



Laocoön and the Sea Serpents

by Cathy Callaway, Museum Educator

The Museum of Art and Archaeology hosts a collection of plaster casts, based on original works from antiquity. The term “cast” refers to a plaster or metal replica made from a mold taken directly from an original sculpture or relief. This practice was invented in ancient times and subsequent interest in antiquities led to the collection of casts in bronze and plaster in Europe as well as in America, where many nineteenth and early-twentieth century universities, museums, and academies built extensive cast collections.

The University of Missouri owns about 100 plaster casts of sculpture, mainly Greek and Roman, but eleven represent later periods. Four of the casts were gifts of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 1973, but the bulk of the collection was acquired for the University in 1895 and 1902 by Dr. John Pickard (1858–1937), a professor of Classical Art and Archaeology.

A tradition arose that the University’s casts were exhibited at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition World’s Fair in St. Louis, but this has been disproved. In fact, a German dealer displayed some of his casts at the World’s Fair, then sold them, and they can now be seen in the Alumni Center of Southeast Missouri State University.

A cast of the “Laocoön group,” the original of which is now in the Vatican Museums in Rome, especially attracts the attention of visitors. The drama depicted in the sculpture, the contorted faces and straining muscles, is compelling. The group has been the subject of admiration and controversy over the centuries. It was excavated in Rome in 1506 and provided great inspiration to the sculptor Michelangelo (1475–1564; there is even a theory that the entire sculpture was a forgery BY Michelangelo).

What is the story? The Roman poet Vergil describes the death of Laocoön (“LAH ah koh ahn”) and his sons in Book II of the *Aeneid*, in which the hero Aeneas describes the fall of Troy at the hands of the Greeks. Laocoön, a priest of Apollo in Troy, rushed down to the group of Trojans, who were deliberating what to do with the large wooden horse the Greeks had left behind. He warns them not to take

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Cast Gallery, Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri



*Laocoön Group, Plaster Cast
Cast Gallery, Museum of Art and Archaeology*



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

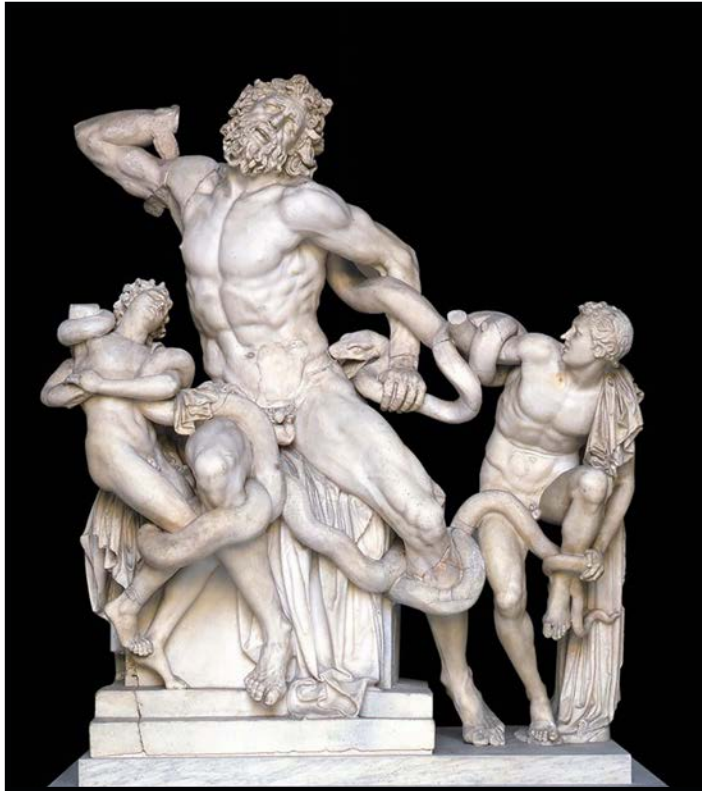
the horse into their walls, because it is a trick of the Greeks (Latin: *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentis*). The gods, seeking to end the Trojan War, decide to punish Laocoön for telling the truth and send sea serpents to attack the priest and his sons. [There are other versions of this story, as is the case for many myths.] The Trojans, unaware that the huge wooden structure is filled with Greek soldiers, decide this sign from the gods means that they must take the horse into Troy.

Vergil and an earlier poet describe both sons* in the throes of death from the serpents before Laocoön

arrives, but in the sculpture, the elder son looks alive and perhaps escaping, since he is busy trying to remove a coil of a serpent from his left foot. There are different versions of the story told by other poets in antiquity: one has Laocoön and only one son perish, and in another version, both sons are killed while Laocoön survives. When the original was found in 1506, the older son on the right, was detached from the other two figures.

Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE, a Roman author, who died in the eruption of Vesuvius) attributes the original statue to three Greek sculptors from Rhodes (Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus) and describes seeing it in the palace of the Emperor Titus, but does not give a date for the group. Various dates have been suggested, from 200 BCE to the 70s CE. The statue could be an original Roman marble or a marble copy of an earlier Greek sculpture, which may explain the confusion about the dates. The three Rhodian sculptors were known for their skills as copyists, which suggests that the Vatican Laocoön is a copy of a Greek Hellenistic bronze, making the Museum's cast a copy of a copy, a not unusual occurrence. Interestingly, many copies have since been made of the Laocoön, including a bronze version now in the Uffizi Gallery (Florence), and a bronze casting, now at the Louvre in Paris. ■

* Antiphantes and Thymbraeus. We also have the names of the serpents, who slithered off to rest under the statue of Athena in Troy after fulfilling their mission.



Laocoön marble group with bent arm, Vatican Museums

At the time of its discovery, several parts were missing, including Laocoön's right arm; Michelangelo suggested that the missing right arm was originally bent back over the shoulder. According to Vasari (1511–1574; a biographer of Renaissance artists) there was an informal contest, judged by the artist Raphael, to replace the arm. An outstretched arm won but was not attached until 1532, when a pupil of Michelangelo added an even straighter version. In 1906, Laocoön's original right arm was discovered, but the Vatican Museums did not reassemble the statue with the missing arm attached until 1957. So the Museum's plaster cast, since it was copied from the nineteenth-century version, shows the "winning" arm and not the original bent arm.