

# TOMORROW NEVER DIES.

# LAOCOON'S HYPERREALITIES

## Preamble

Copies are gateways to alternative interpretations of an original artwork. They function as historical documents of the original at a particular point in time, whether the original has survived to the present day, or has been lost. Copies translate the original into another medium – be it drawing, printing, casting, photography, or a 3D reproduction. Each of these renditions, created in different historical contexts and locations, enriches the biography of the original with new meanings, narratives, uses and values.

Copies can also challenge our propensity to trust in the inherent originality of the artwork, unlocking ambiguous zones where thoughts can philosophically perambulate. When we look beyond the familiar narrative of the original, new ways of seeing it begin to emerge. This exhibition digs into the intricate network of meanings engendered by *Laocoön's* copies, presenting an alternative narrative that confronts our trusting gaze as we gather in front of the sculpture in the Vatican museum. What if what we see is not real, but rather, hyper-real?

## **As soon as it was visible, everyone started to draw**

The sculptural group *Laocoön and His Sons* was found on the Esquiline Hill in Rome in January 1506, after lying underground for fourteen centuries. It was immediately identified as the Greek artwork belonging to Emperor Titus as described by Pliny the Elder in his 'Natural History'. *A work superior to any painting and any bronze* - wrote the Roman philosopher - *carved from a single block in*

*accordance with an agreed plan by those eminent craftsmen, Hagesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus, all of Rhodes.*

The sculpture depicts the Trojan priest Laocoön and his two sons dying from divine and unjust punishment for warning the Trojans of the danger concealed in the wooden horse. The highly expressive rendering of the characters' agony as the snake constricts their bodies led to the sculpture's success over the centuries. Francesco da Sangallo, who witnessed, as a child, the excavation of the *Laocoön* with his father, the famous architect Giuliano da Sangallo, would recount sometime later that *as soon as it was visible, everyone started to draw.*

The discovery of *Laocoön* marked the beginning of its translation into many artistic mediums. Numerous artists and artisans have engaged with this renowned masterpiece, leaving behind innumerable drawings, prints and photographs, as well as full-scale or scaled-down replicas crafted from marble, plaster, resin and ceramic. The history of these translations can be traced back to the acquisition of *Laocoön* by Pope Julius II for the Vatican courts. The Pope's open-air collection of antiquities served as a vital ground for artists to study classical works. This was followed by the establishment of academies where artistic education centred around the imitation of classical models, and copies of the *Laocoön* group were prominently featured and employed as teaching tools for drawing classes. With its striking aesthetic qualities and expressive power, the *Laocoön* group has become one of the most replicated works from across the centuries.

The practice of copying marks the beginning of *Laocoön*'s biographical complexity, where the story of the original intersects with that of anonymous artisans, celebrated artists, researchers and wider users who have, and continue to, engage with its replicas through drawing, engraving, casting, modelling, sculpting, photographing and digitising. Each rendition of the *Laocoön* initiates a new chapter in its history, introducing new uses and meanings to

the earlier purpose of artistic education in the aesthetic qualities and harmonious proportions of classical art. Each copy also speaks about the original itself, performing the various interpretations brought to the sculpture through time.

## **Reinterpreted *Laocoön***

The *Laocoön* group has been restored several times since its discovery in the sixteenth century. The restorations have primarily focused on reintegrating the missing parts of the sculpture, notably the arms and hands of the priest and his two sons. However, except for the last intervention in 1960, the previous restorations did not reflect any scientific analysis of the sculpture but were more concerned with reinstating the group's hypothetical expressiveness. Each intervention changed the meaning of the sculpture, showing either the figures in an energetic resistance to the serpent, or their submission to the power of its grip.

The most renowned restorations, carried out by Montorsoli in 1532 and Agostino Cornacchini around 1727, show the priest and younger son with emphatically raised arms, illustrating an active battle with the serpent. Upon the return of the *Laocoön* group to Rome – following its looting by Napoleon – Canova, charged with its restoration, reintegrated the grandiloquent gesture of Cornacchini's version. At that time, proposing a new interpretation would have likely sparked unnecessary scandals and controversies, as the authenticity of artworks was not yet a concern.

The 1960 restoration resulted in the removal of the missing limbs of the sons and the substitution of the father's arm with a new one, which is thought to be the original and was discovered in 1905 in a stonemason's shop in Rome by German archaeologist Ludwig Pollak. This arm folds behind the neck, significantly altering the sculpture's meaning as compared to the earlier emphatic interpretations. This

version presents us with the final gasps of life of the Trojan priest as he succumbs to the serpent's power.

When we stand in front of the *Laocoön* group in the Vatican, we are unaware of its previous expressive interpretations. These only survive in copies, invaluable documents for tracing how the sculpture has been reimagined through time. A first question then comes to mind – How can we define the originality of an artwork that has changed over the centuries?

While the most recent restoration brings the *Laocoön* group closer to its presumed original shape, some archaeologists suggest that a more original state could be found if the display of the sculpture was reconsidered. The way a sculpture is presented is integral to its experience by the viewer, and the current arrangement of *Laocoön* in the Vatican is in a frontal, relief-like, position, that reflects the sixteenth-century Renaissance idea of the classical.

Through time, archaeological experiments have shown that a different presentation of the figures would result in a more dynamic composition. The first example of such experiments can be found in a seventeenth-century plaster cast located at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, in which the eldest son is rotated nearly back-to-back with his father. This reconstitution likely considered the separation of the eldest son from the father and youngest son. Evidence of this separation can be found in one of the first drawings made shortly after the sculpture's discovery by artist Giovanni Antonio da Brescia.

In the 1970s, American art historian Seymour Howard reached a similar conclusion. With the relationship between the figures reconstituted, the group, arranged in a pyramidal composition, more effectively conveys the physical effort of the characters. Furthermore, Howard suggests that rotating the sculpture's axis by 45 degrees, following a cavalier perspective, would reinforce the baroque nature of the *Laocoön* group. This presentation would force the viewers to

walk around the sculpture, revealing concealed details such as the snake's head biting the priest in the abdomen.

As we consider the display as an integral element of the original essence of the artwork, we start to comprehend the ambiguous zones we find ourselves trapped in when encountering the *Laocoön* group in the Vatican. To what extent is an artwork considered authentic, when confronted with the cultural interpretations that modify its perception and experience?

### ***Laocoön* in Geneva**

The biography of an original tends to be considered today in relation to its copies. These not only carry with them the history and artistic value of the original, but are themselves authentic works of art, products of the specific cultural, social and political contexts in which they have been produced and disseminated. Therefore, when, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, plaster copies of *Laocoön* started populating the collections of emerging schools of industrial arts in Europe, the history of the famous sculpture collided with that of nations striving to showcase their competitiveness in a global market. In this market, the production of industrial objects had to be technologically advanced but also aesthetically refined, and it was this last reason that led to a need for educating the taste of artisans with classical art. In Geneva, it was the Société des Arts and, later, the Ecole des Arts Industriels, that offered drawing courses to artisans in the watch and jewellery industries.

The Société des Arts was created in 1778 to encourage the development of Geneva's manufacturing and commerce through the teaching of drawing. Its creation coincided with the end of the sumptuary laws, which had sought to regulate moral customs by restricting the display of wealth and ornamentation. As it benefited the market, the taste for aesthetic objects and decorative elements

supplanted moral considerations. The Société des Arts considered drawing beneficial for the artisans and employees of the city's manufacturers but also for other trades, such as masons, carpenters and gardeners seeking to incorporate ornamental elements into their work. Plaster casts served as essential tools for teaching the drawing of three-dimensional figures, serving as a foundational step before the study of nudes.

The Société des Arts gathered a significant collection of plaster casts, at one point including two casts of the complete *Laocoön* group. The first was donated by the painter Jean-Pierre Saint-Ours, while the second was acquired following the death of the painter Pierre-Louis De la Rive. It is worth noting that during this period, moulds of *Laocoön* were still taken directly from the original sculpture in the Vatican museum. This practice eventually ceased in the following century, primarily due to conservation concerns. Later copies would be derived from plaster cast master models, and would often only represent parts of the sculptural group.

The Ecole des Arts Industriels in Geneva was created in the second half of the nineteenth century to pursue the mission of the Société des Arts. It focused on technical rather than artistic teaching and prepared the students to work in different industries. The school became Switzerland's primary producer of plaster casts, supplying other schools, museums, and private individuals, in and beyond Switzerland, with thousands of replicas of ancient sculptures, architectural ornaments, human and animal anatomy and natural science objects.

Unlike the Société des Arts, the Ecole des Arts Industriels did not possess a full-scale reproduction of the entire *Laocoön* group, as the practice of casting copies from the original had ceased. It is more likely that the Ecole des Arts Industriels acquired its casts from the Louvre, which had in its possession a master copy obtained during Napoleon Bonaparte's looting of the sculpture. The school's sale catalogues of plaster casts feature a miniature reproduction of the

sculptural group, in addition to casts of Laocoön's torso, his bust and those of his children. Considering the cost and practical challenges, a replica of the entire group no longer met the demands of the school's clients, who preferred to acquire specific details of the work. This fragmentation may have also catered to the growing number of private clients who valued plaster casts for decorative purposes and would have preferred the busts of Laocoön and his two sons mounted on column-like pedestals.

Simultaneously, another semantic ramification of *Laocoön's* biography found its way into Geneva's plaster cast collections. The newly established chair of archaeology at the University of Geneva put together a collection to meet the need for a scientific approach to the study of antiquity. Within archaeological and art history circles, scholars delved into the study of *Laocoön's* historical context, proposing hypotheses regarding its dating. Before photographic reproduction, the presence of *Laocoön's* plaster cast in archaeological collections facilitated the examination of its style through comparative analysis with other casts.

The University of Geneva, which gathered at some point the collection of the Société des Arts, had possessed the plaster replica of the entire *Laocoön* group. As this was lost in time, the University today owns only a copy of the Laocoön bust. However fragmented, this copy functions as both a reminder of the original group and of the history of its plaster copies that have been studied and contemplated in Geneva since the eighteenth century. It is a sum of affections that contributes to create, in our mind, the idea of the original.

## **Chapter 5. Laocoön's simulacra**

Photography's greater fidelity and ease of reproduction has played a pivotal role in advancing archaeological and historical-artistic studies, allowing comprehensive studies of an artist's work, or

comparative and stylistic analysis between different artworks. Photography has the capacity to foster new associations, giving rise to fresh narratives and alternative perspectives on an original work. However, it has also initiated a widespread circulation of images, which has been further amplified by the introduction of the Internet. Images of *Laocoön* have circulated extensively ever since the sculpture was first captured in photographs. The famous masterpiece has made its appearance in museums, houses and unexpected locations, often becoming the sole encounter many individuals will have with the artwork.

New digitisation technologies represent the most recent stage in the reproductive evolution of the *Laocoön* group. Three-dimensional scanning produces intangible models that offer new and immersive ways of engaging with the artwork. Platforms such as Sketchfab now provide digital reproductions of museums' sculpted copies and contribute to making visible the repertoire of gestures *Laocoön* acquired throughout its restorations. The experience of the artwork is no more confined to its physicality and, freed by the constraints of materiality and helped by technology, it can be manipulated and observed from unusual perspectives, such as bird's-eye views, from below looking up, or even from within. Increasingly accessible digital printers are now enabling the production of colourful miniature replicas of *Laocoön*, facilitating the propagation of three-dimensional objects, following a trajectory similar to that of photography.

The multiplication of copies, photographs and three-dimensional models of the *Laocoön* through which we anticipate, if not live, the experience of the original, trivialises or even subverts the notion of originality or authenticity of the work. The copy has become a simulacrum that heralds the original's existence. With the increase of virtual twins made from *Laocoön*'s copies, the past renditions of the original resurface in a queer coexistence. Each of these interpretations lives legitimately in the virtual space, proving the



validity of the rhizomatic path of the *Laocoön* in its accumulation of histories.

In light of this, could a new approach to the original open up to us, conveying our imaginations and affections? Would the notion of the original expand, allowing *Laocoön* to live in states of material fluctuation, engaging with its cultural metamorphoses and copies' biographies, a being in constant transformation, enriched by a tapestry of meanings?

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University of Geneva's Plaster Cast Collection

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[www.unige.ch/moulages](http://www.unige.ch/moulages)

Curator: Francesca Zappia

Audio

Script: Francesca Zappia

Voices: Katrin Kettenacker for the French version, Joanna Peace for the English version

Editing: Mathias Pfund for the French version, Douglas Morland for the English version

Videos

Curating and script: Francesca Zappia

Editing: Douglas Morland

Laocoön's bust

The bust of Laocoön presented in the exhibition is part of the Plaster cast collection of the University of Geneva.

The exhibition was developed with the support of Prof. Lorenz Baumer and Alexis Di Santolo (Plaster cast collection of the University of Geneva), Thierry Kleiner, and Pierre Leguillon, Mathias C.Pfund and Adélaïde Quenson (HEAD Genève).

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