



Classical Art and Archaeology: Teaching Latin and the Humanities with the Monuments of Rome with Karen Moore

Lecture 6:
The Laocoön Group:
A Signum for History,
Literature and Politics

Outline:

“As Rome began to draw Greece into her own empire—as an ally first, then as a province—the influence of Hellenistic culture grew...The poet Horace writes, ‘A captured Greece took captive her wild victor and brought in the arts for rustic Latium.’”

Introduction

In this lesson, Karen Moore explores the influence of Greek sculpture on Roman art, highlighting the transition from Classical to Hellenistic styles and their adoption in Roman portraiture.

- Previous Lesson Recap:
 - This course focuses on 3 Greek sculpture periods: Archaic (625-500 BC), Classical (500-323 BC), and Hellenistic (323-30 BC).
 - Classical period ends with Alexander the Great who spreads Hellenistic culture across his empire.
 - Influence on Roman art as Greeks settled in Italy.

Roman Sculpture and Greek Influence

- Hellenistic Period and Roman Adoption:
 - Greeks carried their artistic influence to Italy as Rome began to integrate Greece into its empire.
 - The Hellenistic period saw the expansion of Greek influence across the Mediterranean.
 - The Hellenistic period ends with the beginning of the Roman empire under Augustus, circa 30 B.C.
 - Notable works of this era:
 - Etruscan Orator
 - Capitoline Brutus



- Greek art forms, including sculpture, painting, and rhetoric, captivated Rome.
- Quote from Horace (Epistulae II, 1.156-157):
 - *Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio.*
 - Translation: A captured Greece took captive her wild victor and brought in the arts for rustic Latium.

Greek Periods and Early Modern Comparisons

- Classical vs. Hellenistic:
 - Comparison between the Classical and Hellenistic periods akin to the Renaissance and Baroque periods respectively.
 - Michelangelo's *David* (1504) and Bernini's *David* (1624) highlight the transition from Renaissance to Baroque.
- Michelangelo's *David*:
 - Carved from Carrara marble, stands 434 cm (14.2 feet) tall.
 - Housed at [Galleria dell' Accademia](#) in Florence, Italy
 - Depicts a relaxed, confident David; carved "in the round", i.e. meant to be viewed from every angle.
 - Compared with Polykleitos' *Doryphoros*, David has many of the same features and contrapposto position.
 - Emphasizes detail and lifelike posture, following the Classical style.
- Bernini's *David*:
 - An example of how Baroque art departs from its Renaissance predecessor in the same way Hellenistic art progresses from Classical.
 - Created in 1624, stands 170 cm (67 inches) tall.
 - Housed at the [Galleria Borghese](#) in Rome.
 - Depicts David in mid-action, full of motion and emotion.
 - Represents Baroque art's sense of movement and passion.
 - Discarded arms at David's feet provide support for the marble and remind us of David's trust in God.
 - This passion and movement are also characteristics of Hellenistic sculpture.

Hellenistic Sculpture: The Laocoön Group

- Historical Significance:
 - Excavated in 1506, now displayed in the [Vatican Museums](#).



- Michelangelo was present at its reveal; influenced his work.
- Torso of Laocoön served as a mode for Christ in *The Last Judgment*.
- Michelangelo borrows head of Christ from the *Apollo Belvedere*.
- Pliny the Elder's Praise:
 - Pliny described this Laocoön group as a marvel, praising sculptors Agesander, Athenodoros, and Polydorus from Rhodes.
 - From Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, 36.4.37:
 - *sicut in Laocoonte, qui est in Titi imperatoris domo, opus omnibus et picturae et statuariae artis praeferendum. ex uno lapide eum ac liberos draconumque mirabiles nexus de consilii sententia fecere summi artifices Agesander et Polydorus et Athenodorus Rhodii.*
 - Translation: Such as in the Laocoön, which is in the home of the emperor Titus, a work that must be preferred to any painting or statuary. From a single stone the preeminent artisans of Rhodes, Agesander and Polydorus and Athenodorus made him [Laocoön] and his children and the marvelous intertwining of sea serpents from the agreement of their plan.

Laocoön Group's Influence

- "Laocoön and the Sculptures of Sperlonga: Chronology and Significance," by Nathan Badou:
 - These 3 sculptors are best called artistic ambassadors.
 - Rhodes was a tripartite city (Synecism) from 408 B.C. consisting of Lalysos, Camiros, and Lindos.
 - The sculptors chosen from each of the cities represented their city by presenting a diplomatic gift to the imperial family.
 - *Consilii sententia*: "By order of the council"
- Political and Artistic Context:
 - Presented to Tiberius Caesar upon his return from Armenia in 20 BC.
 - Rhodes needed to regain favor with Augustus after siding with Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium (31 BC).
 - The statue was a gesture of generosity and excellence.

Vergil's Influence



- Comparison to the *Aeneid*, Book 2:
 - Vergil's account of Laocoön in the *Aeneid* mirrors the sculpture.
 - It tells of the sea serpents' attack of Laocoön and his sons.
 - Regarding the order of creation: the statue was likely created before the *Aeneid* was published.
 - Vergil died in September 19 BC, and his work was published posthumously.

Euphorion's Tale

- An Alternative Source:
 - Euphorion, an earlier Greek poet, also told the story of Laocoön and his sons.
 - Focused on Laocoön's impiety and punishment by Apollo.
 - Suetonius mentions Euphorion as a favorite author of Tiberius and a source for Vergil.
 - Badou suggests the Laocoön statue better represents Euphorion's tale, although his text is now lost to us.
 - An account survives in a commentary by Maurus Servius Honoratus written in AD 1471.

■ *ut Euphorion dicit, post adventum Graecorum sacerdos Neptuni lapidibus occisus est, quia non sacrificiis eorum vatavit adventum. postea abscedentibus Graecis cum vellent sacrificare Neptuno, Laocoön Thymbraei Apollinis sacerdos sorte ductus est, ut solet fieri cum deest sacerdos certus. hic piaculum commiserat ante simulacrum numinis cum Antiopa sua uxore coeundo, et ob hoc immixtis droconibus cum suis filiis interemptus est. historia quidem hoc habet: sed poeta interpretatur ad Troianorum excusationem, qui hoc ignorantes decepti sunt.*

■ Translation: As Euphorion says, after the arrival of the Greeks the priest of Neptune was killed by stones, because he did not prevent their arrival by sacrifices. Afterwards with the Greeks departing when they [the Trojans] wished to sacrifice to Neptune, Laocoön was chosen by lot as priest of Thymbraean Apollo, as was customary when there was not a fixed priest. This [Laocoön] had committed a sinful crime before by having sexual intercourse with his wife Antiopa before the statue



of the god [Apollo], and on account of this he was killed with his sons by snakes despatched [from the gods]. History indeed holds this: but the poet [Vergil] interprets according to an excuse of the Trojans, who, not knowing this, were deceived.

Comparison of Stories

- Euphorion's account, as recorded by Maurus Servius Honoratus:
 - Laocoön was killed by snakes for violating the commands of celibacy imposed by Apollo.
- Vergil's account in the *Aeneid*:
 - Laocoön was killed because he warned the Trojans about the Trojan Horse.
 - The phrase Φοβοῦ τοὺς Δαναοὺς καὶ δῶρα φέροντας (Φονοῦ τους Danaoús kai dóra férontas) - "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" comes to mind.
 - The gods killed Laocoön to ensure the defeat of Troy, not as a punishment for impiety.

Political Message in the Laocoön Group

- The statue conveys a political message, a conciliatory apology from Rhodes for siding with Mark Antony.
- The image of Laocoön is a signum of the hubris of Marc Antony (Laocoön) against Augustus (Apollo, Augustus's patron deity).
- Represents divine vengeance against and a warning to opponents of the Augustan dynasty.

In our next lesson, we will look at an extravagant sculpture group in Sperlonga that uses art and literature to carry a similar admonition.