

The Unspoken Beauty: An Aesthetic Study of the Laocoön Sculpture Group

Yingying Lu

School of Humanities, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

Abstract. The *Laocoön* sculpture group is one of the masterpieces of ancient Greek sculpture, portraying the tragic scene from Greek mythology in which Laocoön and his two sons are entangled by serpents. As a form of plastic art, sculpture differs from literary works such as poetry—although it cannot convey its aesthetic connotations through language, it presents beauty more directly and concretely. The *Laocoön* group stands at the pinnacle of Hellenistic art, representing an epic tragedy with unique aesthetic expressiveness. This paper investigates the aesthetic appeal of this sculpture group from three dimensions: form, content, and concept. In terms of form, the sculpture vividly conveys dynamic and powerful beauty through the design of its proportions, lines, and contours. Regarding content, it reenacts a tragic myth, shapes vivid character images, and expresses complex emotional nuances. On the level of concept, the sculpture communicates aesthetic values unique to visual art by balancing restraint and indulgence, as well as sensibility and rationality.

Keywords: aesthetics, Laocoön, sculpture.

1. Introduction

The *Laocoön* sculpture group is a marble ensemble created in the mid-1st century BCE by three sculptors from Rhodes: Age sander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus. During the European Renaissance, classical art once again became a central topic among art theorists. In 1755, Johann Joachim Winckelmann used the *Laocoön* sculpture as an example in his work *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, arguing that Laocoön's restrained expression epitomizes "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur." [1] His theory spurred widespread scholarly debate. For instance, under Winckelmann's influence, German literary theorist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing wrote his seminal work *Laocoön*, which compares the sculpture with the depiction of Laocoön and his sons in Virgil's epic, aiming to resist the application of Winckelmann's aesthetic ideals to literature and poetry. [2] In the 18th century, inspired by the *Laocoön* theme, artists from various disciplines created paintings, sculptures, and poems, prompting extensive scholarly research across generations.

The literature reviewed for this paper falls into two main categories. One group of scholars, including Goodyear [3], Mitchell [4], Qiao Yuming [5], and Zhang Hui [6], critique Lessing's comparison between sculpture and poetry by analyzing his aesthetic views through the lens of spatial-temporal categorization and aesthetic standards. Others such as Feng Gui [7] and Liu Shi [8] conduct comparative studies of Eastern and Western aesthetic theories. The second group focuses on the *Laocoön* sculpture itself, examining its historical significance, artistic value, and aesthetic principles of spatial art. Building on this foundation, the present study integrates Lessing's visual-literary dichotomy and direct analysis of the sculpture, aiming to answer how beauty is expressed in this sculpture and what types of aesthetic expression are involved. This paper argues that within the sculpture; a unique relationship exists between expressions of pain and the revelation of beauty. Though pain itself is not conventionally considered beautiful, its portrayal in this sculpture becomes a medium for conveying beauty. By materializing beauty through the Laocoön myth, the sculpture reshapes aesthetic ideas and offers new interpretations of artistic expression.

2. The Beauty of Form

2.1. Modeling and Proportion

As a plastic art, sculpture naturally reflects its aesthetic essence through form and proportion. On a macro-visual level, the overall design and proportional harmony determine the sculpture's aesthetic appeal. The *Laocoön* sculpture group underwent several revisions over time, each of which influenced its aesthetic presentation. When excavated in 1506, Laocoön's right arm and parts of his sons' arms were missing. Notably, Michelangelo speculated that Laocoön's missing right arm was bent backward, better capturing the agony of the moment. However, many artists of the time, including Raphael, believed the arm should be extended upward, as if Laocoön, a Trojan priest, were praying to the gods to spare his children—symbolizing heroic resistance. Raphael served as the judge, and the arm was thus restored in an upward gesture.

However, in the 20th century, the original missing right arm was discovered beneath a building in Rome. This arm matched Michelangelo's earlier hypothesis, leading to the accurate restoration of the sculpture's true posture.

Comparing the raised and bent arm versions, the former resembles a right-angled triangle pointing to the upper left, shifting the sculpture's visual center of gravity leftward and generating a dynamic "leaning movement"[9]; the latter adopts a pyramidal composition, achieving traditional balance and symmetry while maintaining visual interest through varied gestures. In both versions, the composition maintains a high central figure flanked by lower figures, creating a rhythmic visual landscape rather than a flat, monotonous display.

Examining each figure more closely reveals precisely captured gestures and expressions. Laocoön twists his body under immense pain—his left leg extends outward while his torso turns right, and his anguished head twists left. His son on the right is tightly coiled by serpents, looking desperately at his father, his left hand attempting to resist the snake's attack. His legs are entangled and forced toward Laocoön's right leg, causing his body to tilt backward, on the verge of collapse. The child on the left also gazes at his father with furrowed brows and a pained expression, using his left hand to fend off the snake around his ankle, leaning slightly forward due to his bent right knee. These synchronized yet varied actions form a unified composition, achieving what Qian Danshili once described as "three people, three moments, captured in a single sculpture" [10]. The meticulous proportions and calculated spatial placement reflect perfect harmony between parts and the whole.

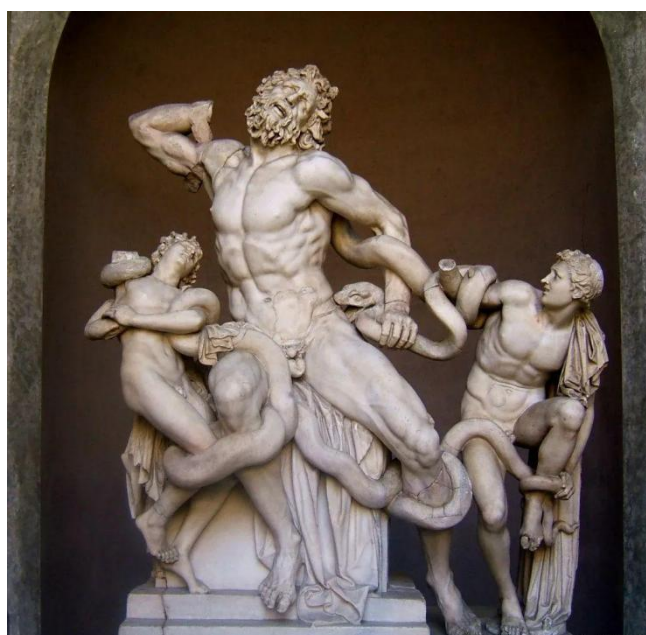


Figure 1. Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus, *Laocoön Group*, 1st century BCE, Marble, 240 cm, Vatican Museums

2.2. Lines and Contours

Lines and contours are vital elements of the sculpture's formal beauty. Lines, as basic sculptural components, outline and define the form. First, the "S"-shaped lines play an integral role in shaping and unifying the figures. The serpents form two diagonal lines, guiding the viewer's gaze across the composition and visually connecting the three figures while allowing reorganization of visual segments—ensuring that no part appears isolated regardless of the viewing angle. Secondly, the contours—defined by these lines—form the external boundaries of the figures. The sharp, clear outlines give the sculpture high recognizability and a strong three-dimensional effect. Each character's unique features and expressions are accurately portrayed, presenting beauty in a delicate and precise manner.

Finally, the contrast between different types of lines enhances the visual impact. Laocoön's twisted torso contrasts with his sons' struggling postures, highlighting relational tension. Unlike Aristide Maillol's *River*, which uses smooth curves, the *Laocoön* emphasizes muscular outlines and sharp turns, following the direction of body movement. These dynamic and powerful lines reflect how ancient Greek sculpture broke away from the rigid, front-facing style of Egyptian art, instead imbuing the figures with lifelike vitality and motion. [12]



Figure 2. Aristide Maillol, *River*, 1943, Tuileries Garden, Paris.

3. The Beauty of Content

3.1. Reenactment of a Tragic Greek Myth

The *Laocoön* sculpture group is based on the ancient Greek myth associated with the Trojan Horse. When the Greek army failed to conquer Troy, they concealed their elite soldiers inside a massive wooden horse and offered it to the Trojans as a tribute to Athena. Laocoön, however, opposed the acceptance of the horse and even struck it with a spear, angering the sea god who favored the Greeks. As punishment, two venomous serpents were sent to attack Laocoön and his sons.

Any visual art that lacks the narrative it embodies is reduced to an empty shell, devoid of substantial aesthetic value. Thus, the enduring appeal and scholarly attention directed at the *Laocoön* group is largely attributable to the tragic myth it encapsulates. The sculpture serves as a medium of narrative preservation, allowing viewers to connect with ancient mythology. Though it diverges in some respects from the original myth, such modifications are creative choices made in the service of aesthetic ideals. As a spatial art, sculpture captures a specific moment in time. In the *Laocoön* group, this moment is what Lessing terms "the most pregnant moment" (*Der prägnanteste Augenblick*), offering viewers a rich imaginative space for interpretation.

3.2. Lifelike Character Depiction

The characters in the *Laocoön* group are rendered with exceptional realism. Each figure—Laocoön and his sons—displays distinct personality traits and physical characteristics. The sculpted musculature is meticulously detailed, full and powerful, creating a lifelike texture from marble, which reflects the ancient Greek aesthetic ideal of physical strength and bodily perfection. The facial expressions are equally expressive: furrowed brows, slightly parted lips, and Laocoön's eyes filled with anguish and resignation, while his sons express fear and despair.

Despite the violent attack of the serpents, Laocoön does not succumb to fear. Even after revealing the Greek plot and knowing the consequences, he displays no retreat. Instead, he transforms into a heroic figure, sacrificing himself to protect his city. The formal precision in sculptural detail enhances the narrative and psychological depth, presenting Laocoön as both a tragic hero and a victim, while his sons embody the pathos of innocence caught in divine punishment.

3.3. Embodiment of Complex Emotions

Emotion, as an abstract concept, must be made tangible through gestures and expressions in sculpture. Drawing from a myth rich in tragedy, the *Laocoön* group naturally conveys profound emotional intensity. Most prominently, it expresses pain and struggle. Laocoön's contorted body and tormented face directly reveal his internal agony, representing not only individual suffering but also symbolizing the broader human experience of hardship and resistance.

As a priest, Laocoön's actions are noble and selfless, yet he is unable to prevent the unjust punishment of his innocent sons. Witnessing their torment brings him even greater psychological pain. He resists with all his might, grabbing a serpent's head in an attempt to save his children. At this moment, paternal love and self-sacrifice emerge powerfully, reflecting humanity's deep attachment to family and the pursuit of justice. Nevertheless, in this moment of crisis, Laocoön's upward gaze does not reflect total despair. His face, though marked by anguish, reveals a hint of resolve and hope. This duality—between despair and hope—expresses a deep yearning for life, adding emotional and philosophical complexity to the sculpture.

4. The Beauty of Concept

4.1. Restraint and Excess

The expressive qualities of the *Laocoön* sculpture group demonstrate the artists' commitment to the aesthetic principle of restraint. Lessing explores this in his comparison of poetry and visual art, questioning why Laocoön cries out in poetry but remains silent in sculpture. In line with the Greek principle that "beauty is the law of ancient artists," Laocoön's sculpted expression had to remain visually pleasing for repeated viewing. An overly dramatic expression of pain might initially evoke empathy but eventually lead to disgust or aesthetic discomfort, which contradicts the purpose of beauty.

On the other hand, restrained expression sustains emotional impact without repelling the viewer. Goethe once remarked that humans react to suffering with three emotions: fear (*Furcht*), horror (*Schrecken*), and compassion (*Mitleid*) [13]. The *Laocoön* group evokes all three, but its subdued portrayal especially enhances compassion. While literature can indulge in unrestrained emotional expression, sculpture, being visually fixed and immediate, risks aesthetic failure if it veers into the grotesque. By choosing to depict emotion as contained and gradually unfolding, the sculpture achieves a balance that allows the viewer to experience unrestrained affect within a visually restrained form.

4.2. Sensibility and Rationality

As a Greek masterpiece, the *Laocoön* group adheres to both emotional control and intellectual clarity. Since its mythological source offered no visual references, the sculptors had to rationally

conceive and construct the figures from imagination, guided by principles of anatomy and ideal proportion. This required an interplay between reason and imagination to bring mythical characters into tangible form.

Moreover, the decision to capture a specific moment—the “golden moment” just before the climax—was not a matter of personal preference, but a rational aesthetic choice grounded in universal human instincts. The sculptors, by selecting the moment of impending doom rather than the peak of agony or the aftermath, ensured the most evocative and enduring expression of beauty. In this sense, the artist’s gaze becomes the gaze of their era—one shaped by reason, emotion, and the timeless pursuit of aesthetic truth.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Laocoön* sculpture group exemplifies the notion of “unspoken beauty” as a form of visual art. Its aesthetic value manifests in three key dimensions: form, content, and concept. Form and content are closely interlinked, mutually shaping and reinforcing one another, ultimately laying the foundation for the expression of aesthetic values and ideals. The beauty conveyed through the tragic subject of *Laocoön* is both solemn and sublime. Through meticulously crafted forms and contours defined by fluid yet sharp lines, the sculpture transforms stillness into motion and vividly presents the narrative behind the figures, creating an emotional resonance with the viewer on a spiritual level.

The passion and agony that might otherwise be freely unleashed are instead tempered and restrained within the sculpture, allowing beauty to emerge gradually through the viewer’s sustained contemplation—filtered through the rationality of the artist. This balance between emotional depth and formal discipline elevates the *Laocoön* group from mere representation to timeless aesthetic experience.

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