The *Laocoön Group*: Myth upon Myth

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**Abstract:**

Few pieces throughout history have been so excellent, as well as controversial, as the infamous *Laocoön Group*. Within the last ten years, a scholar at Columbia University, Lynn Catterson, has proposed that the *Laocoön* is not of the origin, make, and context it has belonged to for about the last 500 years since its discovery. Needless to say she made quite the impression, implicitly challenging countless scholars’ work and research in her attempt to rectify and explain some of the claimed discontinuities pertaining to the piece aesthetically and contextually. This essay will explore the piece in terms of Hellenistic art, such as the style, technique, and context of the classical era. This will also include the myth behind the sculpture, the debated origins of the sculpture, and a critical examination of the piece aesthetically and conceptually, while simultaneously proposing possible emperors of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian families and how they could have possibly been related to the piece. There will also be exploration of relevant pieces of the Hellenistic and Baroque eras that stylistically relate to the *Laocoön Group* helping to place it in classical antiquity, and a reconstruction of the group that may help to better relate it to the Hellenistic Baroque date. All of this will prove relevant information concerning the overall observation that will be made in relation to the nature of Catterson’s debate and the validity of such in terms of other critics’ scholarly opinion and historical evidence.
The Myth:

The piece is most commonly considered a depiction of an event that occurred during the Trojan War, wherein the brother of Anchises, Trojan priest, either of Poseidon or Apollo, Laocoön, was punished by the Gods. There is speculation among myths as to the specifics of the events surrounding Laocoön. He was punished for either warning the Trojans against accepting of the gift of the “Trojan Horse,” or, “one opinion was that Laocoön’s punishment was not connected with the Trojan War at all. The God of prophecy, Apollo, was simply punishing the priest for disobeying divine command.”² This divine command that Laocoön disobeyed was that he should not have conceived children if he was a priest to the Gods.

More commonly discussed, “both Greeks and Romans remembered him as the man who warned the Trojans not to accept the so-called Greek gift of the Wooden Horse,” it was either the work of Athena or Poseidon in punishing the priest, for he caused damage to the dedicatory gift as it was said he threw a spear at the horse penetrating its side.³ It was recorded also that a “Greek named Sidon had informed Trojans that it was an offering to the goddess Athena: if they destroyed it, then Troy would fall, but if they dragged it inside the city walls, then the Wooden Horse was a guarantee of Troy’s safety.”⁴ In this explanation, Laocoön’s death is actually cohesive symbolically to the “death” of the city of Troy.

Regardless of the reasons that Laocoön and his sons were attacked, every version of the myth states that they were in fact attacked, but, there have also been discontinuities as to whether or not the priest and his sons all perished, or if some or one survived. “In the Tragic version (Sophokles), Laocoön is

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² Culterell and Storm, “Laocoön,” in The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology, [58/9]. This is also a version backed and supported by Apollodorus.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
a priest of Apollo who should have been celibate and was punished for marrying, by the snake-inflicted death of his two sons.” In this case the priest was obviously not killed as punishment, but instead punished by the death of his sons. This version may not necessarily be conducive to the piece as Laocoön is already being penetrated and poisoned by one of the snakes. In other versions of the myth just the younger son dies, which is more closely related to the depiction of the sculpture as the older son is the only one not yet bitten and therefore still has the chance to escape the fate of his father and younger brother. Of course in other versions, they all perish. Either way, Laocoön’s figure is playing the role in every version of the myth as one who is punished by altercation with the Gods, a very essential and common theme in both Greek and Roman mythology.

The earliest full surviving literary version is documented in Virgil’s (October 15, 70 BC – September 21, 19 BC) Aeniad. Virgil is an ancient Roman poet who is “in large part responsible for [yet another] Laocoön controversy: which, many have asked, came first, the Aeneid or the sculpture?” In Virgil’s version, Laocoön is a priest of Neptune, or Poseidon, and was portrayed as innocent and he and his sons’ deaths do not seem to be “clearly or personally motivated.” In terms of the piece, regardless of the version of the myth being told, it is depicting the specific moment when the priest found himself and his sons entangled with the two sea-serpents, grasping for life and writhing in pain. Laocoön’s story concludes with the sea-serpents hiding in either the Temple of Apollo or the Temple of Athena, depending on the myth, after they attack the priest and his sons.

It may seem superfluous and redundant to record multiple accounts of the myth of Laocoön, but it becomes essential in terms of context when trying to place an ancient piece that has so many questions unanswered about it. Since multiple accounts of the myth exist, then multiple people were

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5 Smith, Hellenistic Sculpture, [109].
6 Ibid. The fact that many believe that the 1506 and other sculptures existing today to be copies of Greek originals then suggests that Virgil did not in fact “come first.” It is more likely that the myth transpired through generations.
7 Smith, Hellenistic Sculpture, [109]. Though the Hellenistic poet Euphorion of Chalcis also documents this event; he states that Laocoön in fact procreated on the sacred ground of Poseidon and was in turn punished by him, and it was just poor timing that the Trojan War and Trojan horse events occurred simultaneously.
very likely to pick and choose the myth they agreed with or passed onto the next generation. Myths were like parables to the Greeks and oral tradition through time undoubtedly also accounts for the different explanations. When it comes to uncovering where the Laocoön piece may have been located in antiquity, quite possibly many different places, it is important to know the different associations that could be made concerning the myth. These associations lead to supporting evidence of where and when the piece may have been located and the ways in which the reputation of the priest, Laocoön, may have changed throughout time.

It is also important to note that the Greeks and Romans were very likely to view the myths of the Laocoön in different ways. There is no question though, as to why Laocoön would be prevalent to the Romans as “upon reflection, the connection among Laocoön’s failure as [possibly] Apollo’s priest, (my note: Apollo under baths is important) the consequential fall of Troy, Aenea’s flight to the West, and the eventual foundation of Rome would provide ample justification for the Laocoön’s appearance in Rome.” For both cultures, generally, Laocoön was an individual who defied the Gods and Gods’ will, and thus was punished. For Greeks it would stand as symbolism of why one shouldn’t defy the Greeks, especially since regardless of his attempts, they won the Trojan War in large part for having the Gods on their side as they would believe it. As for the Romans, Laocoön was a man who warned his people in favor of salvation, and in turn ended up being right even though they hadn’t listened. Regardless of the outcome, he would seem to be more of a sacrificial character in terms of the Romans, especially with his statements in regards to the Greeks, and has been described as such in Roman record of his existence and the events that he experienced, such as his statement in Virgil, "Equō nē crēdite, Teucrī / Quidquid id est, timeō Danaōs et dōna ferentēs", or "Do not trust the Horse, Trojans / Whatever it is, I fear the

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Greeks even bearing gifts." But, then again, this could be attributed to the fact that his statements concerning Greeks were recorded by Romans to our only available knowledge.

The Controversy

In 2005, Lynn Catterson, a scholar at Columbia University offered an alternative view in the art world concerning the historical nature of the sculpture of the Laocoön Group, challenging the work of prior scholars before her time. She stated that the piece may be one of the best forgeries known in history, executed by the famous Renaissance artist Michelangelo, in the early 16th Century. She wrote an article, although concerned with the Laocoön Group, that was critically focused on the life of the famous Michelangelo, and a study of the evidence in which she believed proved, “he had the motive, the mean, and the opportunity” to execute the forged piece. Based on aesthetics, concept, and related pieces, as evidentiary support, the piece has thus far in this article been deemed as a 1st to 2nd Century A.D. copy of a Hellenistic Baroque, probably bronze, piece. The rest of the article will focus on reasons why Michelangelo did not seem to have the “motive, the means, and the opportunity.”

Catterson lays out her points in her article in a chronological order, starting with Michelangelo’s life prior to the discovery of the piece. She comments on the coincidence of his being able to view the piece first hand, his lifestyle, and his monetary arrangements over time, his sculptures or other commissions, and then observes some of his work and sketches in order to make comparisons between his work and the Laocoön Group. It is through these points that she provides evidence in which she believes supported the ways in which Michelangelo could have forged the piece.

The sculpture being discovered in 1506, Michelangelo would have been about 31 years old, and already very well-known in the art world and the political, social, and religious realms as well. When it was discovered, the Pope, Pope Julius II, at the time was well acquainted with an architect named

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9 Brilliant, My Laocoön: Alternative Claims, [13].
10 Catterson, "Michelangelo’s Laocoön," [31].
Giuliano da Sangallo and Michelangelo, who was friends with Sangallo’s son. The Pope asked both of these men, as they were both already in Rome on prior commission, to go and view the piece for him, which is what sets Michelangelo at the scene of the discovery.

Catterson names Michelangelo a forgery artist by nature, based upon record of Vasari, from the start, stating that he “counterfeited drawings of ‘various old masters,’ returning a copy to the owner instead of the original.”11 Many artists during the Renaissance learned under apprenticeship by replication of and copying the works of others, so this is ultimately deemed an inappropriate interpretation of his character as an individual, as Catterson is exploiting the facts of general society and industry in the 16th century. Prior to the 18th century and the separation between “High” and “Low” art and the creation of the term “Fine Art,” making a living as an artist can ultimately be described as a committal to patronage and commissions. This means that the desire to copy or represent pieces as closely as possible to prior works was considered the norm if one was going to make their living as an “artist.”

She also comments on the fact that Michelangelo had been caught before with a forgery, his sculpture of the Cupid. “According to Vasari, some thought that Michelangelo’s Sleeping Cupid was taken to Rome by the dealer who ‘buried it in a vineyard he had there.’”12 According to Michael Hirst, “we are told that a fellow Florentine with Roman connections, whom Cordivi does not name but who is identified by Vasari as Baldassare del Milanese, paid 30 ducats for the carving, took it to Rome and subsequently sold it to Cardinal Riario for 200 ducats” as a fake piece of antiquity.13 It is also documented in letters that Michelangelo is the one who told the Cardinal of the piece being of his make and even later tried to retrieve the sculpture from the Florentine after the Cardinal returned it to him, but Michelangelo never got it back. It is difficult to believe that Michelangelo would give himself up to

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11 Catterson, "Michelangelo’s Laocoön," [30]. Vasari was
12 Catterson, "Michelangelo’s Laocoön," [32].
13 Hirst, Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame, 1: [28].
the Cardinal if he were in on the con, and at a mere 21 years old. Even though he did not irrefutably forge this piece, it was one that helped in his rise to fame as his work was so good it could be mistaken for antiquity. From this point on Cardinal Riario, who was related to Pope Julius II, actually employed him because of the escalated status of his skills.

As for the “means,” or the monetary capability Catterson states Michelangelo had in terms of making a forgery, she makes note of the land or “homes” that he had where he could work and store work in multiple places. Other scholars have denied the existence of and denied the implied notion that his residence or alleged residences were a reflection of how much money Michelangelo may or may not have had, regardless of the bank statements that Catterson references. In letters to his father, it seems that on multiple occasions he sent money home to his family to help them out. In the late 1490’s, under large patronage of the acclaimed Medici, “He writes that he has no space to put his brother up, suggesting that he is still living with [friend] Gallo.” Certainly, an individual who is often helping his family with money and is not able to live on his own is not exactly full of the means to do extra work wherein he would be unpaid, even though this is 8 years before Catterson believes he would’ve started work on the piece in 1498 while he would’ve been in Rome.

An important point that Catterson plays off of is the fact that in 1497 he bought more marble from Carrara than was necessary to complete his Pietà for the Cardinal for St. Peter’s in Rome, wherein Catterson freely claims he would have stored the extra in his villa. According to Hirst:

> It has been persuasively proposed that he had ordered more marble at Carrara than was required for the cardinal’s commission; at least two shipments were involved, implying a number of blocks. Perhaps impressed by the quality of the material he had encountered

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14 See Hirst.
15 Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame*, 1:[32].
for the first time, he invested in stone that he may have calculated that he would employ in the future.\textsuperscript{16}

Given Michelangelo’s recorded failures in material quality and medium in the years preceding the find at Carrara, it makes sense that he would want to stock up on good quality marble. Michelangelo had commissions from numerous people in addition to his larger well-known commissions.

In 1498, Michelangelo was in Rome, and commissioned again to make a piece for the Cardinal Jean Villiers de La Grolais, this piece was the \textit{Pieta}.\textsuperscript{17} In 1501, three years since Catterson proposes Michelangelo started work on the Laocoön (and stated he finished it in said period of time) the artist was also commissioned from Rome for the second \textit{David}, which he did not get finished for many years possibly being attributed to his moving to Rome in 1505.\textsuperscript{18} This insinuates that from this point on in 1505, he lived in Rome and thus travelled to other places. This becomes important when Catterson states that he was coincidentally “back in Rome, as fortuity would have it, just two weeks before the discovery of the Laocoön” since if he lived there, that is where he would have been a lot of the time.\textsuperscript{19} Prior to this, he was said to be looking at marble again in Carrara.

Catterson also calls Michelangelo a canon of his time, and unable to be coincidental that the piece was “authenticated by an individual of the same caliber” of artistry that the Laocoön Group was considered. It does not seem so coincidental when one considers the fame Michelangelo held at that point, and if his past patron, and friend, the Pope knew he now lived in Rome, it only makes sense that he would ask him to go and observe the piece as a favor, along with Sangallo, who had been the architect to the Pope since 1494, in his work on the Pope’s Savona palace.\textsuperscript{20} The statement about caliber is also made more presumptuous because of the fact that both he and Sangallo were in Rome for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Hirst, \textit{Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame}, 1:36.
\item[17] Catterson, “Michelangelo’s Laocoön,” [31].
\item[18] Hirst, \textit{Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame}, 1:51.
\item[19] Catterson, “Michelangelo’s Laocoön,” [36].
\item[20] Catterson, “Michelangelo’s Laocoön,” [33].
\end{footnotes}
previous engagements when the Pope addressed them, Michelangelo for the tomb of Pope Julius II, and Sangallo for St. Peters. There is no way to know whether other famed artisans would have been asked by the Pope to go see the discovery had they been present in Rome and of the same relationship to the Pope. Unless he created the sculpture in less than a year, between 1498 and 1501, on top of other commissions he had, most notably, this included the huge commission of the tomb of Pope Julius II, it is hard to imagine he was able to complete his Laocoön Group in 3 years and transfer it secretly, easily placing it where it was found, in seven joined pieces. This especially considering how long Michelangelo’s single and smaller pieces took him in the past.

Considering the unrecorded commissions he was sure to have aside from the well-known political and religious pieces, it is difficult to imagine that he had the time and desire to create a piece for which he would gain no recognition or compensation, and he was already employed by the Pope, so it was not to gain attention there as Catterson alleged before with the Cardinal Riario. In response to another argument Catterson makes, it is important to mention that in 1505 after being commissioned for the tomb, his relationship with the Pope was extremely unstable. “Documentation shows that he had been paid 500 ducats on 24 January 1506 and it seems that he had not received, as had been agreed, any further payment at the end of February. There seem, therefore, to have been grounds for his impatience and disappointment in April.” It was because of this, and also rumors he heard of the Pope halting anymore commissions in stone, that he tried to meet with the Pope that week upon appointment and was turned away every day for a week. He was disheartened at this, and wrote to his friend and banker Sangallo, with whose son he initially went to observe the discovery of the Laocoön. Catterson uses this to her advantage to exploit what she claims to be suspicious characteristics of Michelangelo. In the letter he states:

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21 Catterson, "Michelangelo’s Laocoön," [30].
22 Hirst, Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame, 1:67/68.
This [papal rejection] was not the only reason for my departure; there was also something which I do not wish to write about. It is enough that it led me to think that, if I remained in Rome, my own tomb would have been made sooner than that of the Pope. And that is the reason I left immediately.\(^2^3\)

She recognizes this flee from Rome, in March of 1506, as a clue to his being afraid of being caught with another forgery like he “had” with the *Sleeping Cupid*, by the Pope, building on the assumption that he took part in the actual con of this initial “forgery” that took place, which is not proven.

Looking at this letter from a different perspective, many things could be referenced. If Michelangelo’s commissions were observed, one would find that Michelangelo at this point had still not followed through on his contract for the second *David* in Rome, and until he did, “the delay in delivering the sculpture would be the artist’s registration as a debtor to the commune, a situation known as being a specchio.”\(^2^4\) This fact, on top of the fact that it looked like he had accepted payment and then been removed from the commission on the tomb by the Pope, it looks as though he had reason to believe his past endeavors had come to light and who knows what debt he may have been in had this been the case.

If observed in a literal sense, concerning the tomb of the Pope, it has been recognized that the commission was much larger and impossibly expected and contracted to be finished in 5 years, as there was way more sculpture and work to this commission than could be completed in this time. Despite this, Michelangelo still undertook the project in 1505, and he had reason to believe that he had officially undertaken more than he could handle with this commission:

\(^{2^3}\) Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame*, 1:[67].  
\(^{2^4}\) Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame*, 1:[51].
To begin with, close to a year had to be allotted to the task of quarrying the marble. Then, in addition to the marble mausoleum, the bronze reliefs, and minor marble sculptures, Michelangelo would have had to carve the major statues at a rate of more than one a month – thereby producing more sculpture by far than he actually carved in his more than seventy-years of productivity. From what we can deduce of his method of working, no one of the tomb statues could reasonably have been expected to be carved in much less than a year.\textsuperscript{25}

In this sense it seems as though his nonchalant reference to his death in his letter to Sangallo could be taken quite literally, as without the desire to admit his lack of judgment in accepting the assignment, he may have realized, a year into the project, that he could very well die trying to complete it, or before it was completed.

Many scholars have been challenged in their life’s work by the claims that Catterson has thus presented in the last ten years. In this many have refuted her claims and given them little credibility, often stating her vague attempts and evidence that only seems plausible insofar as someone may want to find it plausible. Catterson made a number of comparisons between Michelangelo’s sketches before the discovery of the sculpture and of the dynamics of the sculpture. “Catterson cited a pen study by Michelangelo dating from 1501 depicting the rear of a male torso that resembles the back of the ‘Laocoön.’\textsuperscript{26} In response to this, Kathleen Welch stated, “To my eye, the Michelangelo drawing does not bear a close resemblance to the torso of the Vatican Laocoön... The latter is distinguished by a vigorous torsion or twist, which is lacking in the drawing.”\textsuperscript{27}(Figure a). This can also be seen when one observes the work of Michelangelo preceding the sculpture’s discovery compared to his work after, which shows much more of an influence and change that could be equated to Michelangelo’s encounter

\textsuperscript{25} Liebert, \textit{Michelangelo: Psychoanalytic Study of His Life}, [122].
\textsuperscript{26} Shattuck, "Is 'Laocoön' a Michelangelo," Arts.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
with the piece, such as some of his work on the Sistine Chapel. Catterson also uses what is now considered the incorrectly restored version of Laocoön from 1506, wherein the arms on the figures have been restored in the wrong manner, to show similarities between Michelangelo’s work and the piece. This incorrect restoration is made even more apparent by recent scholarly summary providing new concepts of reconstruction that better place the piece into the context of the Hellenistic Baroque era. To put it simply, the piece Catterson uses as reference is not even cohesive to the proposal of correct restoration.

Some scholars completely disagree with her claims, such as Richard Brilliant, who also teaches at Columbia and is an authority in Classical Antiquities and author of *My Laocoön: Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Art*. He called Catterson’s attempt, “noncredible on any count,” also later stating “she made absolutely no reference to ancient sculptures that could be related to the ‘Laocoön’ (including a large body of ancient fragments found just before World War II at Sperlonga, a site near
Rome, that refer specifically to episodes of the Trojan War.)\textsuperscript{28} That being said, it does look as though within Catterson’s article she only focuses on information that could help her claim while not in any way acknowledging any arguments that could be made against her claim.

That being said, it is indisputable that she has introduced a concept concerning the piece that will not quickly be discarded in history, and may possibly even become validated eventually. Quoted by Kathryn Shattuck for the New York Times, William Wallace, a professor of Art History at Washington University in St. Louis, stated: “Until I read the full argument in a reputable academic publication, I’m going to reserve a final judgment,” concerning only the discussion Catterson posed at Columbia University, but he also stated “However, the more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became. I think this one has the greatest lasting power.”\textsuperscript{29}

It is at this point that we can look closer at the specifics of the piece, the facts and context that Catterson avoided, and the other possible Hellenistic Baroque elements that can be attributed to the sculpture. Though she made an intriguing claim with some supportive evidence, it is also important to look at ways in which this piece could be proven to be from the Classical Era.

**The Origin**

Unfortunately, many known pieces of ancient art are copies made of an original, as throughout time, popular mediums change, pieces get destroyed and broken, and patron’s often commissioned work based off of other prior examples made available to them. This is because art in ancient Greece was most often intended for public spaces and viewing, serving religious, political and social functions. From this, many individuals were consistently surrounded by art, and desired original or even copied interpretations of previously made exceptional pieces of this art. “What we see of this group today is a very fine marble copy of what must have been a bronze original.”\textsuperscript{30} Clearly, this makes it difficult to

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Shattuck, "Is 'Laocoön' a Michelangelo," Arts.
\textsuperscript{30} Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, [216].
determine which pieces are copies or interpretations and which are originals. This difficulty is consistently debated by scholars throughout history. Where and when do artists deviate in representation based on personal preference, aesthetic appeal, and proper proportion and depiction? And what deviations become prevalent, credible, or even incorrect, in restorations? The only proper answer is to critique and discuss the pieces that are available to observation, reinforced by evidence from other mediums and context.

The Laocoön Group was discovered on January 15th, 1506, on the south side of Esquiline hill in Rome, and was considered “one of the finest expressions of the full Hellenistic Baroque.” Initially it was said to be located in the holding tanks for the “Great Baths of Trajan” also called the “Sette Sale.” Unfortunately, this was based on vague description left by one of the first people to observe the piece, the aforementioned architect named Sangallo’s son. It has more specifically been noted now that the piece was found in a vineyard, inside and very close to the Servian Wall, recorded as still maintained in 1st Century A.D. This spot is actually within the boundaries of where the Gardens of Maecenas had once been, built by patron to the arts and friend to Augustus, Gaius Maecenas. Interestingly this was a place where emperors had lived after Gaius’s time, including Tiberius, who was an heir to Augustus. This becomes relevant when one notes that Tiberius could very well be related to the Laocoön Group, and possibly other future rulers who also could’ve stayed in or near the Gardens, which will be touched upon more later. But it has also been stated that “the ‘Laocoön’ statue group was found on the Oppian Hill, under the remains of the Baths of Titus, a site called “La capocce,” in a vineyard on the Esquiline worked by a certain Felice de Freddi.” The Oppian Hill is in the southern spur of the Esquiline and actually coincides with the Servian wall. If that were the case then the piece was still in a place of Titus’s and his rule.

31 Smith, Hellenistic Sculpture, [108].
32 Frischer, "Laocoön an Annotated Chronology," The Digital Sculpture Project.
The piece, and multiple other “Laocoön’s,” now reside in the Vatican museums, and has been historically attributed, by Pliny, to three sculptors from Rhodes by the names of Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenadoros, who were living and working in the 1st Century A.D. This piece on display today and discovered in 1506 was often said to be the one seen and described by the scholar Pliny, but this has been refuted since the moment of its discovery. “The first artists of the period, Michelangelo and Giovanni Cristofano Romano, deny, however, that Pliny’s statement saying that the three figures are carved out of one piece of Marble is right, for they found about four joints” in the piece existing today. 33 This statement has also been revised as of late, “First, the group is composed of seven pieces of marble, whereas Pliny described it as having been carved from one.”34 This doesn’t account for the large number of restorations that very likely occurred by Romans before it was discovered and also by artists of the Renaissance after it was discovered.

33 Bieber, Laocoön: The Influence of the Group, [2].  
34 Catterson, “Michelangelo’s Laocoön,” [30].
If Pliny was correct, this existing piece is unable to be the original, yet, it has also been stated that he possibly wanted to exaggerate the grandeur of the piece as the properties of it makes it appear as though it would be nearly impossible to be made of one piece of marble for a number of reasons, including size, transportability, and finding an initial piece of marble of that size. This can also be refuted by new scholarly articles that propose a new and more “Hellenistically” correct reconstruction of how the piece may actually have existed prior to discovery and reconstruction. This has also been refuted as an original as “it was found that the back of the alter was made with Italian (Luna or Carrara) marble, which implies a date in the mid-first century to second century A.D. or later,” which was after the Hellenistic period but entering a time when Hellenistic style was still being employed by artists, and very favorably when artists were commissioned by the aforementioned Philhellenic emperors.\textsuperscript{35} Whether interpretation or copy, Pliny wrote that the original piece was “a work to be preferred to all that the arts of painting and sculpture have produced,” and it is difficult to argue that the execution of the piece seen today is anything less.\textsuperscript{36}

Back in the period that the Laocoön Group is said to have originated it is important to remember that art was not created for an aesthetic appeal alone; there were other functions that pieces were to perform that were not just for the sake of art. “A statue could have in one of four main cult functions: cult, votive, funerary, or honorific.”\textsuperscript{37} The original Laocoön Group was probably a votive piece, part of a larger tableau, as an offering to the Gods. It very well was probably commissioned by a patron as well. Votive pieces were made and dedicated to Gods in return for divine favor, which explains why the Greeks strove to create pieces in proportional and conceptual perfection so often, and why the sculpture executes just that.

\textsuperscript{35} Smith, Hellenistic Sculpture, [109].
\textsuperscript{36} Spivey, Understanding Greek Sculpture, [216].
\textsuperscript{37} Smith, Hellenistic Sculpture, [10].
Restorations

Earlier I mentioned “multiple Laocoön’s” existing. When I said this I meant that not only does more than one sculpture of Laocoön exist, the existing sculptures have to be defined and described by time period, depending on known restorations. One sculpture can be described as more than one sculpture in terms of restorations. It is best to separate the sculpture, and sculptures, in terms created and employed by Richard Brilliant, whose explanations not only clear up the confusion made by the sculpture, but also lays out the possible pieces in a more organized manner:

Laocoön A is the “original” ancient sculpture, carved by the Rhodian artists mentioned by Pliny, and Laocoön B, the shadowy, alleged model or prototype of A, posited by some scholars and placed earlier in the Hellenistic period.

Laocoön I, the normative image for so long, was discovered in 1506, restored in the sixteenth century, and stimulated a powerful response among Renaissance artists.

Laocoön II, derived from I, became with Wincklemann and his successors a vehicle for critical discourse on the nature of art and its powers.

Laocoön III comes into being after the restorations of the 1950’s and is considered to be, by virtue of its more “correct” restoration, closer to A, if not quite identical with it, and yet is still contaminated by the established image of I and the rich literature on II.38

In this organization of sculpture, these pieces are essentially and possibly the same piece, just defined by changes and restorations made. Scholars that desire to speak about the Laocoön have not so far been this descrip in which sculpture they may in fact be speaking about, or what sculpture of what time was being used. In fact, Catterson uses photos of Laocoön I that has restorations that are now deemed incorrect. This becomes even more confusing when one considers how much some pieces we

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38 Brilliant, My Laocoön: Alternative Claims, [18]. For more information one can reference chapters 1, 2, and 3 of brilliants book cited in this paper.
are able to see today don’t look as classical as we would assume them to be after restorations have been made to them. These restorations not only make the pieces more difficult to place, but can also change the supposed context entirely. The pieces were found in this manner originally:

![Figure c]. Howard, Seymour. "On the Reconstruction of the Vatican Laocoön Group." Seen April 10th, 2014.

A number of dates have been proposed as the possible date of initial construction for the piece. Many scholars believe it to be sometime in the first century CE, wherein in almost every case it is an original work inspired by late-Classical and Hellenistic prior pieces. 40 BCE to 20 CE is one of the most common proposed dates, still making it probably a copy of a bronze original, possibly belonging to a larger tableau. This range of dates would allow the piece to be inspired by pieces from Pergamum, that was completed in the 2nd century BCE, and possibly even inspired by, or inspiration for Tiberius’ commissions of Trojan War figures at his grotto in Sperlonga. Either an original or copy of an original is the piece that would’ve been spoken of by Pliny in 70 CE in his Natural History:

"Beyond these, there are not many sculptors of high repute; for, in the case of several works of very great excellence, the number of artists that have been engaged upon them has proved a considerable obstacle to the fame of each, no individual being able
to engross the whole of the credit, and it being impossible to award it in due proportion to the names of the several artists combined. Such is the case with the Laocoön, for example, in the palace of the Emperor Titus, a work that may be looked upon as preferable to any other production of the art of painting or of statuary. It is sculptured from a single block, both the main figure as well as the children, and the serpents with their marvelous folds. This group was made in concert by three most eminent artists, Agesander, Polydoros, and Athenodorus, natives of Rhodes" (translated by ed. John Bostock, M.D., F.R.S., H.T. Riley, Esq., B.A.).

Roman copies didn’t often have signatures of original artists, and the piece that exists today does not have signatures. So regardless of the fact that the scholar attributed this piece to specific artists by name, this suggests that Pliny may have actually been attributing this piece to artists of the past even after Roman restoration or interpretation, or else the Rhodians could’ve made the piece he was discussing. The work of Rhodians was not foreign to emperors of Rome in the 1st Century CE, and rulers such as Tiberius and Nero both commissioned Rhodian artists for works. This is not to imply indefinitely that the named artists by Pliny may be the same artists of other works, but stylistic attributes and technique can be related.

The thing about restorations is that the era of restoration and restorer of the piece are directly related and detrimental to the original construction of the sculpture, especially in the past when the theories for correct restoration were not as rounded as they are today. Because of this, one has to remember that within the Renaissance, the restorations were made by people looking through a scope of compositional eyes of a Renaissance artist, not an ancient. Because of this, “the Renaissance restorer

39 Frischer, "Laocoön an Annotated Chronology," The Digital Sculpture Project.
"Nec deinde multo plurimum fama est, quorundam claritati in operibus eximiis obstante numero artificum, quoniam nec unus occupat gloriem nec plures pariter nuncupari possunt, sicut in Laocoonte, qui est in Titi imperatoris domo, opus omnibus et picturae et statuariæ artis præferendum. ex uno lapide eum ac liberos draconumque mirabilia nexus de consili sententia fecere summi artifices Hagesander et Polydoros et Athenodorus Rhodii" (ed. Carolus Mayhoff, Leipzig, Teubner 1897).
constrained the original baroque-looking composition in a planigraphic frontality, giving the work a somewhat neoclassic character; conceivably, this has induced us to prefer too recent a date for it."\(^{40}\) This also means that “likewise, since the Romans viewed art with an eye to the practical side, we find Pliny praising the Laocoön group for its stark reality. Indeed, this whole system of listing and classifying Greek sculptors in bronze was calculated to appeal to the practicality of the Roman mind,” which the Renaissance artists undoubtedly attempted to do but ultimately succeeded in pulling the piece even further from its origin.\(^{41}\)

1532 marked the year that the incorrect restorations to the arm of the father was constructed by a former assistant of Michelangelo named Giovanni Antonio Montorsoli (Figure d). "The reason for the restoration is not known. Note that in contrast to Bandinelli’s copy, where the father’s right arm bends back slightly toward his head, Montorsoli’s restoration shows the father’s right arm pointing upward, away from his head."\(^{42}\) This is interesting because Catterson mentions that Michelangelo was the one to point out a more correct restoration in the arms of the Laocoön, whereas other artists before Montorsoli clearly employed the bent arm approached before this extended arm execution. This gesture that wasn’t consistent with the archeology of the characters attested to a theatricality that people of the Renaissance clearly valued regardless of this inconsistency. The piece remained in this position until after World War II, the 1950’s, when the piece would become what Brilliant calls Laocoön III. In the early 18\(^{th}\) century, a man named Cornacchini restored the son’s missing arm in the same style as the arm of the father.\(^{43}\) "The arm would then, in a manner befitting marble sculpture and the intact part of the work, more closely relate the contour and mass of the son and his father, as well as echo the position of the father’s arm."\(^{44}\) (Figure e).
1798 marks when the piece was restored by a sculptor named Girardon, correcting the arms that Montorsoli had added 200 years earlier. Girardon replaced the arm with a plaster model that folded over the back of the Laocoön’s head. The piece was in Paris because of the French Revolution and following treaties and then returned in 1815, after Napoleon’s loss at Waterloo. The piece then finally made its way back to the Vatican, though restored with the incorrect restorations of the past, specifically the extended arm. 1905 marks when an “arm” was found and attributed to the Laocoön. This is the bent arm on the Laocoön III that is today considered the most closely accurate rendition of the sculpture to this day. It was found in a workshop not far from where the statue group was initially found as well, on the Esquiline Hill. This widely attests to the fact that the piece could very likely be the work of an entire workshop, and probably one of many works that were associated with one another. In 1957, this arm was added by Filippo Magi. This arm coincided better with the snake coil that was on the priest’s shoulder and anchored down his wrist, pulling the arm back and down and causes the hand to

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45 Frischer, “Laocoön an Annotated Chronology,” The Digital Sculpture Project.
go behind the head of the priest, also pushing his head to the side. This also means the arm attracts less attention.

Another problem must be addressed concerning the issues arising from restorations. The most common would’ve obviously be to initially attack the inconsistencies between what Pliny wrote of the piece, and the piece standing today. In order to make a legitimate connection between the existing piece today and the one in which Pliny wrote about, a scholar would have to observe any possible record of restorations through the past, which Catterson did not address to the extent she should’ve. This is arguably a valid point that Seymour Howard makes in his reconstruction proposals when he provides context for the sculpture. He states, “The current relief-like restoration and its scenographic exposition, apparently the result of serial reworking’s by Roman Imperial as well as Renaissance and modern craftsmen, need reassessment based on further study of the ancient pieces, allied compositions, and developments in archaeological technology.”46 This accounts for the facts that not only were restorations made that we have record of, but in ancient times a number of restorations could’ve been made, and changes to aesthetics in artistic execution and technological tools of art, such as the drill, would have made a difference concerning the piece through time.

Many arguments have been made as to why the piece Pliny mentioned has been discredited as the existing piece found in 1506. One of these arguments is that Pliny claimed the piece was made from a single slab of marble. As previously stated, this could be attributed to his attempt at creating grandeur in terms of the piece. But, the multiple pieces also could’ve been established after the initial construction of the piece, especially in terms of moving, restoring, and exposing of the piece at any number of different points in time. Another argument stifled by the concept of restorations is the account of different types of marble found on the piece that could place it at a later date and different time than the classical era. “The use of marble from Luna for the back of the altar that is part of the

46 Howard, "Laocoön Rerestored," [417].
group may date to sometime after 30 B.C., but this may well be a later restoration.” Though this date of 30 B.C. doesn’t interfere with the most commonly proposed dates of between 40 B.C. and 20 C.E., it only stands to obstruct the theory that the piece could have been created earlier in the 2nd Century B.C. unless of course the marble was attributed to restoration.

Another factor obstructed by the prospects of restoration are the inconsistencies concerning the coils of the serpents within the sculpture. “The coil that runs over Laocoön’s forearm and seems to join them winds around the elder boy’s arm also has a break that does not meet its ancient complement.” (Figures f and g). This is evident from the inconsistency on the back of the arm where the coils seem to meet in a discombobulated manner. Thus, these coils aren’t cohesive directly with where they should meet up. This implies that one of the restorers had turned the son to face the other subjects when at one point it was possible that the layout of the design was different and all of the characters were not facing the front.

Seymour Howard was the scholar that then proposed this new and more plausible design in the 1950’s, and then again with more evidence in 1989. He proposed that the Laocoön Group would be even more accurate were it to be reconstructed on a new pyramidal style plane and with new aspects of

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47 Isager, Pliny on Art and Society, [170].
reconstruction. These reconstructions not only place the piece in a more Hellenistic Baroque style but also help attribute it implicitly by doing so to a more classical era context. His reconstruction ideas attempt to rectify the damages done to the placing of the sculpture by 500+ years of inaccurate restorations and confusions over such restorations.

**New Proposal for Reconstruction**

The goal of Seymour Howard’s scholarly exploration of a reconstruction of the Laocoön Group sculpture is to propose ways in which reconstruction of the sculpture would better allow it to be seen as a more classical piece of work, not only contextually, but in terms of technique and structure as well. To do this, Howard explores the inconsistencies of the piece, both in terms of the initial construction of the group and also in terms of what was stylistically common for the Hellenistic Baroque era of Classical art. Ultimately, he proposes a concept of a more pyramidal design (figure b), which would not only change the frontality of the piece, but also increase the likeliness of the piece to have been created from one piece of stone at one point in time before the Renaissance reconstruction.

(Figure h). Howard, Seymour. “Laocoön Rerestored.” Seen April 10th, 2014.
He of course addresses the arms of the Laocoön and his older son, since it has been such a subject of discontent and argument. He agrees with the common understanding pervading today that the most accurate replication of the piece would involve the bent arm of both the father and the son, as opposed to the extended arms that have been favored in the past. Of this he states, “The greater compactness achieved by this change, which increases the force of the composition, the practicality of making the group in marble, and the movement into the third dimension is, I believe, a key to the reconstruction of the group.”49 The bent arm concept keeps the emotion within the subjects, in their downfall, as opposed to this symbolic reaching for escape and willpower, especially concerning the ideals of the Hellenistic period. Both the Greeks and the Romans would be more likely to observe in the Laocoön succumbing to his fate in exaggerated suffering, whereas the Renaissance was the embodiment of the ideals of the individual and an emphasis on individual’s will power.

As the sculpture is now, it is easy to get it confused with a piece of a different era, specifically speaking, the Renaissance. The frontality of the piece and the concept of one-dimensional viewing has consistently been an issue for scholars when observing this piece. To start, it has the appearance of being only viewable, arguably, from one perspective, meaning they believed for a long time that it was meant to be placed against an altar, where the back of the altar would be rendered unimportant. This doesn’t coincide with the common Hellenistic practice of creating a theatricality that is observable from multiple directions. Because of this, it has been said that “the frontal arrangement of the group is thus a sixteenth-century reconstruction that perhaps has nothing to do with the original composition of the Rhodian work.”50 So to speak, the relief-like composition that exists today is not cohesive to the traditional Baroque aspects of the other traits of the sculpture.

50 Frischer, “Laocoön an Annotated Chronology,” The Digital Sculpture Project. Quoted from Pinelli by Frischer.
Essential to this is the fact that the older son, the only subject not yet being bitten by a serpent, is displaced from the composition of the rest of the group. A pyramidal design would diminish this awkward gap between the father, younger son, and the older son, and change the single viewpoint that has been attributed to the group. “The older son was displaced perhaps as much as ninety degrees out of his original position, and the axis of the group was shifted about forty five degrees.” This would place him with his back against his father, his gaze more frontal, and creates a possible outline of an entire piece of marble the piece could’v been constructed from. “Laocoôn’s foot is now the starting point of the composition, which in its main lines is carried up and back like a great wave by the twisting movement of the central figure and the complementary forms of the flanking sons.” This now creates a flanking concept for the Laocoôn by his sons and also “like the right side of the younger son, so the near-vertical line of the elder son’s left side marks the outer corner of the original block and the end of the composition.” In this composition the knee of the priest would be facing directly forward, and thus full observation of the piece would actually require a rotation of the viewer around the sculpture.

Interestingly enough, this wasn’t the first time this concept was proposed or executed. Between 1750 and 1770, there was a Laocoôn Group case commissioned, one of which know resides in the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence and another in Dresden. In these pieces, “the figure of the older son is turned with its back to the father, establishing a more vivid and decipherable relationship in the exchange of glances among the three protagonists and inspiring a new compositional arrangement that is highly suggestive.” What is amazing about this composition, which is essentially the same as Howard’s, is that with the two sons flanking angled and slightly behind the centered priest, the glances that they exchange to the sides would actually be in the direction of one another. This creates a

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53 Ibid.
54 Frischer, "Laocoôn an Annotated Chronology," The Digital Sculpture Project.
relationship between the subjects that didn’t seem to exist in the restored composition and has caused confusion between scholars, wherein many believe that each of the characters are actually quite concerned only with themselves. Ultimately, “by lowering the right arms and by bringing them and the figure of the elder son closer to the core the stone is utilized much more effectively, with reduction of its size and elimination of much waste. Pliny’s remarkable observation at the original colossal group (perhaps recently discovered) was cut from a single block of stone is far more credible in light of the compact mass of this new composition.”


This pyramidal design also helps to make more sense of the inconsistencies within the piece concerning the coils of the serpents. With this design, the coils make more sense in terms of how they would flow consistently throughout the sculpture, attaching the subjects to one another. “Between the Elder Son and Laocoön, the only ancient parts that do touch (at the knot of coils) abut only tangentially

and at small thin quarter-moon surfaces smoothly finished like Renaissance patching for the Elder Son’s raised hand.”\textsuperscript{56} This means that a large portion of the coils that can be seen between subjects are probably of modern design. “The coil leading from Laocoön’s left hand to the Elder Son is of course almost entirely modern, and its ancient remnants point backward, as do the ancient coils over Laocoön’s forearm and around his leg, suggesting a convex group.”\textsuperscript{57} It is in large part because of the misconstructions of these coils that so much about the group becomes confusing. They also support the previous concept of a rotation of the sculpture as well. “The remnants of the original coils, then, indicate that the figure of the son should be turned about ninety degrees, i.e. parallel to the right side of the altar...”\textsuperscript{58}

There are a number of other factors that also attribute to the incorrect restorations that have been performed on this piece, and the exploitation of these mistakes can lead to a key in discovering more accurate observations on correct restoration in the future. Howard addresses these inconsistent aspects that give evidence to the differences between restorations and the original:

The massive rear part of the altar, reportedly made of Italian rather than Rhodian marble, is joined to the altar front, though not to the right corner piece, with large architectural iron cramp bars (once set in lead), like the one noted above, that joins the forearm coils of the father and son. There is, however, no dowel hole on the rear block to match the one on the back of the right altar corner, which suggest that they were made at different times (the altar corner also has a dowel hole in its underside, by which it was fastened to the lost ancient base).\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Howard, "Laocoön Rerested," [417].
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Howard, "On the Reconstruction of the Vatican," [366].
\textsuperscript{59} Howard, "Laocoön Rerested," [418].
There is also an awkward distance and relation between the left foot of the priest and his older misplaced son’s right foot that have raised questions in the past. “The antique fragments as set into the base are separated between the right foot of the boy and the left foot of the father not only by breaks but by filling marble between the edges, no parts of which will coincide.”\textsuperscript{60} This is obviously because the place in which the Elder Son is positioned is not where the son belongs in the general layout of the sculpture altogether.

Because of the proposal made by Howard, and even executed/proposed by some artists of the past, the piece has a more obvious and pervading Baroque style that coincides with the period in which it was expected to have emerged from in 1506 when it was discovered. These changes actually assist to favor an even earlier date of creation that most epigraphical evidence has supported in the past. This earlier date could place the piece at the hands and disposal of a number of Emperors in the first century CE, stylistically and structurally. Regardless of the differences that restorations have made throughout time, it doesn’t change the explicitly Baroque traditions of the piece, such as the theatricality, rendering of shade and light, dynamic and organic masses, and extreme sensuality of the surfaces.

The Sculpture

There is no doubt that just about every aspect of the piece can properly help to place the piece, at least its original, in the period of the Hellenistic Baroque. In the piece Laocoön and his sons are fighting off the serpents, one already penetrating the side of the younger son, and one biting the side of the priest, while wrapped around all three subjects. The piece is depicting a moment of pain and suffering during the initial cause of such suffering. This is explicitly a style concept that emerged during the Hellenistic period, wherein the audience is not observing the moment of repose and control before or after the action, but during the very moment of such action. Upon close inspection, this is subtly

\textsuperscript{60} Howard, "On the Reconstruction of the Vatican," [366].
interpreted which will be touched on later. G.E. Lessing, a scholar on the Laocoön, wrote that both art and literature “are imitative arts; the purpose of both is to awaken us in the liveliest, most sensate representations of their objects. They therefore have in common all the rules that follow from the concept of imitation, from this purpose. However, they make use of entirely different means for their imitations; and from the difference of these means all the specific rules for each art are to be derived,” placing excessive importance on the exact moment in time that artists choose to depict, nothing is left ignored.61 That being said, every aspect of the Laocoön is important in understanding the piece as a whole.

Ultimately, the piece has been claimed to be “designed for a single viewpoint,” such as from against a backdrop as opposed to in the center of a courtyard or the like.62 This “single viewpoint” is not exactly correct as, truthfully, each of the faces are turned in different directions, meaning from all directions but one, the viewer will be looking at the face of at least one of the subjects. This is even more pervasive concerning the new ideas presented on the proper reconstruction of the group. The only unobservable viewpoint of any interest would be a view from directly behind the piece, which excuses the notion that it may be placed against a single backdrop. This is one of the only aspects of the group that doesn’t correspond with popular execution of the Hellenistic Baroque as most often pieces were executed in a way to make them observable in the round. Interestingly, this can be attributed to another aspect of poor restoration, because a newly proposed pyramidal design actually renders the piece even more Hellenistic and not only observable from multiple viewpoints but also more likely to be constructed from one piece of marble as Pliny had stated.

“Laocoön throws up both arms in a gesture of wildest despair, while the sons are absolutely broken and helpless. The muscles are exaggerated; the hair is a wild entangled mess.”63 There is also

61 Wellbury, Lessing’s Laocoön: Semiotics and the Aesthetics, [103].
62 Smith, Hellenistic Sculpture, [109].
63 Bieber, Laocoön: The Influence of the Group, [5].
discrepancy in the way that the figures arms should be raised. Regardless, all of these examples are concepts of the Hellenistic Baroque, the new long, flowing hair as opposed to the previous crop, the reemergence of excessive muscle definition following the fourth century’s softness, and again, the moment of great despair. The contortion of the bodies shows the great pain that each subject could be feeling as the movements are almost subconscious, unnatural motions. Renaissance artist, Bernini, upon written reflection of seeing the sculpture, “even believed that he could discover the beginning of the effect of the poison of the snake in the thigh of the Laocoön by the stiffening of it.”

Seventeenth Century studies in art held portrayals of emotions and passions of the highest esteem when observing art. Because of this, the concept of an individual’s soul was of interest to scholars concerning how the soul affects the movement of the body, executing “a long tradition of forging links between man’s physical qualities and nature and man’s spiritual qualities.” Because of this, the piece should be viewed as though the experience of the priest is radiating not only from physical pain, but also emotional strain that is affecting the contortion of his body and the bodies of his sons:

One should also observe in the figure of the Laocoön the lively portrayal of extreme suffering which heats him and makes his blood boil and expands in all the veins of his body, in such a way that one sees them appear as though through the skin in various places, where the accomplished sculptor would not have shown them if he had represented Laocoön in a state of tranquility and without suffering.

64 Bieber, Laocoön: The Influence of the Group, [8].
Even though Descartes refuted this, stating that the soul does not interact with the movement of the body, although it is aware of the body, it is clear that the Laocoön’s suffering would appear to be internal as well as external.\(^{67}\)

It would be interesting to make a comparison to a Renaissance piece, specifically Bernini’s *Rape of Proserpina*, concerning how an artist executed the representation of emotions throughout the entire body. Arguably, closer attention to detail was paid during the Renaissance than during the Hellenistic Baroque. If the feet of the subjects of the *Laocoön Group* are closely observed, they do not show representation of any experience of pain, such as one would expect of an individual in pain. The feet of Laocoön and his sons could very well be on subjects who are not experiencing pain, whereas in the representation of characters in Renaissance art, such as Bernini’s piece, the toes curl and contort with the body in equal exaggeration and representation of pain. This is probably an example of the aesthetics of beauty reigning more important to the artist than thorough, and sometimes ugly, representation of pain.

This inability to depict the ugly is the concept of beauty employed that is not quite veristic even though the sculpture was executed as extremely realistic in proportion. The Greeks still maintained a certain level of restraint when depicting figures, to maintain beauty. Another good example of this is in the execution of the face of the priest and his sons. Arguably, the most severe and dramatic moment of action would be “to depict Laocoön screaming (the scream Virgil tells us of)” which would in turn “offend the laws of beauty.”\(^{68}\) The Greeks nearly never depicted any figure like such as it would create such a large void in the region of the mouth that it would be considered unappealing. This is “not because crying portrays an ignoble face, but because it disgustingly disfigures the face.”\(^{69}\) This can be considered, depicting the moment that Laocoön inhaled in preparation to scream, as depicting slight

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\(^{67}\) Descartes was a famous philosopher who often critiqued and referenced art throughout the ages in his philosophical study.  
\(^{68}\) Van Helsdingen, “Laocoön in the Seventeenth,” [127].  
repose, within the sense of inner emotions of the figure, but not in the physicality. Or symbolically, he is practicing some control over his emotions, as the shame culture that ancient Greece was, this would not be a stretch in assumption.

Argument has also been made about the depiction of the figures as naked, especially considering the fact that the main subject is a priest and would not have been naked ever publicly in antiquity. This has been equated to the idea that the artist chose to portray the subjects in a heroised manner, which would explain the facial repose. Concerning the aforementioned ways in which Greeks and Romans considered Laocoön, it would not be surprising that they escaladed him to the status of deified heroism. Again, the Greeks stressed aesthetic beauty and representation above all else in most cases. This is also represented in discussion during the Seventeenth century Laocoön Academy conference, where it was stated that:

Long and well-developed arms and well-articulated elbows are the signs of a person of integrity and as strong sinewy legs bear witness to a great heart, the craftsman who carved this figure of Laocoön did not fail to bestow on him the characteristics appropriate to that which he wished to portray... a person of high birth... His large hands, sinewy and as well-articulated as his feet, are the signs of a vigorous nature and beautiful soul. His prominent hips, broad chest and high shoulders are also marks of great courage of an honest man.\(^7\)

Clearly the physical depiction of the subjects, in addition to the symbolism of being nude in ancient Greece, work together in this piece to exaggerate the hero-status that eventually befell the priest in the eyes of the ancients and ancient artists.

Emphasis has also been placed on the idea that each figure within this group is essential to the group as a whole. “This abounding completeness, both poles of existence, are properties only of the

\(^7\) Van Helsdingen, “Laocoön in the Seventeenth,” [133].
whole group, but it gets them by virtue of the completeness of the individual figure. Neither one alone, each dependent on the other.”

This is interesting as symmetry has clearly been defined by, and within, the whole group. In other words, the piece works because it is a group, which may seem necessary to depict when depicting the myth, but not necessarily. The execution of the three is worth noting, and even more notable when the new pyramidal design is taken into account.

From this, scholars have made an attack on the priest saying that he is anything but concerned with his two sons, only showing remorse for himself. “No consciousness of their distress is evident either in his face or form, in which pain, terrible and blinding, seems to have smothered every other feeling.”

Here it may be noted that the only interaction of the subjects to each other is that the older son on the right looks up at his father, or seems to. In this respect then, we can assume that this is only because the older son is the only subject not yet being bitten. Like stated earlier, the viewer is experiencing one moment, and it happens to be one in which the priest and his younger son are preoccupied with being bitten, while the only visually involved subject is not being bitten.

Though the piece is extremely correct in proportion and stance, an aspect that has been criticized as unrealistic is the execution of the sea-serpents. Ernest Arthur Gardner stated that the piece “would be justified... if its realism was equaled by its correctness.” He continued: “the snakes have no truth to nature, but are zoological monstrosities... one of them is biting like a dog.”

As a depiction of a Greek myth that is concerned with God sent sea-serpents, it is unjustified to deem the piece less credible due to the fantastic depictions of the serpents. The myth itself is grandiose, and thus, the execution of the snakes relies little on reality because if it did, the piece would be hard pressed to be executed at all, for when was the last time that a known animal sent by a God attacked a human out of wraith for punishment?

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71 Kantorowicz, *The Inner Nature of Greek*, [58].
Nicolas Calas stated that “the function of art is to help us understand reality, both the inner reality of the self and the structural reality of the outside world.” Though depicting a myth, the artists did an exceptional job of representing such in as realistic a manner as possible, while maintaining an aesthetic beauty and control, though full of motion and emotion, which is common to Hellenistic Baroque. The only present issue is that when a piece is discovered with attributes of a historical art period, but dated before that time period it is an anomaly, restructuring the chronology of history. But, when a piece is discovered with attributes of an artistic time period, dated after the said time period, it becomes difficult to determine when exactly the piece was reasonably executed and whether or not it is an original.

**Pergamum**

One of the reasons for the confusion surrounding the dating of the Laocoön Group is because there are existing pieces from Classical Greece that can be related to the sculpture, whether it’s aesthetically, stylistically, or in execution. The Altar of Zeus at Pergamum, in Asia Minor, is a group of these pieces. There is no known direct relation between the two, it is merely the appearance of the sculptures in their similarity that causes such speculation. “Pliny tells us in Book 34, that bronze art did not exist during the Pergamene period and had a revival only in the 156th Olympiad (156 – 153 BCE). I should like to suggest that Pliny by this information implicitly states that Pergamum’s contribution to art history was marble sculpture in the Pergamene or Asiatic style. We do not know if Pliny connected the Laocoön with the Pergamene School, but by identifying the artists [the Rhodians] he definitely connects the group with a representative of the Asiatic school, i.e. the Rhodian [school].” This is essential because of the aesthetic and technological relations between the sculpture on the Altar and work of

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74 Calas, "The Laocoön: An Approach," [276].
75 Isager, *Pliny on Art and Society*, [172].
both Sperlonga, and the Laocoön Group, while at the same time all coincidentally belonging to the same school.

The altar consists of marble carved in high relief, spanning the almost entire perimeter of the architecture, save for the back. It is a representation of the Gigantomachy, which is the battle between the Giants and the Olympian Gods. This altar has been dated to the first half of 2nd century BC, and there has been diary entries found that have described the altar in the 15th Century, but it was not until the 17th Century that someone collected pieces and it was not discovered fully in modern times until the middle of the 19th century. This means that the piece easily could’ve been as inspiration to other artists in antiquity, but it is unlikely to have been inspiration for an artist such as Michelangelo, as it didn’t yet exist to the men of the Renaissance. Regardless, were he to have forged it, the blatant similarities between the execution of the individuals and the priest Laocoön, to be specific, are difficult to ignore. Not only could the piece have been inspiration to other artists in classical antiquity, the fact that it was created in Asia Minor attests to the fact that Rhodians would have definitely been exposed to it, and maybe even took hand in the piece through a generational workshop or school.

The similarity in question lies on the East Frieze of the Altar, in the face of a Giant being taken by a Goddess, believed to be Athena. There is a focus on the “sensuality of his [Laocoön’s] face which he shares with the giants of the Pergamum Frieze,” and both pieces are associated with Rhodes.76 “The stylistic correspondence with the Zeus Alter at Pergamum makes it virtually certain that either [the piece] or its original dates from the second century B.C.E.”77 Not only is the contortion of the body strikingly similar and curved in even the same direction as the Giant, but the thick mass and the heavy brow of the face is nearly the same. The left arm of the Giant is even being pulled back by the Goddess behind the head of the subject, tilting the head of the subject as well as pulling the body, just as the coil

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76 Onians, *Art and Thought in the Hellenistic*, [91].
77 Onians, *Art and Thought in the Hellenistic*, [90].
of the serpent does to the Laocoön’s left arm (Figure j). There also seems to be coils of a serpent wrapped around this figure as well, but for whatever reason has not been addressed. This frieze also attests to the fact that the Laocoön Group was probably part of a larger tableau as the theatricality of the piece and context of the story does not support its existence by itself. It has actually been considered a small and slightly insignificant aspect to the whole series of events that is the Trojan War.


Another interesting point is that Greek peninsula came under Roman rule during 146 BC, which is the second half of the 2nd century, and the rest of Greece followed in the preceding years. This means that the Altar of Zeus was constructed while Greece was still in rule of the Empire, even though they would fall shortly. Because of this, it is clear that Greeks had direct access to Pergamum and the art of the Rhodians as well. This means that the Laocoön that exists today could be based on a Pergamene workshop and could essentially be dated to the same period as the altar. But problematically, there are not many records of the Pergamum altar from antiquity, which is odd considering the great deal of works that were written about and this one seems to be quite colossal. Because of this, everything that can be mentioned about the similarities of the pieces can only be backed by speculation and no hard evidence up to this point in time. Regardless, these similarities and important contextual consistencies are ones in which Catterson ignored entirely in her article.
Tiberius, Sperlonga, and the Rhodians

The Laocoön Group has been a sculpture of antiquity that scholars have willingly mentioned briefly in relation to larger discussion about other sculptures, but the desire to elaborate on the piece is just not there. The Laocoön Group can be considered a “red-headed step-child” of ancient art. This is partially due to the fact that it is so widely disputed on such a large number of planes that nobody seems to want to make any specific statements about it or create any arguments because the evidentiary support just seems to be nonexistent. According to a New York Times article published in the last decade, Professor Wallace, a professor of Art History at the Washington University in St. Louis stated, concerning the piece that “the intriguing thing about [it] is that nobody who studies classical art in a way wants the Laocoön. They find it kind of a Hellenistic embarrassment, maybe because it really doesn’t look like anything else comparable in the history of classical art.”78 Like previously stated, this can easily be attributed to the number of restorations, incorrect restorations, and debates over context throughout history. Unfortunately, it has been restored to the point that it arguably doesn’t look classical anymore.

Though it may seem farfetched, there are a number of Roman Emperors that can be connected to the Laocoön group through a number of different factors. The remainder of this article will seek to entertain different ideas about a few Roman emperors that can be traced to the Laocoön Group through their personal lives and personal preferences on aesthetics and the time period in which they were in rule of the Roman Empire. This is concerned with some of the emperors of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian Empires, from Tiberius to Trajan.

For starters, an important note to touch on is the Philhellenism many Roman Emperors experienced when they were in rule. That is, the love and popularity of all things Greek they possessed.

and how spoils of Greece actually became a regular pastime of collecting. Many Emperors dressed Greek, behaved in Greek fashion, and acted as they believed Greeks would, including what many Romans believed to be participation in frivolous Greek activities and celebrations. Often this meant that the citizens of Rome and Emperors clashed on ideology of Greek worth. This obviously infringed upon the attitudes that Romans had concerning Greek Art. “As they struggled with, and eventually absorbed, the impact of Greek art, two fundamental attitudes toward it emerged – one of which I will call the ‘Catonian attitude’ and the other the ‘Connoisseur’s attitude’ – and a conflict between these two points of view can be seen to run from the end of the third century BC until as late as the reign of Vespasian.”

The Catonian attitude was an idea that the spoils of Greece, and a focus on art in general, was a waste of time and decay of the moral structure of the Roman Empire, which focused very seriously on conquest and military efforts. The Connoisseur’s attitude reflects the desires of a number of emperors that shall be discussed later in this article. It was an attitude that valued the art world and the knowledge that the art world could provide. The Connoisseur’s attitude was clearly in favor of the art and foreign Greek tastes, also forming private collections. Some of these Philhellenic Emperors were Tiberius, and also Nero.

In 1957, another discovery threw the origin of the poor Laocoön Group into confusion. At a dining grotto of an imperial villa there were many figures executed in the Hellenistic Baroque style but dated in the 1st Century A.D.80 The pieces inside depicted different scenes from the Trojan War, just as the Laocoön does, and apparently the style has been considered quite similar to that of the Laocoön. Also, “a signature was discovered at Sperlonga which gives their [these pieces] patronymics. The evidence from Sperlonga suggests that they [the artists] worked in the later 1st Century B.C.E. or in the early Imperial Period.” This is, of course, referring to the three previously stated artists, Athenodoros,

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79 Pollitt, "The Impact of Greek," [158].
80 Pedley, “Greek Art and Archaeology,” [369].
son of Agesander, Agesandros, son of Paionios, and Polydoros, son of Polydoros, that have been credited with the work, and the patrons of such had been alive during the same period in which the Laocoön has now been dated.\textsuperscript{81} The fact that the names of the fathers is included in the signatures is important, because “sons tended to remain in their fathers’ work-shops; in no instance can a Rhodian sculptor whose father was also a sculptor be shown to have established a separate workshop.”\textsuperscript{82} This means that chances are the work in Sperlonga was the work of three different workshops and the signatures belonged to men whose fathers were sculptors as well, meaning the workshops could have been in commission far before the time of the grotto at Sperlonga, and then inherited down through generations, as workshops were small and primarily family affairs. As for their names, there is no way to tell “if the artists are identical [between Sperlonga and the Laocoön] or if we are dealing with several generations of the same artistic family.”\textsuperscript{83} What’s difficult is that they did not sign as Rhodians, but that could’ve been attributed to the fame these workshops had during their lifetime, wherein they didn’t believe that they needed to specify location, and today the stylistic attributes point all signs to Rhodes.

The patron of this dining grotto was the Philhellenic Emperor Tiberius, who ruled Rome between 14 AD and 37 AD. “Most scholars now agree that the installation of the sculptures in the cave at Sperlonga dates to early in the 1\textsuperscript{st} century, somewhere between 4 AD and 26 AD, and they have been particularly associated with the emperor Tiberius.”\textsuperscript{84} This dining grotto was irrelevant to Tiberius’ political standing, in fact, it is reflective of his lack of desire to be an emperor to Rome in the first place. At one point he was considered in such a negative light that “one day, at a private dinner party attended by Gaius Caesar, Tiberius’ name cropped up, and a guest rose to say that if Gaius gave the order he would sail straight to Rhodes and ‘fetch back the Exile’s head’ – for he had come to be known as ‘the

\textsuperscript{81} Smith, \textit{Hellenistic Sculpture}, [109].
\textsuperscript{82} Goodlett, “Rhodian Sculpture Workshops,” [678].
\textsuperscript{83} Isager, \textit{Pliny on Art and Society}, [171].
\textsuperscript{84} Carey, “A Tradition of Adventures,” [47].
Exile."  

Tiberius regularly left his duties in Rome to visit other places he had enjoyed and even shirked his duties when he was in Rome, secluding himself. 

This was undoubtedly during what Suetonius called Tiberius’ retirement in 6 BC to Rhodes:

Tiberius’ motives had been hotly debated, and later Tiberius himself, if Suetonius is to be believed, offered two reasons, one at the time, and one later. At the time, trying to justify a total withdrawal from public life, he pretended to yearn for rest from his labours, claiming that he had had enough of honours, but later he is alleged to have said this his real reason for removing himself from the scene was a desire to avoid any appearance of friction. 

This friction has to do with the conduct of his wife, which was regularly an issue for him. It is rumored that he didn’t love his wife, Julia, and in actuality loved his first wife more but had to marry again for political reasons. This caused him many emotional disturbances throughout life, and was probably a leading cause to his lethargy concerning his political duties. Another reason he wanted to avoid friction was because he did not want to overshadow the next in line to rule, Gaius and Lucius, Julia’s sons. So he removed himself from the situation entirely, even before he was named Emperor. The relevance of all of this is that he had spent time on Rhodes, giving him an opportunity to meet Rhodians and become acquainted with workshops in the area, while being exposed to the art work that was present there. This is very well where he could’ve gotten a taste for Rhodian work. “Clearly, the mixture of an updated Lysippan style and the last word in the Pergamene baroque that was the three Rhodian’s specialty would have catered very adequately for Tiberius’s tastes in sculpture.”

“On his return to Rome Tiberius introduced his son Drusus to public life, but immediately afterwards moved from the house of the Pompey’s in the ‘Keels’ to another residence in the Gardens of

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85 Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, [121].
86 Seager, *Tiberius*, [30].
87 Stewart, "To Entertain an Emperor," [85].
Maecenas on the Esquiline Hill where he lived in strict retirement merely looking after his private affairs and undertaking no official duties.”

This is obviously prior to the fire of 60 AD that destroyed the Gardens. But the fact that Tiberius is related to the Sperlonga statuary groups and also lived where the Laocoön Group was found by the Servian Wall is too coincidental to ignore. Perhaps the piece was left there after he departed and the area was destroyed and abandoned. He was known for keeping personal artworks by his side in his living quarters. “After Augustus’s death, his struggle to preserve Greek art in Rome as a public possession took a strange turn, and the roles of the Emperor and public were reversed: Tiberius and the later Julio-Claudians apparently attempted to reconvert it to private use, and they were resisted by an irate public.”

Tiberius was even rumored to have removed the Apoxymenos of Lysippos (another reminder of the style in which he enjoyed in art) because he adored it so much he had it put in his room. Obviously, public outrage made it necessary that he return it to the Baths of Agrippa from which he took it.

The point of mentioning the grotto at Sperlonga is to make the connection between the stylistic and contextual similarities that exist between the Laocoön Group and the Trojan War figures within the cave. The four statuary groups that exist in the Grotto are the Pasquino group, the Palladium group, the Polyphemus group, and the Scylla group. “While there are clear similarities in style between two of the Sperlonga groups – the Blinding of Polyphemus and the encounter with the Scylla – and the Laocoön (most notably in the leonine hair and agonized expressions of Polyphemus, and the helmsman in the Scylla group), attention has focused primarily on the inscription in Greek on the boat of the Scylla group naming the three artists to who Pliny the Elder attributed the creation of the Laocoön, Hagesander, Athenadoros, and Polydorus.”

(Figures k and l). One of the issues with the signatures on the Scylla group in relation to Pliny is that he used the word “Rhodios” to describe the men, which could have

88 Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, [122].
89 Pollitt, "The Impact of Greek," [167].
been related to the style, technique, or even location. Unfortunately, “the evidence of the sculptors’ signatures strongly suggests that there is not a single definition for the ethnic Rhodios.”\textsuperscript{91}


(Figure l). “Detail of Scylla Group.” \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Head_Odysseus_MAR_Sperlonga.jpg}; Seen April 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2014.

There are many conspicuous connections that can be made between the Laocoön Group, the Sperlonga Grotto, and implicitly, Emperor Tiberius. The similarities in style, technique, and the coincidental relationships between the Rhodians and the time periods in which all of the works have been dated are enough to make anyone question why further connections have not been made or discovered. But, Emperor Tiberius wasn’t the only emperor of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century AD that would have a motive and desire to obtain or commission a piece like the Laocoön Group, and it is even possible that it was attained by the passing down of generations.

\textbf{Nero and his “Golden House”}

Emperor Nero ruled between the years of 54 AD and 68 AD. He is well-known as the “Greek” Emperor, being one of the most famous Philhellenic Emperors that ever ruled. He was Philhellenic to the point that he was disliked for this and has actually acquired a negative reputation throughout history, despite all of his good works that he committed for his people. He also received a reputation of a

\textsuperscript{91} Goodlett, "Rhodian Sculpture Workshops," [681].
frivolous spender, who set out to create the most extravagant of palaces that Rome had ever seen. “Nero, with his acquisitiveness, his implied disdain for Roman taste, and his extravagance can be considered the last great apostle of what I have called the “connoisseur’s attitude.”” 92

Nero believed himself to be so Greek that he often funded and participated in many activities that were essentially considered Greek, such as performing in Greek Tragedies, which he loved. He was also no stranger to the art world and spoils of conquest, while “vast numbers of works of art, however, were collected from Greece and other parts of the Empire, and brought to Rome for embellishment of the palace and city; and it is said that Nero’s seizure of famous statues was bitterly resented by the municipalities from which they were taken.” 93 He was not the first and only Emperor to do this, but he is definitely known for it based on how much he plundered from other lands. According to Weigall, “the beautiful Apollo Belvedere, and the Fighting Gladiator were found in his house at Antium and the famous Laocoön comes from his palace in Rome.” 94 This last statement about the Laocoön sculpture coming from his palace in Rome is a skeptical one. But it is interesting because some scholars have equated the Laocoön’s finding spot to the architecture that Nero erected, or attempted to, on the Esquiline Hill, as opposed to earlier or later architecture that also occupied the Esquiline Hill at some point in time. This means that scholars have also debated the Laocoön either coming to existence at this date in time, or even being inherited by the Emperor Nero. “The news available as regards to the finding of the famous group is very uncertain – so much so that it is even doubtful whether it appertained to the Golden House and not to the Trajan Baths, which is more likely.” 95

Nero was extremely involved in the architecture that took place in the city. “He was also said to be offended by the ugliness of the ancient buildings and the narrow winding streets, and a play written

92 Pollitt, "The Impact of Greek," [168]. This attitude was mentioned earlier, and recognizes Nero’s fervent love of all things Greek and his desire to collect Greek art.
93 Weigall, Nero: The Singing Emperor, [306].
94 Weigall, Nero: The Singing Emperor, [279].
soon after his death claims that he wanted to take revenge on his people for their support in 62 [AD] of his discarded wife, Octavia.”¹⁹⁶ But, this has to do with his being accused of having involvement in the great Roman fire of 64 AD, which has been disputed by scholars for generations. His involvement in the fire has been negated mostly because in Rome in the 1st Century AD, “accidents were all too likely. The city of Rome, over-crowded, poorly constructed, and inadequately protected by fire-fighting forces, constantly suffered major fires.”¹⁹⁷ This is even further disregarded when one realizes the many different fire-resistant changes Nero made to the city after this fire. It is said that he made sure that “in multi-storied buildings the amount of lumber was reduced in favor of solid stone and each unit had its own walls on every side; water supply to the quarters was guaranteed and fire extinguishers were provided to every building.”¹⁹⁸ This fire devastated the Domus Transitoria that was under construction by Nero, which “according to Tacitus and Suetonius (Annals 15.39.1; Nero 31.1), it outshone every luxury building that had been constructed before. (LTUR II (1995) 199-202).”¹⁹⁹

This Domus Transitoria connected the imperial estates on the Esquiline Hill to the Palatine Hill, which was the Gardens of Maecenas, though no one knows where exactly it accomplished these connections, just that it was bridged in the valley between the Oppian and Palatine Hill. Regardless, like most of the city, the Domus was burned to the ground in the 6 day 64 AD fire. From this point on, Nero began his work on a palace he called the Domus Aurea, or the “Golden House.” This Golden House sought to accomplish the same thing that the Domus Transitoria had, only on a much larger, and grandiose scale, replacing the area that would’ve been occupied by the Domus Transitoria. “The strongly disapproving Elder Pliny asserted explicitly, not once, but twice, that the Golden House surrounded Rome.”¹⁰⁰ This new palace covered over 80 hectares when including the Gardens of Maecenas and

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¹⁹⁶ Champlin, Nero, [182].
¹⁹⁷ Champlin, Nero, [183].
¹⁹⁸ Beste and Hesberg, “Buildings of an Emperor,” in A Companion to the Neronian, [315].
¹⁹⁹ Beste and Hesberg, “Buildings of an Emperor,” in A Companion to the Neronian, [322].
¹⁰⁰ Champlin, Nero, [202].
Luminus, and was considered much more luxurious than the plans for the prior palace. Though “the “Golden House” was not a house at all, but a large suburban villa set down in the heart of the city, *rus in urbe.*”\(^\text{101}\)

Of the Golden House, according to Suetonius:

The entrance-hall was large enough to contain a huge statue of himself, 120 feet high; and the pillared arcade ran for a whole mile. An enormous pool, like a sea, was surrounded by buildings made to resemble cities, and by a landscape garden consisting of ploughed fields, vineyards, pastures, and woodlands – where every variety of domestic and wild animal roamed about. Parts of the house were overlaid with gold and studded with precious stones and mother-of-pearl. All the dining-rooms had ceilings of fretted ivory, the panels of which could slide back and let a rain of flowers, or of perfume from hidden sprinklers, shower upon his guests. The main dining-room was circular, and its roof revolved, day and night, in time with the sky. Sea water, or sulphur water, was always on tap in the baths.\(^\text{102}\)

\(^{101}\) Champlin, *Nero,* [131].

\(^{102}\) Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars,* [229].
The reason that this is important is because of the clear reasons in which Nero would acquire all the art that he could as he was “himself an amateur sculptor of merit, he filled the palace with masterpieces in stone and metal, [and] his love of genius of the ancient Greeks being instanced by the fact that he had the statuette of an Amazon, the work of Strongylion, the famous Greek sculptor of the 5th Century BC was carried about him wherever he went.”\(^{103}\) He was extravagant in all that he did and clearly a piece like the Laocoön, in its Hellenistic Baroque appearance would’ve appealed to him. This Hellenistic style was something that became quite popular:

> The question of whether the complex should be understood as a particularly lavish Roman mansion, providing maximum luxury, or as an imitation of Hellenistic and oriental palaces and their ornamental gardens informs our perspective on Nero’s building activities. From its beginnings, however, the Roman villa itself progressively combined the agrarian part of the old manors with the concept of Hellenistic luxury living, so that since the late Republic high-end specifications and luxurious features had become the norm in the Roman villas.\(^{104}\)

This explains why he would fill a palace of this caliber and style with Greek art, especially art he plundered. This becomes even more relevant when it becomes apparent that he knew and was involved with Rhodians, just like the emperor Tiberius had. This involvement actually started when he was just 15, and he convinced the Emperor Claudius to free the people of Rhodes. Ancient poetry states that Rhodes was the island of the Sun because the praise of the sun god Apollo was more prevalent there than anyone else, and after the act of Nero, became the island of Caesar.\(^{105}\)

The construction of the Golden House came with a very colossal statue that Nero commissioned to stand alongside his new palace. “At 119.5 feet (over 35 meters) high, the nude statue with the

\(^{103}\) Weigall, *Nero: The Singing Emperor*, [279].  
\(^{104}\) Beste and Hesberg, "Buildings of an Emperor," in *A Companion to the Neronian*, [326].  
\(^{105}\) An epigram by Antiphilus of Byzantium in the Greek Anthology is where such a poem can be found.
features of the final Nero portrait type is the largest in antiquity, surpassing even the famous Colossus of Rhodes, which may have been its model; the New York Statue of Liberty, without plinth, measures 46.5 m."\(^{106}\) There is argument over whether the piece was to mimic the Sun God, Apollo, or the Emperor Nero, as many have said that the statue possesses Nero’s features. But, if Rhodes was inspiration, and it was the island of the Sun, it is very likely that because of how Nero felt about Apollo. Nero reportedly had an obsession with Apollo, and “his interest in Apollo and the Sun was a matter of ideology, not of theology. He did not actually identify himself with gods; he did not think himself divine; nor did he wish others to deify him. This is made clear in his decisive rejection of the divine honors which were offered to him not only at the beginning of his reign, but even a decade later.”\(^{107}\) The important part of the existence of this statue is that it was reflective of Rhodian work, this can be seen when Champlin comments on “the mass of the marvelous Colossus,” where he states that it was “crowned with rays, delights in overcoming the work of Rhodes.”\(^{108}\) This is because the piece is said to have taken inspiration from the Colossus of Rhodes. It is interesting that Nero appreciated and had connection with Rhodes when he was young, and grew up to have an obsession with the Sun God who just happened to be related to Rhodes.

Had Nero come into contact with an already existing Laocoön Group, whether from a previous emperor (such as Tiberius), or even by plunder, he would’ve undoubtedly kept it or moved it to his palace. He also had the means and regular desire to have commissioned a piece such as the Laocoön Group at once point if he so pleased. He was philhellenic, extravagant and frivolous enough to have had involvement with the piece, and intentionally made place for pieces of his finding to exist.

\(^{106}\) Mratschek, "Nero the Imperial Misfit," in A Companion to the Neronian, [52].
\(^{107}\) Champlin, Nero, [132].
\(^{108}\) Champlin, Nero, [130].
Vespasian and His Sons

If anyone knows the history of Nero well enough, then they also know that Vespasian has often been compared to him as his polar opposite. According to J.J. Pollitt, “If Nero was the last apostle of the connoisseur’s attitude, Vespasian should be seen as the last major spokesman for the Catonian attitude.” Vespasian ruled between 69 AD and 79 AD. Even though Vespasian was not the Emperor immediately following Nero, he did the most in an attempt to rectify the changes Nero made to the Empire while Nero was in rule. The importance of Vespasian in a chronological account is because of the places he lived that coincide with the statue of the Laocoön Group and locations in which it may have existed in terms of other Emperors before his rule. Not only that, but his elder son, who ruled after him in succession was the Emperor Titus, which is whom Pliny mentioned housed the sculpture and was owner of it.

What exactly happened to the Domus after Nero’s death is uncertain, even though that it is rumored that partisans of him offered up money to have it finished. Despite this, many believed that Nero lived inadequately, including his wife at the time, even in the luxurious “Golden House.” Inadequately as in simply, he was definitely a connoisseur of fine art, but as for decoration and furniture, it can be believed he was not interested in it to the same degree. Regardless, Vespasian set orders to dismantle the Golden House and return the area to the people of Rome, “leaving only quite a small part standing, in which he himself and Titus resided for some time. It may have been here that Pliny saw the celebrated Laocoön Group…” Where was this residence within the Golden House? Was it the place in which the Laocoön Group was? Did Titus take a liking to the piece and keep it for himself? The likeliness of this is not high as Titus would’ve followed his father’s example, and doubtful that his father would allow him to retain a piece of antiquity, unless it was decided that it was not of antiquity,

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109 Pollitt, “The Impact of Greek,” [168].
111 Lugli, Nero’s Golden House and the Trojan, [10].
but instead a copy of an original. All of the pieces of art in the Golden House that were looted by Nero had then been returned to the public and placed in one of Vespasian’s sanctuary’s he had erected for the people, near the forum, the Templum Pacis.\footnote{Temple of Peace.} This was part of Vespasian’s desire to return the art back to the public as Augustus had desired it. He “revoked the liberty granted to Greece by Nero, opened the Golden House to the public, and dedicated to Colossus of Nero to the Sun [officially].”\footnote{Champlin, Nero, [9].} According to Pliny, “Of all the works that I have enumerated the most famous are to be found in Rome today, dedicated by the Emperor Vespasian in his Templum Pacis and in his other buildings. They were brought to Rome by Nero as plunder and were displayed throughout the intimate rooms of the Domus Aurea.”\footnote{Isager, Pliny on Art and Society, [103]. “Atque ex omnibus quae rettuli clarissima quaeque in urbe iam sunt dicata a Vespasiano princepe in templo Pacis aliisque eius operibus, violentia Neronis in urbem conuecta et in sellariis domus aureae disposita.”} But, the important part is that the sculpture was not found in the Temple of Peace, but instead, in what Pliny claimed was the living quarters of Titus at the time, and where exactly was that?

Another important point that is made is that “after the time of Vespasian we do not hear much more about the importance or the function of Greek art in Rome; nor do we hear anything more about the related controversy as to whether it should be public or private property.”\footnote{Pollitt, "The Impact of Greek," [169].} Considering the political uproar that privatizing ancient art had caused up until this point, it can only be assumed that many of the following emperors did not indulge in keeping public art from the public. So why did Pliny state that the piece belonged to Titus during his short rule from 79 AD to 81 AD, and where was his residence? The way in which Suetonius describes Titus would lead one to believe that he wouldn’t desire to keep any art as private luxury:

> He never took anything away from any citizen, but showed the greatest respect for private property, and would not even accept the gifts that were permissible and customary. Nor had any of his predecessors ever displayed such generosity. At the
dedication of his Amphitheatre and the Baths, which had been hastily built beside it, Titus provided a most lavish gladiatorial show; he also staged a sea fight on the old artificial lake, and when the water had been let out, used the basin for further gladiatorial contests and a wild-beast hunt, 5,000 beasts of different sorts dying in a single day.\textsuperscript{116}

Suetonius also stated that after another great fire in Rome during Titus’s rule, that he discarded his own personal palaces of all the decoration within them and distributed them among the damaged buildings and temples. He appointed his men to set to this project and made sure it was completed thoroughly.\textsuperscript{117} Once again, this doesn’t represent an emperor that would be keeping art for himself. That being said, maybe since the Empire was under the rule of Titus at the time that is why Pliny stated that the art was his. It has been said that he treated his people like a loving father would. Perhaps it belonged to a public forum that either Titus dedicated to the city, or that he sometimes resided in as well.

Titus’s younger brother was an Emperor next in succession named Domitian. There has been speculation as to Titus’s death amongst scholars where some believe that Domitian had actually assassinated his brother in some way, as he was never happy that he ascended the throne before himself. According to Suetonius:

\begin{quote}
When Titus fell suddenly and dangerously ill, Domitian told the attendants to leave him for dead before he had actually breathed his last; and afterwards granted him no recognition at all, beyond approving his deification.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

This doesn’t sound like an Emperor who would be interested in preserving the belongings of the prior emperor and his older brother. It is very little evidence that Domitian was at all interested in art

\textsuperscript{116} Suetonius, \textit{The Twelve Caesars}, [295].
\textsuperscript{117} Suetonius, \textit{The Twelve Caesars}, [298].
\textsuperscript{118} Suetonius, \textit{The Twelve Caesars}, [301].
during his reign. What does become interesting is that it is believed he actually had a hand in the construction of the area of the Golden House where the Trajan Baths would eventually be, another place in which scholars have claimed the Laocoön Group was found. This is disputed by scholars, and it is not widely agreed upon, but “late sources insist in attributing a large part of the work [Trajan Baths] to this emperor and call them the *Thermae Domitiana sive Travianae, or Thermae Domitianae quae nunc cognominatur Traianae.***”¹¹⁹ Though Domitian was believed to be much more frivolous with amenities than his father and brother, there still isn’t much evidence of his possible relation to the piece aside from excess of what has been proposed here.

**Trajan and His Baths**

Regardless, popular belief is that “the major builder of them [the baths] was Trajan, who left his name to the majestic edifice and inaugurated it about 110 AD.”¹²⁰ Obviously Trajan and his baths are important because it was initially the place in which scholars believed the piece to have been found, in the “Sette sale.” Clearly, that has been widely disputed and there have been an array of other places also located on the Esquiline Hill throughout the 1st century that also could have housed the statue. The Trajan Baths are specifically on the Oppian Hill, just like the Servian Wall, the place in which the sculpture was found near. These baths were made from mostly concrete and brick, and covered an area of about 1,033 x 1,082 feet.¹²¹ What makes this difficult is how little actually remains of the Baths. “The principle remains are two great apses, one of the outer enclosure near the east corner, and the other of the eastern exercise court. Both are buried up to a certain height, and are adorned with niches at the bottom and coffers in the vault, hexagonal in the first case and trapezoidal in the second, faced with painted stucco-work.”¹²²

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¹¹⁹ Lugli, *Nero’s Golden House and the Trojan*, [33].
¹²⁰ Ibid.
¹²¹ Bennett, “Pater Patriae,” in *Trajan: Optimus Princeps*, [152].
The Baths were oriented towards to South, for maximum sunlight to enter into it, especially during the winters. The building was very open and airy, with a square natation, which was a pool, surrounded by porticoes, and open to apodyteria, which was a changing room. It was also connected to two symmetrical quatrefoil rooms, and then all of the rooms typical of a Roman bath were there as well, including a frigidarium, calidarium, palestrae, and a gym. There was also libraries, small rooms for teaching, and meetings, and also a theater for displays.

What is striking is some of the existing work that has been found in the Baths that is questionable. In the past, there were “many statues discovered at the time of Faminio Vacca (16th Century) and another twenty-five discovered by Cardinal Trivulzio in 1547; an alter to Jupiter with a dedication to Vespasian (Giulio Brunelleschi).” The dedication to Vespasian is interesting, it is debatable as to who would have been more likely to have a statue dedicated to Vespasian, between Domitian and Trajan. Domitian was not fond of his father and older brother, but if he did in fact have it dedicated it means that he had more of a hand in the Trajan Baths than most people realize.

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123 “Cold Baths,” “Hot Baths,” “Place for Athletics.”
124 Lugli, *Nero’s Golden House and the Trajan*, [35].
Like what is known of Titus, Trajan was also an emperor who appreciated a good reputation with his citizens. He was very careful to avoid allegations of vain status or selfish traits. He consciously refused to add onto the Domus Tiberiana and constantly decided against building palaces on any scale, especially nothing comparable to the excess frivolities practiced and executed by Nero and Domitian. Instead, he made it his sole purpose to enforce only amenities that served the citizens of his Empire. Again, this means he wouldn’t be likely to keep the piece for personal use, but would definitely display such a piece within his public palaces, such as the Baths.

Recently there has been uncovered a mosaic of Apollo in the Sette Sale, which is where the sculpture of the Laocoön Group was originally believed to be found. “The mosaic-covered wall is 16 meters (53 feet) wide and at least 2 meters (6.6 feet) high. Officials think the wall continues down some 8 meters (26.5 feet) more.”

It is believed to be located in a tunnel that was used as support for the Trajan Baths above, and also served as a room where Romans could gather and listen to music together, which is the obvious assumption as Apollo is a god of music and the lyre.

This is relevant because the Laocoön Group may have been located in the Sette Sale at one point, and arguably could have been found there, as the reports from 1506 are so uncertain and vague. Laocoön may very well have been a priest of Apollo, as is debated by some scholars and differently interpreted by different philosophers throughout time. Because of this, it again puts the Laocoön at home in the context of the area. This is why it was important to discuss the multiple variations of the myth that have existed throughout time, because a piece of context may arise that helps to support a possible location of the Laocoön Group, such as this.

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125 "Dig Under Ancient Trajan's," The Telegraph.
Conclusion

Fortunately, the unexplained mysteries of origin that pervade the existence of the Laocoön Group are the reasons in which it has maintained the level of popularity it has in terms of popular art history. As much as scholars would love to have all the answers, it is safe to say that there would be no need for scholarly study if that was the case. Though there are a number of different theories on the origins of the piece, not any one is necessarily right or wrong, some are just more properly supported than others. Regardless of all else, it stands as a magnificent representation of what could possibly be a fine piece of antiquity. Even if the piece has been altered extensively, damaging its reputation, it is safe to say that it is of the best Hellenistic Baroque representations that exists to this day.
Bibliography


