

Kathleen Christian - The Laocoön Group, Vatican Museums

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: My name is Kathleen Christian. I'm a lecturer in art history at The Open University. And today, I'm going to be talking to you about an ancient statue that was made in the first century AD by Greek sculptors.

And the statue is known as The Laocoön Group. And it shows a Trojan priest named Laocoön and his two sons. They're being eaten by a serpent because the priest to Laocoön, according to the ancient myth, had predicted that the Greeks were going to destroy Troy in the Trojan War. And the gods were punishing him because he had made this prophecy. The gods were on the side of the Greeks.

The statue is a life-sized statue. It's as large as a real group of people. It was made by three different Greek sculptors collaborating together. And it was displayed in the Imperial Palace.

The statue was made in the first century AD, but it was rediscovered after it had been buried, after the entire Imperial Palace had been lost, unknown, in the Middle Ages. In the Renaissance, it was rediscovered by accident in the 16th century when a farmer who was ploughing a field happened to come across the edge of the statue coming out of the ground.

At the time, in the 16th century, people were very interested in antiquities. And they would have been really interested in knowing what this statue would look like. So, the farmer who discovered it told the person who owned the land. Everyone in Rome became very excited to know what the statue was going to look like when they pulled it out of the ground.

And the Pope's artists were immediately informed to come and see the statue being discovered. And one of those artists was actually the great Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo. And Michelangelo was present when the statue was being pulled out, along with other artists.

They watched this emerge from the ground. And they saw a statue that they actually already knew about because the statue had been written about in the first century AD by someone named Pliny. Pliny had written down the name of the sculptors, the fact that the statue had been in an Imperial Palace. And when it was pulled out of the ground, the artists of the Renaissance who had read that text could say, 'this is the Laocoön that Pliny wrote about.'

When the artists were watching the Laocoön come out of the ground, one of the artists had his 11-year-old son with him. And this 11-year-old boy remembered this moment later on and wrote about it and described how he and his father saw the Laocoön come out. And I'm going to read you now his description.

'The first time I was in Rome when I was very young, the Pope was told about the discovery of some very beautiful statues in a vineyard near Santa Maria Maggiore. The Pope ordered one of his officers to run and tell Giuliano da Sangallo...' (who was an artist) '...to go and see them. So he set off immediately. Since Michelangelo was always to be found at our house, my father,

having summoned him and having assigned him the commission of the Pope's tomb, wanted him to come along too.

I joined up with my father, and off we went. I climbed down to where the statue was being dug up. And immediately, my father said, this is the Laocoön which Pliny mentions. Then, they dug the hole wider so that they could pull the statue out. As soon as it was visible, everyone started to draw, all the while discussing ancient things.'

The person who owned the land owned the Laocoön. He had the rights to this ancient statue. And because of its fame, because they knew exactly what it was, everyone in Rome wanted to buy this statue.

Immediately, people started to come to see it. They started to make offers to the owner of very high prices to try to buy the statue. And the owner was so paranoid that someone would steal it that he brought it to his house, and he put it in his bedroom, and he slept next to it so that no one would steal it in the night.

And the person who eventually did win the rights to buy the statue was, of course, the most important person in Rome, the wealthiest, the most powerful - the Pope. So the Pope won the rights to the Laocoön. He had to pay a very high price for it. He took it and put it in the Vatican, in the Palace of the Popes, in a special collection that he had been forming of antique statues.

This collection became very famous. People from all over Rome, all over Europe, came to see the collection. Artists were very interested in it. Artists would draw the ancient statues and become inspired by them in their own works of art and reflect the ancient statues in what they were doing.

So the papal collection, at the time, became very famous. The statue was so famous that even people who couldn't make it to Rome and to the Vatican wanted to know what the Laocoön looked like. But at the time, in the 16th century, there were no photographs. There was no email.

There was no way of getting an image easily of the Laocoön except through prints. Prints were a very new type of artistic medium at the time. The printing press had only recently been discovered for printing books in the 15th century. And artists in the 15th century had started to make images using the technique of the printing press. For the first time, images could be produced in mass production, printed on paper, and sold relatively easily and cheaply to a wide audience.

So how they would do this is, a plate of copper was engraved. And the lines of the engraving were then filled with ink. And the copper plate was pressed against a piece of paper at high pressure through a printing press. And what you get is the image of the lines that were engraved in the copper.

So this can be done many, many times. And so instead of a photograph, you have an image of the Laocoön made through print that can be widely seen, sold, and advertised. One of the prints that was made after the Laocoön is one by Cornelius Bos.

When you look at the print, you see that the image is actually reversed. But you also see that the arm of the Laocoön, his right arm, is missing in the print. But you might recall that, in the statue as it is now in the Vatican, the arm is there. So how did this happen?

When the statue was discovered, the arm was missing. That was one of the only pieces of this statue that was missing when they pulled it out of the ground. And artists were very interested in what that arm might have looked like.

There was a lot of discussion about what the missing arm, what pose it would have been in. Would it have been straight? Would it have been bent? And there were different artists who made restorations of the arm.

But then, in the early 1900s, an archaeologist who worked for the Vatican happened to be walking near where the Laocoön had been discovered in the 16th century. And he was at a sculptors' workshop. And he just saw that there was an ancient arm that looked very much like the style of the ancient Laocoön. And he brought it back to the Vatican.

And he discovered the arm, the missing arm of the Laocoön. When they put that arm back on the ancient statue, there was a perfect match. And that's the arm that is on the statue today.

The statue is still in the Vatican today. And it's such an important work of art. It was famous in the first century AD when it was made.

It was famous in the 16th century when the Pope wanted it so much. It's still in the Vatican. And I really recommend that, if you go to Rome, you go and see it yourself too.