

**Laokoon :  
The Reading of a Masterpiece\***

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What is a masterpiece? It could be a spectacular painting, like Rembrandt's *Doctor Tulp's Anatomy Lesson*: (1832), although the view of the partially flayed corpse excites a feeling of horror despite our admiration for the painter's art; or it could be an exquisite sculpture like Michelangelo's *Pietà in St. Peter's in Rome* (1497-1499), where the sense of pity for the Mother holding the lifeless body of her Son is softened by the enjoyment we derive from the beauty of the work. In viewing the *Laokoon*, pity and horror mingle with appreciation for the sculptor's skill, even if modern viewers may not know the ancient story.

Michelangelo did know it, since the group, when first found, on January 14, 1506, was immediately recognized by Guiliamo da Sangallo as that mentioned by Pliny (*Natural History* 36.37), who pronounced it superior to any work in sculpture and painting. A charcoal sketch found in 1976 on a wall in the Sacristy of San Lorenzo in Florence shows the head of a bearded man seen from above; it was probably made by Michelangelo, from memory, reflecting his first glimpse of the *Laokoon* while being excavated in Rome. It is said that the sculptor refused to restore the group which, when unearthed, lacked the arms of the father and of both sons, as well as other minor pieces, as revealed in an early-16<sup>th</sup> century etching by Marco Dente. We shall mention this etching again at the end, to confirm a major point.

What Michelangelo did not do, others did (First Montorsoli, then Cornacchini), adding limbs outflung in desperation, with a sense of the dramatic that greatly appealed to an artistic taste conditioned by Baroque creations like Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-1624). IN the late 1950s, however, all these later restorations were removed, and an intense study by Filippo Magi led to a new assemblage of the extant fragments. A bent right arm had long been recognized as ancient, but it had remained in private hands (and last owned by the sculptor Ludwig Pollack). It was now added to *Laokoon* and the newly recomposed group could be displayed to the public in 1960; a cast provided in plaster those elements that

could be surmised but were no longer preserved such as the children's arms and the laurel wreath around Laokoon's head, of which traces remained on the figure's nape. In this new format, all limbs are properly anchored, as befits a marble composition a medium that requires support for each undercut element, to prevent breakage. It should be mentioned that the general public was so dismayed by this new and unfamiliar Laokoon that the Vatican has been forced to produce a cast of the group in its former appearance and to exhibit it side by side with the correct version.

What is the story that the Laokoon tells? Most famous is the narration that Vergil puts in Aeneas' mouth, as the Trojan hero tells Queen Dido of his past vicissitudes (*Aeneid*, 2.199-233; R. Fitzgerald's trans.):

And now another sign, more fearful still,  
Broke on our blind miserable people,  
Filling us all with dread. Laocoön,  
Acting as Neptune's priest that day by lot,  
Was on the point of putting to the knife  
A massive bull before the appointed altar,  
When ah look there!  
From Tenedos, on the calm sea, twin snakes  
I shiver to recall it endlessly  
Coiling, uncoiling, swam abreast for shore,  
Their underbellies showing as their crests  
Reared red as blood above the swell; behind  
They glided with great undulating backs.  
Now came the sound of thrashed seawater foaming;  
Now they were on dry land, and we could see  
Their burning eyes, fiery and suffused with blood,  
Their tongues a-flicker out of hissing maws.  
We scattered, pale with fright. But straight ahead  
They slid until they reached Laocoön.  
Each snake enveloped one of his two boys,  
Twining about and feeding on the body.  
Next they ensnared the man as he ran up  
With weapons: coils like cables looped and bound him  
Twice round the middle; twice about his throat  
They whipped their back-scales, and their heads towered,  
While with both hands he fought to break the knots,  
Drenched in slime, his head-bands black with venom,  
Sending to heaven his appalling cries  
Like a slashed bull escaping from an altar,  
The fumbled axe shrugged off. The pair of snakes  
Now flowed away and made for the highest shrines,  
The citadel of pitiless Minerva,  
Where coiling they took cover at her feet  
Under the rondure of her shield. New terrors  
Ran in the shaken crowd: the word went round  
Laocoön had paid, and rightfully,  
For profanation of the sacred hulk  
With his offending spear hurled at its flank.

The context of the episode is the dispute over whether or not to take inside the walls of Troy the Wooden Horse the contraption left by the (allegedly) retreating Greeks, filled with warriors who will eventually emerge in the dead of night, open the city's gate to their returning comrades and set the whole place of fire. Laokoon had thrown his spear against the Horse, uttering what has now become a proverbial phrase of caution: *Timeo Danaos, et dona ferentes!* (I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts). The snakes and their deadly actions served to convince the Trojans that the priest was wrong, and the Horse was taken within the walls, with the well-known consequences.

Some version of this story was current since the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C., as attested by a large burial jar, the so-called Mykonos pithos, from its findspot on the Cycladic island (ca. 850 B.C.). It carries reliefs showing not only the Horse on wheels, with Greek warriors inside and emerging from it, but also a series of vignettes illustrating the horrors of the Last Night of Troy (the *Ilioupersis*): women and children being transfixed by swords. But in the Vergilian version, Aeneas is not forewarned by Laokoon's demise; he remains at Troy and fights valiantly until he is convinced by his mother Venus to escape with his father and son, in order to follow his destiny and eventually found a new city on Italian soil.

Other versions of the events existed, however, and some were more significant for the Romans. Arktinos of Miletos, an 8<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup>-century Greek poet (known to us through a summary by Proklos), tells that Aeneas and some companions, warned by the omen of the snakes, retreated to Mt. Ida, away from the city, and were therefore able to survive the final slaughter and head for Italy and the future Rome; this same tradition may have been followed by a now largely lost tragedy by Sophokles, according to a few surviving fragments. There are also different accounts of who fell victim to the sea monsters. In the *Aeneid*, both sons and then the father die; in a poem by Bakchylides (ca. 480-460) only Laokoon and his wife perish, but not because of opposition to the horse rather, in punishment for an alleged sacrilege, a motif of retribution picked up also by the Alexandrian Euphorion (Hellenistic, but known through a scholiast to Servius *Aeneid*). Sophokles, for dramatic purposes, has Laokoon remaining on stage throughout, narrating the death of his children, whereas the earliest source, Arktinos, lets one son escape.

Which is the version followed by sculpted group? The answer may depend on its date. Pliny the Elder (died 79 A.C.), cited above, saw it in the house of the Emperor Titus (ruled 79-81 A.C.) and gave the name of its three sculptors: Hagesandros, Polydoros and Athenodoros of Rhodes, who fashioned it from a

single block in accordance with an agreed plan (*ex uno lapide. . . de consilii sententia*). We shall return to this ambiguous phrasing. The findspot, however, does not corroborate Pliny's statement. It was an area of Rome known as Sette Sale, because of its ancient structures: a wing of Nero's Domus Area, later overlaid by the Baths of Trajan (ruled 98-117 A.C.) yet so strong was the influence of Pliny's passage that throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century the place was thought to be the Baths of Titus, despite the clear evidence of Trajanic brick-stamps. Moreover, the sculpture was found near the reservoir of the Baths, which had been turned into a sort of cryptoportico by a much later house built over the ruins; this could not have been the original location of the group, which was probably placed there by the house owners, to keep it away from the eyes of the Christians prevalent in Rome by the fourth century A.C.

We must therefore fall back on stylistic considerations. Although it was soon realized that the Laokoon was not in one piece, as mentioned by Pliny, viewers continued to be influenced by the Latin writer's admiration. With the beginning of art historical studies, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, doubts about the group's aesthetic value began to be advanced. Its sculptors, through documents in Rhodes, were dated to the first century B.C., a period of reputed decadence and scant imagination; the rendering was viewed as melodramatic rather than pathetic; and the composition was considered flat and one-sided, as typical, perhaps, of a work copied from a painting. Suitable comparisons were adduced (the marble Niobids in Florence, the Three Graces, known from Roman paintings and works in the round), and the Laokoon was brought into the (unresolved) discussion of the relative merits of sculpture versus painting, and of the latter versus poetry (*ut pictura poesis*).

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a new point of view was advanced (spearheaded by Gisela Richter). The Laokoon, with his tormented expression and highly modeled features, was stylistically very close to the Baroque forms of the Pergamon Gigantomachy the frieze of the Battle of the Gods against the Giants which decorated the podium of the Great Altar from Pergamon. This impressive monument had been excavated by the Germans just before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was beautifully reconstructed and exhibited in the Berlin Museum. The exaggerated renderings of the musculature, the sunken eyes and tormented faces, the diagonal poses, the coiling and biting snakes around the struggling Giants are indeed so close to the Laokoon that a new date for the latter was proposed: ca. 160 B.C., in keeping with the chronology assigned to the Pergamon Altar. A slight variation of this position would even today see the

Laokoon in Rome as a copy of a bronze original of the Hellenistic period, created in Rhodes (or at Pergamon) around 146 B.C., after the Roman destruction of Carthage and Corinth.

A surprising discovery, in 1957, abruptly reopened the issue and continues to excite controversy and new theories. In building a road between Rome and Naples, near Terracina, the engineer and his workers, at a locality called Sperlonga along the Tyrrhenian coast, found a vast grotto containing an inner pool, an outer *triclinium* (dining room) in the middle of a fishery, and innumerable fragments of sculpture, some of them at enormous scale, scattered all around. One of these fragments, which was eventually seen to come from the oarbox of a marble ship, carried the same three Rhodian sculptors' names cited by Pliny as the makers of the Laokoon. The surprise was so great that, at first, hopes of recovering the real group (the one all in one piece) led to erroneous reconstructions. But the reality was even more surprising. The entire grotto was adorned with marble compositions celebrating episodes of the epic poems: the Blinding of Polyphemos and the Encounter of Odysseus' ship with Skylla, from the *Odyssey*, and two more episodes from the Trojan cycle: the Theft of the Palladion and Ajax (or Odysseus) with the Body of Achilles. On the basis of passages in Suetonius and Tacitus, the grotto was identified with the place where Tiberius almost lost his life through a sudden rock fall, and the sculptural layout was interpreted as a program exalting the Emperor's alleged ancestry from Odysseus.

This is not the place to discuss the true meaning of the sculptural program at Sperlonga, nor the various suggestions about its exact date and Imperial connections. We have learned, however, that sculptural styles typical of Hellenistic times could be reproduced at will during the Late Republican and the Imperial periods, according to their appropriateness for the subject depicted. There is indeed considerable similarity between the head of Laokoon and the head of Odysseus from the Blinding of Polyphemos group, or even that of the pilot from the Skylla episode; the bodies trapped in the spires of Skylla's fishtails recall Laokoon and his sons entwined by the snakes. The correspondence of the sculptors' names clearly indicates that a link of sorts exists between the two complexes: the finds from Sperlonga and the Laokoon in Rome. Whether the three Rhodians are understood as creators of original compositions or as copyists and adaptors of earlier (Hellenistic) models. Can the date of the Laokoon help in dating the Sperlonga sculptures? And can such a date be reached on the basis of the version chosen by its masters? If, for

instance, we could agree that all three protagonists are being killed by the snakes, then Vergil's *Aeneid* would provide a date of 19 B.C., after which the marble group is likely to have been created.

Peter von Blanckenhagen once argued that the composition, as we have it, was altered from an original two-figure group. He pointed out that the older son is entirely made from a separate piece of marble, with an overly long mantle to provide an awkward strut; that his face is different from that of his younger brother; that the group seen from above or from behind shows two clearly interlocked bodies (the father and the younger son) whereas the third one appears independent, like a later addition. The Rhodian master, therefore, working in the Late Republican/Early Imperial period, would have transformed a mid-Hellenistic prototype into a three-figured group that corresponded to the Vergilian narrative, in order to satisfy a Roman clientele. I was at first convinced by the reasoning, but now have second thoughts. The difference between the two sons' faces may be due to deliberate characterization, the younger child having less clearly defined, more blurred features; moreover, stylistic eclecticism, once seen as pejorative, is now understood as a sign of artistic freedom and therefore as positive. The fact that the older son is made from a separate block of marble may be due to the requirements of the construction, since three masters worked simultaneously at the same piece; to be sure, even the other two figures are not carved from a single stone. Pliny, of course, could have been mistaken in his evaluation, since ancient joins are usually very difficult to detect; and the expression *ex uno lapide* may simply have meant 'from the same type of stone'. Finally, the apparent distancing of the older son may imply that he will succeed in freeing himself from the clutch of the snakes, and therefore that the Rhodian masters followed Arktinos' version, rather than Vergil's. Indeed, a painting by El Greco (in the National Gallery in Washington, ca. 1610) seems to have used the same concept, with one son apparently escaping from the monsters.

It has recently been suggested that the Plinian phrasing, *ex consiliis sententia*, means that the sculptors asked advice on which tradition to follow in their work, and were perhaps told to keep it ambiguous, so that each viewer could decide on his own. One scholar, emphasizing that Nero sang of the Fall of Troy while Rome was burning, thought that perhaps Seneca was among the people who counseled the three Rhodians, thus advocating a date around 64 A.C. for the group. Another scholar, noting the angular rendering of the snakes' bodies and their considerable size, identified them as belonging to a type of Asiatic python (*molurus molurus*) that was first brought alive to Rome under Augustus, and then again

not until Hadrian. Yet pythons kill by constriction, not by venom or bite (as depicted by Vergil and the Laokoon ), and there is no assurance that the sculptors followed a particular model from nature. That the snakes were important in any version of the story is shown by the fact that Sophokles gives us their names (Prokis and Chariboia), and Bakchylides, who agrees that they were male and female respectively, makes them turn into a man and a woman after the killing.

In the marble group, today, the snakes are colorless, like the human figures, but in antiquity the entire composition would have been painted, as traditional, and the course of the serpents, differentiated by color, would have been easier to follow. Another feature, vital to our understanding, would have been apparent before the paint faded away, but it has been recently detected on the stone, with raking light, and can be confirmed in the etching by Marco Dente mentioned above: Laokoon's eyes show blank irises, without indication of pupils; they are thus veiled and sightless. Laokoon is blind!

The priest's expression had been criticized by late-18<sup>th</sup> century writers, who commented that the father seemed indifferent to the sons' plight, since he was not even looking at them. Winckelmann had tried to justify the rendering by explaining Laokoon as raising his glance to the heavens to invoke help or express reproach. Now, thanks to the ingenious observation of two scholars, François Queyrell and Gtz Lahusen, who have arrived almost simultaneously to the same conclusion, we can see the Trojan as a blind prophet, an entirely new dimension to the story, but one that was current in antiquity, perhaps as early as the fifth century B.C., as described by Quintus of Smyrna, who wrote almost a millennium later but seems to have been inspired by Sophokles' play. Laokoon has just exhorted his fellow citizens to burn the Horse (Quint. Smyrn. *Ilioup*. 12.396-415; Loeb ed. Trans.):

. . . ; but Athens, fiercely wroth  
With him, the Trojans, and their city, shook  
Earth's deep foundations neath Laocoon's feet.  
Straight terror fell on him, and trembling bowed  
The knees of the presumptuous: round his head  
Horror of darkness poured; a sharp pang thrilled  
His eyelids; swam his eyes beneath his brows;  
His eyeballs, stabbed with bitter anguish, throbbed  
Even from the roots, and rolled in frenzy of pain.  
Clear through his brain the bitter torment pierced  
Even to the filmy inner veil thereof;  
Now bloodshot were his eyes, now ghastly green;  
Anon with rheum they ran, as pours a stream  
Down from a rugged crag, with thawing snow  
Made turbid. As a man distraught he seemed:  
All things he saw showed double, and he groaned

Fearfully; yet he ceased not to exhort  
The men of Troy, and reeked not of his pain.  
Then did the Goddess strike him utterly blind.  
Stared his fixed eyeballs white from pits of blood;  
And all folk groaned for pity of their friend.

The poem continues with Laokoon again speaking against the Horse, and then with the arrival of the two fearful serpents who kill both his sons, while everybody scatters leaving the father helpless to defend them in his blindness. Medical experts, consulted about Quintus' passage, have confirmed its accuracy in describing the two-phased attack to human sight caused by glaucoma.

Through the centuries after its discovery, the Laokoon has continued to inspire ever novel renditions whether a satirical woodcut from Venetian circles around Titian (16<sup>th</sup> c.), in which all protagonists are turned into monkeys, or a page from Laura Ashley's Catalogue of 1985, in which hats and scarves draped on the marble figures shock and amuse us with their irreverence. But, as this new discovery has shown, we have not yet finished to understand the entire story the Laokoon can tell. In a famous essay of 1766, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing debated whether literature was better than art. He gave preference to literature, which could depict an entire sequence of events whereas art was limited to a single, if pregnant, moment. Yet, as we have seen, there are many ways to read our marble Laokoon. We have by no means reached a complete reading, which is perhaps the best reason why this multi-faceted sculpture is truly an immortal masterpiece.

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\* My original talk was given (on May 3, 2000) without a written text, but with the help of many slides. In trying to reconstruct my oral presentation for publication, I have followed the guideline of the illustrations, but I have tried to express in words what cannot simultaneously be seen on a screen. On the other hand, the precision allowed by a written format makes up in greater concision and clarity for which the phrasing may lose in spontaneity. I have used quotation marks ( ) to refer to the 3-figured group as a whole, omitting them when I focus on Laokoon himself as a single figure. I must add that I am deeply indebted to the members of the Committee who select the speakers for the Professor John C. Rouman Classical Lecture Series for their invitation to speak at the University of New Hampshire, and in particular to Professor Richard V. Desrosiers and Christos and Mary Papoutsy, whose exquisite hospitality made my visit there so memorable.