm × 163 cm × 112 cm	55 x 39cm
Subject matter/narrative	Laocoön and his two sons. A serpent coils around Laocoön and his sons, who are dying	Laocoön, his two sons and three unidentified figures (the gods?). Two serpents attack Laocoön and one of his sons, while the third has already died
Style	Hellenistic baroque	Mannerist
Current location	Vatican Museums	National Gallery of Art, Washington DC
Composition	twisting, torsion, heroic nudity, power and profound emotional expression (in facial expressions and gestures)	elongation , harsh colours, unnatural poses, expressive lines, sense of divine punishment seen in the representation of the sky
What the medium can do	show figures life sized, in the same physical space as the spectator, but the statue has to stand without falling so the laws of physics apply to it	show a narrative in colour, defy the laws of physics in its representation of bodies in space however the artist wants, represent three dimensions on a flat canvas
Function	consummate expression of emotion and figural power meant to be displayed as a masterpiece work of art in an emperor's palace	commentary on contemporary sentiments in the era of the Spanish inquisition
Colour	white	unnatural colours for figure and landscape