

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

Student handout

Presenter: Dr Kathleen Christian

Agesander, Athenodoros and Polydorus of Rhodes, *Laocoön and his sons*, first century BC – first century AD, white marble, Vatican Museums

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

In this film Dr 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. 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

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

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

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

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

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

5. What is its relevance for today?

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. 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

Barbara Plankensteiner (ed.), *Benin: kings and rituals: court arts from Nigeria*, Ghent: Snoeck, 2007 (this is the big exhibition catalogue from the 2007 Benin exhibition, which may be available in some libraries).

Paula Girschick Ben-Amos, *The art of Benin*, Rev. ed., London: British Museum Press 1995.

Suzanne Preston Blier, *The royal arts of Africa: the majesty of form*, London: Lawrence King 1998

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

Fill out the table below, considering the following elements: date, subject matter, material, location, function, formal qualities. Use the empty boxes to comment on any other formal qualities or aspects of the works you would like to note.

| Works of art | Agesander, Athenodoros and Polydorus of Rhodes, <i>Laocoön and his sons</i> | The Laocoön by El Greco |
|-------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| date | | |
| What is it? | | |
| material | | |
| Size/scale | | |
| Subject matter | | |
| Original location | | |
| Current location | | |
| Composition | | |
| Condition | | |
| Function | | |
| | | |
| | | |
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