On *Laocoön and His Sons* and the Body in Agony

Tucked away in a small alcove at the Pio-Clementine Museum of the Vatican, one may stumble upon Laocoön and His Sons, the nearly life-sized depiction of a Trojan priest frozen and contorted in marble. According to Pliny the Elder, this Hellenistic era piece was the work of three Rhodian sculptors from the second century BCE. Though we do not know the exact date of this piece, we immediately recognize the story behind it. Laocoön, smited by Athena, has been blinded and chased by sea serpents in a dramatic personification of human agony. Unlike Judeo-Christian art, with martyrs and the Passion of Christ, Greco-Roman art is littered with stories of suffering with no redemption. Using similar staging and musculature techniques, sculptors have rendered bodies in "classical" agony throughout art history.

Done in Parian Marble, Laocoön and His Sons is a true Hellenistic marvel. The facial expression on Laocoön is one of complete anguish, his eyebrows are furrowed beyond human physiology, his coiled hair contrasts with the worry lines on his forehead, and he gazes upward with pleading eyes. His younger son is limp, already dead from the serpent's bite, and his older son looks towards his father with fear and fatigue on his brow and scrunched nose[1]. The dramatic tone of the piece is aided by the staging; Laocoön's legs jut backward, his chest towards the front, and his head tosses backwards. This strong C-shape makes the scene feel "in the moment" as if the serpents have just bitten Laocoön and we are seeing his live reaction. The sculpture's musculature is another defining factor. In the younger son, we see very little musculature. The boy is entirely wrapped by a serpent and lacks the exaggerated muscles of the rest of the composition. This lack of muscle helps convey his mortality as he grasps the serpent's head[2]. Laocoön, in contrast, is shown as the ideal human form, highly muscular and veiny as he kicks

[1] Victoria Kubale, Laocoön and His Sons, (Berlin: Humboldt Universität, 2015), 59.
[2] Ibid., 64.

and pulls away from the serpents. The contorted muscles and staging as he tries to break free are a case study in Hellenistic form as the human body clashes with divine natural forces.

These methods of depicting man's struggle against the natural world did not emerge in a vacuum but were built off of pre-existing ideals of sculpture from the Classical period. In the Southern Metope XXX of the Athenian Parthenon, ca. 447–433 BC, we see an early attempt at capturing Classical agony. Designed by Pheidias, the metope now stands in the British Museum with other metopes of the Centauromachy. Here, a Centaur towers over a defeated Lapith as he prepares to deliver a final blow. The staging here is questionable- we see two figures in high relief that exist without much interaction- as if they were carved separately rather than part of the same scene. Unlike the Hellenistic Laocoön with its circling snakes and sharp C-shaped bend, the two figures' only interactions are the Centaur pulling the Lapith's hair and the Centaurs hoof, which stands on the Lapith's right leg, though we do not see any response to the action. The metope is also a "post-action" frame where the Lapith has already been defeated. This agony without redemption is shown too late and lacks the same drama as the Hellenistic statue which invites us to pity Laocoön. The Classical musculature is more severe; we do not see the Hellenistic focus on veins or curvature, but rather a neo-Archaic geometric rendering of legs and angular torsos without definition. Laocoön represents an obvious step towards realism and works off of these rudimentary methods to improve its own depiction of emotion.

Later attempts to capture Classical agony drew from these methods, but also added their aesthetic twist. Take Bernini's 1622 Apollo and Daphne, a larger than life sized marble depiction of a scene from Ovid's Metamorphosis. Now at the Galleria Borghese in Rome, the statue shows a pagan scene with Christian moral undertones of unchecked desire. The staging is reminiscent of the Hellenistic in the way Bernini has intertwined his figures. Daphne appears contorted as she pushes away from her pursuer like Laocoön and his snakes. Her legs, torso, and face all move in

different directions, creating the C-shape seen a millennium before. Her body extends unnaturally as a physical manifestation of the agony and fear she experiences. Her torso is dented and marked by Apollo's hands, just like Laocoön's from a snake's bite. The figures are physically touching and reacting to one another, unlike the static depictions of the Classical era. We are also aware of motion as we see the bodies in action. Apollo steps into the scene with a foot completely removed from the plinth[3]. This is a progression from the Hellenistic framing, as we see the figures move into the scene and our gaze. The musculature of the two figures represents a divergence from the Hellenistic ideal human form. Bernini makes his characters more lifelike; their arms are slightly curved and their torsos have folds to them. Unlike the exaggerated muscles of Laocoön, Apollo and Daphne appears softer, rounder, and in line with humanism. We see clear callbacks to Laocoön and Hellenistic design in this Baroque piece, but there is an obvious descent with modification.

These three statues provide an interesting case study of the development of Western art. We see three Classical scenes of agony without redemption, displayed with varying degrees of positioning and musculature. Laocoön emerges as a midpoint between the Classical and Baroque and gives us a glimpse into the evolution of art. The development of responsive positioning and the C-shape contortion provides a linear progression in the development of art, constantly improving the ways sculptors show their figures "in the moment." From the severe and geometric depictions of muscles in the Classical to the rounded human form in the Baroque, Laocoön and Hellenistic art represents the time when the human ideal was the chief subject of art and contemplation. *Laocoön and Sons* help us understand the common methods sculptors have used to capture it throughout a millennium of art.

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[3] Barolsky, Paul. "Ovid, Bernini, and the Art of Petrification." (Boston, Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics) 159.