

Ut pictura poesis: Vergil's Laocoön and beyond

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Abstract

The liberal arts are not contained by specific boundaries, and with this assertion the artist is free to extract material from other idioms and reap inspirations from literary antecedents outside his immediate domain. Such is the basis for this research in Vergil's poetic style and the visual images emerging from his verses. Appropriating Horace's humanistic doctrine, *ut pictura poesis*, which suggests an association between poetry and the visual arts, this article renders a survey of selected works inspired by Vergil's Laocoön narrative including those models derivative of the Vatican antique. There ensues an exegesis of this passage addressing the pictorial imagery of the *Aeneid*, after which the theme, *exemplum doloris*, culminates in a visual triptych format. All three panels reflect the verbal and structural components of the poet's text, and attempt collectively to capture Vergil's cinematic design in a sequence of events programmatically unfolding to a deterministic conclusion. It is the author's thesis that it is possible to perpetuate the tradition of *Ars pictoria* through the genre of abstract expressionism.

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Classical theories on poetry and the visual arts

Documented evidence suggesting an ancient association between the art of poetry and painting originates from two treatises: Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars poetica*. In the context of Aristotle's attempt to clarify his discourse on the drama, he observed that both painters and poets chose to imitate human nature in action,¹ and he further remarked that plot in tragedy was the counterpart of design in painting.² Two textual sources from the *Ars poetica* provide admonitions for both the prospective poet and the critic. In the first, Horace persuasively argues for the necessity of unity by describing an absurd

composition depicting a grotesque figure of incongruous parts and comparing it to a book reflecting equally bizarre imaginings and dreams of a sick man. The author concedes that both painters and poets are dealt the license of imagination, *pictoribus atque poetis/ quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas*, provided there are also limitations, *non ut/ serpentes avibus gementur, tigribus agni*.³ The second passage from the *Epistularum* containing the famous simile, *ut pictura poesis*, advises critics to be less stringent in their assessment of poetry and to afford a greater flexibility by allowing the same criteria for judgment as those applied to the visual arts. Both media exhibit a detailed style to be viewed at close range *si proprius stes*, but also they are equally effective when critiqued from a distance *si longius abstes*.⁴

Other references in antiquity which suggested analogies between poetry and painting include the comments of Plutarch and Lucian. Although a general acknowledgment prevailed that the "sister arts" differed in means and manner of expression, nevertheless they were considered almost identical in fundamental nature, content, and purpose.⁵ Plutarch quotes the famous aphorism of Simonides that painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture.⁶ Lucian had acclaimed Homer as "the best of painters,"⁷ before Petrarch twelve hundred years later designated the Greek poet as "*Primo pittor de le memorie antiche*."⁸

Between the middle of the sixteenth century and the middle of the eighteenth century Horace's *ut pictura poesis* maintained a strong hold on Renaissance humanists who appropriated this comparison of the arts to support their claim that painting shared the same honors

long accorded to poetry. In their forcible efforts to achieve this goal they often employed Procrustean tactics which distorted the original intent of their ancient sources.⁹ Nevertheless, this humanistic doctrine, the *Ars pictoria*, flourished for approximately two hundred years throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods and continued to associate the verbal imagery of the poet with its visual counterpart.

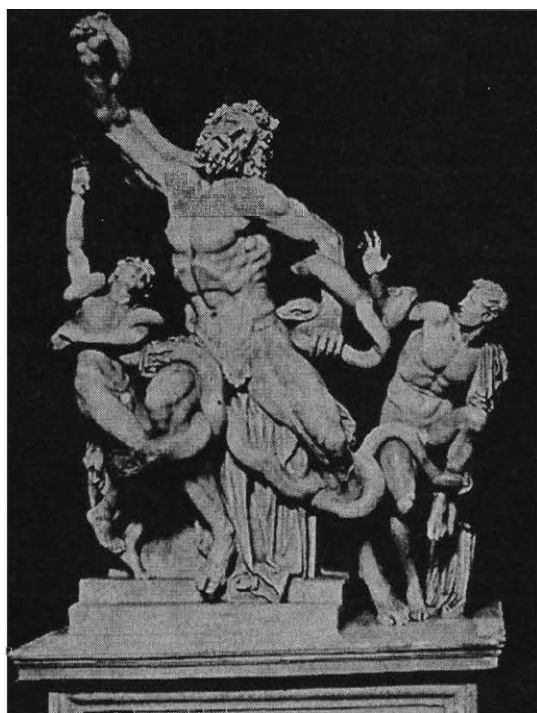


Figure 1

Exemplum doloris: the interpretive process

Vergil's pictorial narrative of the demise of Laocoön and his two sons (*Aen* ii.201-227) has undisputedly helped to immortalize the legendary priest for over fifteen hundred years before the renowned *Laocoön* group (Fig 1) was unearthed in 1506.¹⁰ Two and one half centuries later there surfaced a difference of interpretation shared by two major figures of the eighteenth century, Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768), and Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781). In 1764 Winckelmann, in his publication entitled *History of ancient art (Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums)*, expressed his preference for the Vatican *Laocoön* group over Vergil's poetic account, stating that the Greek statue illustrated artistic restraint and a portrayal of inner peace, which Vergil's poem lacked

in the loud utterances ascribed to the Trojan priest.¹¹ Refuting this assessment of Horace's *ut pictura poesis*, Lessing in his subsequent edition, *Laocoön, or the boundaries of painting and poetry (Laokoön, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesis, 1766)* demonstrated that the provinces of poetry and those of the plastic arts were not the same. In sculpture and painting the artist is restricted to capturing one moment in time and in space; in poetry the standards are not as binding, and therefore allow the writer to present a succession of things in time and to become narrative in format. Lessing was therefore successful in his attempt to draw the essential distinction between poetry and the plastic arts, each governed by its own medium. In his only completed volume of a projected three-volume critical work, he enlarged the sphere of creative writing to include all truth and released it from the bounds that revered beauty as the highest law in art. The following models of the *Laocoön* theme which have been chosen to exemplify the aesthetics of pain also illustrate the static quality of sculpture and painting and thus fall within the criteria of evaluation which Lessing proposed.

The earliest example and the one closest to the writing of the *Aeneid* appears on a fresco from the ruins of Pompeii, *Laocoön after Vergil, Wandgemälde* in the House of Meander, dating before 79 AD (not illustrated).¹² The priest adorned with a fillet around his temples is grasping one of the serpents with his right arm extended. The younger son, already dead, lies on the ground; the elder son is still entwined while the second serpent is attacking the father, its head threateningly approaching the head of Laocoön. The depiction, by virtue of its composition is definitely inspired by Vergil's poem.

Many representations of the *Laocoön* theme, however, apparently derived from the marble antique of the Rhodian sculptors. One of the earliest known three-dimensional adaptations of the *Laocoön* group appeared in a relief by Antonio Lombardo (1458-1516) who had come to Ferrara from Venice in 1506, the very year that the antique statue was rediscovered. Shortly after his arrival Alfonso d'Este, having ascended to the

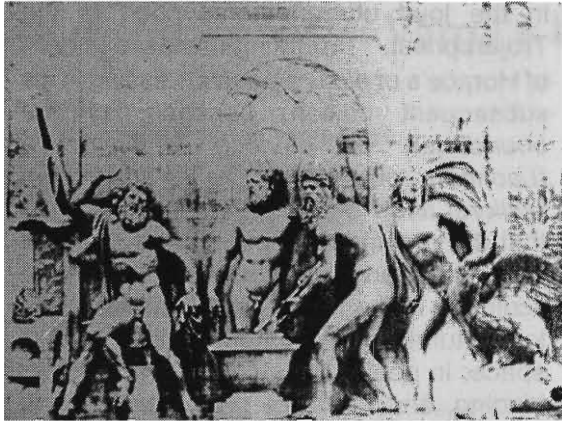


Figure 2

position of duke, procured Antonio's services as court sculptor. One of his first commissions from the duke was realized in this relief entitled *The forge of Vulcan* (Fig 2) in which the figure of Laocoön without his sons was placed to the left of Vulcan's forge. According to Wendy Stedman Sheard¹³ the purpose for the incorporation of the Laocoön figure in Antonio's relief was to aid in the campaign to embellish Alfonso's "studio" with classical motifs. The sculptor's choice of subject was at first meant to flatter his employer, but it then became a personal symbol for the duke, and finally progressed to a metaphorical self-portrait of Alfonso himself in his struggle with the papacy, representing his sense of anguished patriotic martyrdom.¹⁴ It is also Sheard's thesis that Titian included in his second bacchanal, *Bacchus and Ariadne* (not illustrated) the Laocoön figure which was not only influenced by the antique sculpture, but by the re-creation of it in Antonio's relief of *The forge of Vulcan*.

With Alfonso as his patron, it would have behaved Titian to incorporate the figure in his painting to enhance further the duke's reputation as a connoisseur and collector of antiques. Another political motive could be found in Titian's use of the Rhodian piece. In 1520 the artist employed the body of Laocoön for his *Risen Christ* in the altarpiece which he painted for the church of San Nazaro e Celso in Brescia. For the head, however, he replaced the anguished expression of the Trojan priest with the more ideal one of nobility, serenity, and divinity. This conflation of the Christ/Laocoön figure representing sacrifice probably appealed to the papal legate who commissioned the work by its

reference to the pope's collection of antiques in the Vatican.¹⁵

Added to the earlier representations of the marble statue is the etching of Laocoön by Marco Dente in 1527 (not illustrated) which was taken from a drawing in Düsseldorf. In the drawing the serpent grasped by Laocoön's left hand is detailed "with a fantastic head"¹⁶ and the other serpent's head is missing. Another engraving of Marco Dente (Fig 3) renders the more pictorial version of the narrative in the style of the Vatican Vergil with the priest's uplifted arms gesturing appalled despair. This is the Laocoön that Raphael chose to portray his *Lucretia* with the same flung-arm gesture. The *dolor* which the Trojan priest symbolized in the antique statue and in Vergil's epic is thus translated to the despair and exaltation of Lucretia who in a narrative moment is frozen forever beyond freedom of choice.¹⁷ This Dente engraving also contains another detail that not only involves a multi-scenic format, but also reflects Vergil's text. The twin serpents are presented in two stages of their agenda: in the background they are leaning over the sea headed to shore with their crests raised above the waters (ii.205-206); subsequently they are entwined around Laocoön and his two sons (ii.213 ff). The temple of Minerva proleptically placed to the left with the inscription "*Minervae Sacrum*" possibly foreshadows the final flight of the two invaders as they take refuge in the goddess' shrine (ii.225-227). The temple in the farther horizon is possibly that of Poseidon.



Figure 3

In 1741, more than two hundred years after Dente's engravings of Laocoön, P.S. Bartoli etched his rendition of the

theme entitled *Engraving after the Vatican Vergil* (Fig 4). The two versions are similar in content and composition. Bartoli repeats the multi-scenic progression of the serpents: Laocoön's arms are both raised to the heavens as he endures his sufferings standing opposite the two temples, and the altar at which the sacrifice of the bull is to occur is detailed in the landscape. The Bartoli etching, however, does include figures not appearing in the Dente model. The former illustrates a priestly Laocoön beside the altar with axe in hand juxtaposed to the sacrificial bull. The multi-scenic device of the serpents is repeated in the progressive role of Laocoön, from sacrificing priest to sacrificial victim. Also the Bartoli Laocoön dons a flowing cape as he stands with his two siblings of a much younger variety, "cherub sons"¹⁸ girt to his side. All of the Vergilian trappings in the picture attribute the depiction of the story to its epic source.

The century which unearthed the Vatican *Laocoön* spurred more sculptors to depict the theme as evidenced in the works of Baccio Bandinelli, and Vincenzo di'Rossi.¹⁹ In the seventeenth century many terracotta sketches and models by Italian baroque sculptors surfaced which, for notable mention, were ascribed to Stefano Maderno, Bernini, and Rusconi. In the early seventeenth century the *exemplum doloris* could be seen in modified versions of the Laocoön myths, some adhering to the structural composition of the antique, but some blending both the sculptural and the poetic antecedents. One such example is found in *Allegory of Pain* with the caption "*Dolore*" after Cesare Ripa (Fig 5). With this direct allegorical approach, the artist uses Laocoön without his sons as a vehicle to portray the human emotion of pain and futility. Restrained by the coils of the serpents the figure is unable to extricate his arms to make his plea for any outside intervention. The anguish in his face and the tense arch of his back presage his ultimate doom.²⁰

One of the most famous adaptations of the sculptural group also emerged in the early seventeenth century. The *Laocoön* (Fig 6) of the visionary El Greco (Domenicos Theotocopoulos 1541-

1614) captured the angst of the legendary priest and his two sons in a painting with the same musculature which prevailed in the antique model. There are significant differences, however, in his interpretation of the victims in his two-dimensional medium. The canvas allows for a narrative embellishment which can introduce additional themes not present in the original Rhodian work. Because of the more generous space the three figures connect only tangentially and are accompanied by two additional nude figures to the right who function as mysterious on-lookers. Speculation has long yielded their possible identity as either Apollo and Artemis or Poseidon and Cassandra, but recent conjecture points to a Biblical connection in Adam and Eve.²¹ This thesis is based on the fateful apple which the male figure holds in his left hand. Allegedly, in addition to defiling the sacred wooden horse with his spear, Laocoön had also engaged in intercourse with his wife within the temple precincts of Apollo. For this sacrilege both Laocoön and the Biblical sinners had to pay. Thus El Greco's painting symbolizes *dolor* which stems from *hamartia* or an act of *hubris*.



Figure 4

A structural analysis of the painting apprises the viewer of the same rules of composition heeded by the Rhodian sculptors with regard to the circular motif and how it functions. Obviously, it is conducive to the serpentine subject matter, but it also comports appropriately with the musculature of the figures which in collaboration keeps the eye of the observer within the confines of the composition. For instance, the figure of the son to the left

gracefully leans into the picture in arabesque fashion and directs one's attention to Laocoön and the other son. The figures strategically placed on the right look back into the landscape, and thus divert the eye of the viewer back into the painting and render it self-contained. Two other aspects of El Greco's *Laocoön* involve the background: the artist has chosen for the tragic event his picturesque Toledo, looming as the City of God which could reveal religious or political overtones;²² and in the left-center of the canvas over Laocoön is a horse which references the wooden structure in the *Aeneid* and one possible cause for Laocoön's demise. Thomas Hoving²³ deems it a "glimpse of hell" with its macabre colours of dead whites, lambent greens, and blue-blacks. He concludes that "once observed, the struggles of the doomed family are burned into one's mind."

William Blake's modified copy of the antique sculptural group in his line engraving of *Laocoön* (Fig 7) in 1820 could have been the result of his interest in hieroglyphics. David Bindman²⁴ suggests that Blake's image of Laocoön could have been foreshadowed by a print of Garnet Terry (1744-1817) published in 1793. Like Blake, Terry was a copy engraver by profession, and in the latter's emblematic figure of *Daniel's great image* the apocalyptic purpose was to presage the approaching Destruction of Antichrist, the Beast, the Whore, and the False Prophet. Bindman contends that *The great image* was believed by Blake to be read as a hieroglyph of Babylon which stood for "the degraded material state of man in the present age." Thus the line engraving of the "academic" Laocoön could have been intended as a hieroglyphic image which Blake would have used to symbolize with imagery his political convictions.

With the advent of abstraction and surrealism in the first half of the twentieth century, one figure emerges who tends to manipulate the subject matter rather than the pictorial means of its presentation. Paul Nash (1889-1946) draws from nature for his landscape, but his symbolism is manifested on several levels.²⁵ The theme of confinement is expressed with sea-walls, fences, and enclosed gardens. Snakes also represent for the artist the same

concept of circumvallation with their ability to constrict, and in the context the photograph of 1938 entitled *Laocoön* (not illustrated) achieves the appropriate result.

More specifically it is a gelatin silver print from the original negative which depicts a sculptural composition suggesting the arched serpentine movement seen in the original antique model. The structure in the photograph is superimposed on a board fence which spans the print horizontally and further substantiates the motif of incarceration.

A decade later Alexander Calder (1898-1976) constructed his *Laocoön* (Fig 8) engaging a combination of materials: painted sheet metal, string, and wire.²⁶ The elements representing the twin serpents are white globes suspended on two separate rods that connect to a single hyperbolic extension of the base which, in turn, anchors the sculpture and depicts the figure of the Trojan priest.²⁷ The mobility of the abstract components which symbolize the serpents provides a scintillating quality to the sculpture which extends 190.5 cm in height, and 304.8 cm in breadth.



Figure 5

Other examples of twentieth century art originating from the Laocoön motif appear in the form of a parody. Such is the iconoclastic satire in *Laocoön, just plug it in* (Fig 9) of 1963 by Eduardo Paolozzi. The collage apparently sets out to undermine the classical icon about to be electrified into motion as a kitsch toy. Sarat Maharaj²⁸ gives her interpretation of Paolozzi's Laocoön anagram - Kakkafon

Kakkaon Iakoon Elektrik Lafs- stating that it is an anality that “captures this element of kitsch’s irreverent laughter against high culture’s seclusions and solemnities.”

Laocoön and nun (Fig 10) 1983-1984 by Sidney Goodman²⁹ represents another somewhat satirical version of the Laocoön motif, but with a new twist. A “woman of the cloth” is superimposed in the central foreground in front of “twin Laocoöns” while a single child seemingly sinks into the background with a hand raised in supplication. Apparently, there is some religious overtone in the liturgical figure officiating with an ambivalent expression of pleasure and disdain. The duality of the apocopted Laocoöns and the appearance of only one son in the background provide several possible clues for solving the riddle. Perhaps nescience challenges the viewer as much as the erotic innuendos tantalize him.

The most current illustration of the antique group and the final entry in this catalogue is the *Laocoön* by Roy Lichtenstein (Fig 11) of 1988.³⁰ Bold linear strokes roughly echo the compositional design of the original version, but with minimal attention to trivial detail. The result is an undulating network of motion which integrates the famous statue with the landscape and creates a consistent pattern throughout. This uniformity of pattern slightly down plays the subject in its mission to blend positive with negative shapes. Such stylistic efforts are reminiscent of works by Matisse, Picasso, and DeKooning.

For generations the *Laocoön* group has elicited multiple interpretations since it was unearthed in the first decade of the sixteenth century. The Italian Renaissance witnessed the emergence of various copies of the antique which adhered closely to the original version, both in structural design and in texture. With the advent of professional engraving the theme was often modified to pay homage to Vergil’s descriptive narrative and to incorporate into the landscape items such as the altar, the bull, and the proleptic appearance of the serpents before landfall. By embellishing their composition with such detail the engravers’ reliance on the Roman poet was well documented. Whether the motive

of the artist was strictly allegorical or political, his image of Laocoön symbolizing *exemplum doloris* has been perpetuated by both sources, the visual and the poetic, the one acknowledged as the genesis of the design, the other, the agent which poetically preserved its memory and kept it alive for more than fifteen hundred years and beyond.



Figure 6

Cinematic progression

If cinema is the visual representation of a sequence of events carried out in motion, a close examination of Vergil’s Laocoön narrative proves its existence in a literary format. A synoptical view of the passage reveals a three part itinerary for the twin serpents as they become the destructive force in the ultimate demise of Laocoön and his two sons. This martial theme unfolds methodically and programmatically in a sequence of frames which is labeled “cinematic progression.”

The scene opens with a reference to Neptune, as Laocoön, a priest for the god, performs the ritualistic sacrifice of a bull (ii.201-202). Twin serpents **gemini angues** emerge from the sea and head for the shore.

*Ecce autem gemini a Tenedo tranquilla per alta
(horresco referens) immensis orbibus angues
incumbunt pelago pariterque ad litora tendunt;*
(ii.203-205)

Size and form are revealed in **immensis orbibus** (with huge coils), a descriptive phrase which is compounded and strengthened with synonyms as the

action continues. The progressive action suggested with *incumbunt pelago* (they lean upon the sea) and *ad litora tendunt* (they stretch to the shores) provides a cinematic feature which is reinforced by the duality of *pariter* (side by side).



Figure 7

As the serpents approach the shore in view of the Trojans the description becomes more vivid:

pectora quorum inter fluctus arrecta jubaeque sanguineae superant undas; pars cetera pontum pone legit sinuatque immensa volumine terga.

(ii.206-208)

Pectora. . . *arrecta* (their chests raised above the waves) with *jubaeque sanguineae* (their blood-red crests) again reflect their enormous size with an introduction to the foreboding colour of slaughter. **Immensa volumine terga** (huge backs in a coil) echoes *immensis orbibus* seen earlier. Alliteration provides an audio-visual element as two pictorial themes converge with the use of sibilants:

Fit sonitus spumante salo; jamque arva tenebant ardentisque oculos suffecti sanguine et igni (ii.209-210)

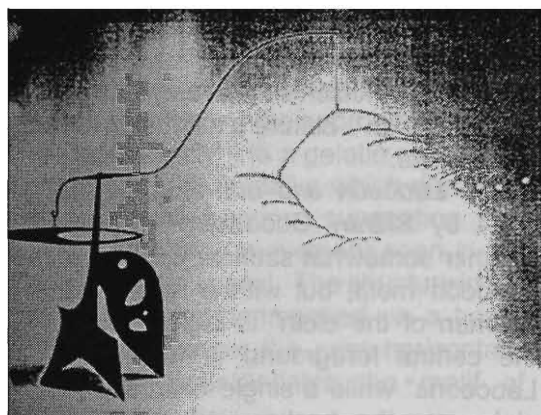


Figure 8

Through onomatopoeia to depict the roaring of the foaming sea *sonitus spumante salo* and to render the hissing of the serpents, their burning eyes suffused with blood and fire *ardentisque*. . . *igni*, a blending of two themes occurs accompanied by a second allusion to the colour of blood-red. After licking their hissing mouths with quivering tongues (ii.211) the serpents have ended their journey by water, and the first phase of cinematic progression is complete.

The second phase of their destructive course resumes when after landfall the pair follows a route straight to Laocoön and his two sons:

Illi agmine certo Laocoönta petunt; et primum parva duorum

corpora natorum serpens amplexus uterque implicat et miseros morsu depascitur artus;

(ii.212-215)

The predators make a straight line for Laocoön, and each serpent embracing the small bodies of the two sons entwines them and feeds on their wretched limbs with their fangs. Of particular significance is the poet's use of *agmine* (in a line), a military term used to describe battle line formation. With their attack on Laocoön's sons, the poet's verbal palette, *amplexus* (embraced) and *implicat* (entwines), acquires a movement which suggests a spiral and a curve, and *serpens uterque* (each serpent) reminds the reader of the dual number found previously in *gemini*, *pariter*, and now *duorum* (two), the number of the priest's siblings. It is Laocoön who next becomes the target for the serpents' path of destruction:

Post ipsum auxilio subeuntem et tela ferentem
 corpiunt spirisque ligant ingentibus; et jam
 bis medium amplexi, bis collo squamea circum
 terga dati superant capite et cervicibus altis.
 (ii.216-219)



Figure 9

Afterwards they seize Laocoön himself as he goes for help carrying his weapons. They bind him with their huge coils, and embracing his waist twice, and twice encircling his neck with their scaly bodies, they overcome him with their head and lofty necks. *Spiris ingentibus* (with huge coils) and *cervicibus altis* (with lofty necks) continue to reinforce the hyperbolic quality of the passage and to persist in painting the appropriate serpentine contortions. The anaphoric *bis. . .bis* (twice. . .twice) contributes to the frequentative action which enhances the twice performed deeds of the nefarious pair. The epithet *squamea* (scaly) provides a texture reflecting the quality of bas-relief.

The following three lines probably describe that moment in the narrative most often depicted in the visual representations since the writing of the *Aeneid*, and undoubtedly that climactic moment which the Rhodian sculptors so effectively captured in the Vatican antique.

Ille simul manibus tendit divellere nodos
 perfusus sanie vittas atroque veneno,
 clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit:
 (ii.220-222)



Figure 10

At the same time that Laocoön strives to tear apart the knots with his hands, his fillets soaked with blood and black poison, he at the same time raises horrendous shouts to the stars. To compound the pathos the correlatives *simul. . .simul* introduce two clauses each of which depicts the victim in his futile attempts to extricate himself from the foe. The repetition of these conjunctions serves in the same capacity as the correlative adverbs in the previous lines. The simultaneous action reinforces the angst of the victim and is inherent to the cinematic nature of the passage as evidenced from the onset.

The composition and content of the last five lines follow the cyclical course to bring the narrative to its conclusion: *qualis mugitus, fugit cum saucius aram taurus et incertam excussit cervice securim:* (ii.223-224)

In the simile of the bull, the situation is reversed. Laocoön, who was performing the sacrifice for Neptune (ii.201-202), is now indeed the sacrificial victim. With this reversal of circumstances the reader is now pulled back to the beginning of the story, as the viewer of a painting or sculpture follows with his eye the structural movement of the work of art to keep him within its confines.³¹

With their mission accomplished the dual protagonists flee the scene in this third and final phase of cinematic progression:

At gemini lapsu delubra ad summa

dracones
 effugiunt saevaeque petunt Tritonidis
 arcem sub pedibusque deae clipeique sub
 orbe teguntur. (ii.225-227)

The twin dragons, in a swoop *lapsu*³² flee to the top of the shrine, seek the citadel of savage Minerva, and hide themselves under the feet of the goddess and under the circle of her shield. *Gemini angues* has yielded to *gemini dracones*,³³ and this final reference to the dual number closes the passage and directs the audience back to its start. One final source of thematic unity is the reference made to the serpents' place of refuge, *Tritonidis arcem*. The despicable creatures hide *sub pedibus* and *sub orbe*.

Minerva is the maiden goddess of war and wisdom, and under her auspices, as goddess of wisdom, the Greeks take Troy. Neptune, for whom Laocoön was performing his sacrifices, and to whom the priest had forfeited his divine favor, is also apparently hostile to the Trojans. Mention of the two deities, one at the beginning, and the other at the end, completes the thematic cycle and thus confirms and frames the martial theme of these twenty-seven lines.

A visual abstraction

As demonstrated in the preceding exegesis of the Laocoön narrative, Vergil's pictorial imagery has emerged from a close examination of his visual rhetoric which seems to remove the barriers traditionally imposed on poetry and the literary arts. Through verbal discourse the poet has employed all the descriptive elements indigenous to painting, sculpture, and cinema, among which are movement, form, dimension, and colour. Such pictorial characteristics are achieved by a palette of words carefully chosen and strategically placed in the text to convey visually the images in his narrative. This observation is the premise on which I have under-



Figure 11

taken to present in abstraction my individual interpretation of the legendary episode. The triptych format mirrors the multi-scenic quality witnessed earlier in the engravings of Marco Dente and P.S. Bartoli and strives to depict the cinematic progression upon which this research has focused.

Gemini angues (Fig 12a), the first pendant of the triptych, depicts the serpents when they appear with their breasts *arrecta* over the waters in a vertical position. The title of the painting is taken from the poet's own employment of the language, and partly, with reference to the commentary of Servius concerning the names of serpents contingent upon the location of their appearance. The slight angle in their movement is appropriated from the verbs *incumbunt* and *tendunt* as they lean and stretch to the shores. Other characteristics of the panel are derived from the words and phrases of the exegesis set in bold print.

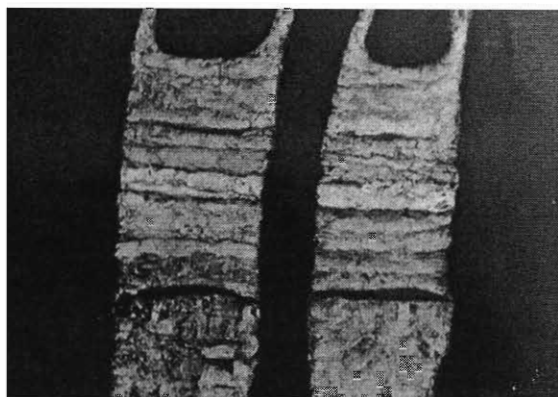


Figure 12a

Laocoön (Fig 12b), the second pendant of the triptych, depicts each serpent *serpens uterque* in the fatal attack on the sons of the Trojan priest, and subsequently in the assault on Laocoön himself. Vergil's words to describe their sanguineous agenda are now those which convey circular motion and contortion. Accordingly, the primary shapes in this painting are derivative of the poet's choice of words such as *amplexus*, *implicat*, *spiris*, and *circum. . . dati* (having encircled). The human figure becomes elliptical, and now a configuration of the two interlocked predators portrays the systematic slaughter of the Trojan family in this most calculated phase of their journey. *Squamea* is the literary source for all three paintings to be executed in the delineated style of intaglio.

Gemini dracones (Fig 12c), the third pendant of the triptych, draws its horizontal composition from *lapsu* (with a swoop), a cinematic movement whose direction is reinforced by *sub pedibus* and *sub orbe*. The three final deeds performed by the infamous duo are rendered chronologically in the text: *effugiunt* (they flee), *petunt* (they seek), and *teguntur* (they hide themselves). The elongated shapes of the serpents extended across the entire length of the panel attempt to convey this last stage of their mission. Servius' commentary continues to be applicable in the nomenclature of the first and the third pendants.



Figure 12b

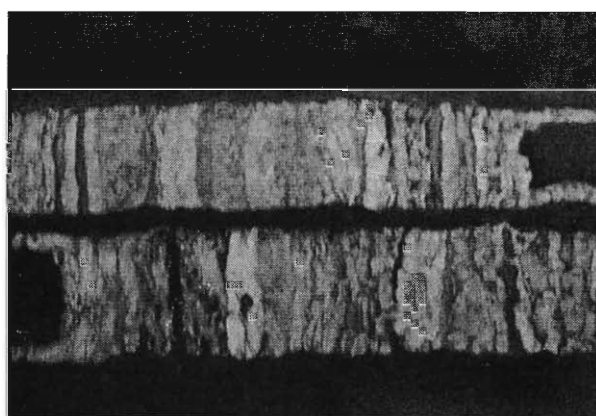


Figure 12c

Conclusion

Poetry has been defined as the essence of a characteristic quality attributed to an object, act, or experience. Consequently, by its very nature the idiom falls under the rubric of verbal abstraction. From this premise an even more cogent argument arises for the further appropriation of Horace's *ut pictura poesis* to include visual abstraction as poetry's "sister" counterpart. This syllogism provides a point of departure to explore the means by which it is possible to render pictorially the themes of the *Aeneid* in the genre of abstract expressionism and to capture merely the essence of Vergil and focus on the intrinsic nature of his epic. The *catalogue raisonné* of art inspired by the Laocoön theme has functioned to provide a continuum for the interpretive process in the evolution of artistic expression. In an attempt to perpetuate the tradition of *Ars pictoria* which flourished for two hundred years throughout the

Renaissance and Baroque periods this article culminates in a new interpretation of Vergil's text. Although an allegiance to the visual/verbal imagery of the epic is not altered or diminished by a comparative analysis with my predecessors, the focus of artistic expression has centered on different sources. By removing the human or divine figure from the composition thereupon lies the option to depict in abstraction Vergil's Laocoön narrative through form and movement which the poet's verbal palette has suggested. The images of sanguine-crested serpents superimposed on a tapestry of darkness become the principal subject as they exemplify collectively the concept of cinematic progression on their tripartite journey. Through the exegeses of these twenty-seven lines from the *Aeneid* and the subsequent presentation of the narrative in visual abstraction I have continued to adhere to the development of the verbal with the pictorial, an assimilation by which Vergil has expressed his authentic personal creation indirectly on canvas, one man in search of an imagery to communicate to all.

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Notes

- 1 *Poetics II*. 1.
- 2 Ibid VI 19-21. Aristotle makes the analogy of plot-design by stating that a canvas smeared with random spots of colour does not please as well as a portrait done in outline.
- 3 *Ars poetica*. 1-13.
- 4 Ibid 361-365.
- 5 R.W. Lee, "Ut pictura poesis: the humanistic theory of painting," *Art Bulletin*, xxii, (1940) 197.
- 6 Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensium III*. 346 f-347 c 1905.
- 7 Lucian, *Eikones 8 (Images)*. See Lee n 6.
- 8 Lee, op cit n 6, 197. Petrarch, *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino*, Florence, 1735 (first ed Venice, 1557), 116.

- 9 Ibid 201.
- 10 L.D. Ettlinger, "Exemplum doloris: reflections on the Laocoon group." *Essays in honor of Erwin Panofsky, (1961)* 121. The rediscovery of the marble Laocoon group near the Baths of Titus on 14 January 1506, was the most celebrated archaeological event of the Renaissance period. Pliny writes (NH xxxvi.37): *opus omnibus et picturae et statuariae artis praeferendum*. The work, currently exhibited in the Vatican Museum, is attributed to three Rhodian sculptors: Hagesander, Polydorus, and Athenadorus. Its date is controversial, but archaeologists place it around the first or second century BC. It is therefore possible that Vergil was familiar with the group, but Austin, in ed *Aeneidos Liber Secundus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) 96-99, informs us that there is another possibility. There exists six Roman representations of the subject which date later than the Vatican group and later than Vergil. Ettlinger contends that all six derive from a painting of the fourth century BC of which the Rhodian sculptors were aware. Since Vergil's depiction of the episode suggests a "pictorial prototype," Austin argues that the poet possibly used such a painting as his literary source. Charles Knapp (see: *The Aeneid of Vergil Books I-VI and the Metamorphoses of Ovid Selections* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1951 revised ed) 148 n 81-82.) comments on the mutilated condition of the group upon the discovery and the seemingly unsuccessful restoration. Scholars have argued that Laocoon's right hand should be placed against the back of his head. For further theories on the date, restoration, and authenticity of the Rhodian work see Richard Brilliant, *My Laocoon: alternative claims in the interpretation of artworks*, (Berkeley, Calif; London: University of California Press, 2000). Also see Salvatore Settis, *Laocoonte: fama e stile*, (Rome: Donzelli, 2000). Both Brilliant and Settis stress that the instant impact of the statue is attributed to the obvious links between Vergil's poetic version in the *Aeneid* and the description of a sculpture in Pliny the Elder's encyclopaedic *Historia naturalis*. It should be pointed out, however, that the serpents in the sculpture are also without Vergil's *jubae. . . sanguineae* (ii.206-207). In the final analysis, it is irrelevant whether Vergil knew the group, and any speculation supporting the thesis does not alter the similarities with which the poetic version and the visual representation are manifested. Both creations are self-contained in their structure, the former, in its cyclic thematic structure, and the latter, in the contour of lines which directs the eyes of the viewer up, down, and around in a circular pattern. The result is the convergence of a theme in two separate idioms, the one not necessarily dependent on the other.
- 11 See Nigel Spivey, "The depiction of suffering in Classical art: the audition of Laocoon's scream," *Apollo*, 148, 437 (July 1998) 3-8.
- 12 Erika Simon, "Laokoön und die Geschichte der antiken Kunst," *Archaeologischer Anzeiger*, 43, 4 (1984) 651.
- 13 Wendy Steadman Sheard, "Antonio Lombardo's reliefs for Alfonso d'Este's studio di Marmi: their significance and impact on Titian," *Studies in the History of Art*, 45 (1994) 321-322.
- 14 Ibid 321. The purpose and motivation for Antonio's relief are ultimately to provide political gain for Alfonso and to contribute to his self-aggrandizement.
- 15 Ibid 322.
- 16 Simon, op cit 660. Simon's descriptive phrase to describe the serpent is "mit einem Phantasiekopf."
- 17 Patricia Emison, "The singularity of Raphael's *Lucretia*," *Art History*, 14 (Sept 1991) 381-383.
- 18 Simon, 649. The author refers to the two siblings as "puttöhaften Söhne."
- 19 Detlef Heikamp, "Die Laokoöngruppe des Vincenzo di Rossi," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz*, 34, 3 (1990) 352-353.
- 20 Simon, 668-669.
- 21 Jonathan Brown, *El Greco of Toledo*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982) 257. One major reason for the ongoing mystery of the two figures on the right is that El Greco never finished them. Manuel B Cossio in 1908 identified them as Apollo and Artemis with his thesis that El Greco used for his source the account of Arctinus of Miletus instead of Vergil's poem. Apollo punishes the priest for having desecrated his temple with the sexual union of his wife and the subsequent birth of his two sons, while Artemis, his sister, looks away. Camon Aznar suggested that the pair represents Poseidon for whom Laocoon was making his sacrifice, and Cassandra who was able to foresee the attack. Sanchez Canton, construed the figures as Epimetheus and Pandora, while Erwin Walter Palm in 1969 departed from the pagan iconographical source to declare them as Adam and Eve because of the apple in the former's hand. However, according to Ewald M Vetter, the apple is used to allude to the beauty contest which had occurred earlier among the goddesses, and, therefore the two figures could represent Helen and Paris.
- 22 See Marek Rostworowski, "El Greco's *Laocoon*: an epitaph for Toledo's comuneros?," *Artibus et Historiae*, 14, 28 (1993) 77-83.
- 23 Thomas Hoving, "Eleven," *Connoisseur*, 218

- (Sept 1998) 114-121.
- 24 David Bindman, "William Blake and popular religious imagery," *The Burlington Magazine*, 128 (Oct 1986) 717-718.
- 25 Merlin Ingham, "New York City Art Gallery; Pallant House, Chichester, England; exhibits," *The Burlington Magazine*, 131 (Dec 1989) 865-866.
- 26 *Laocoon* (painted metal, string, wire, 1947), *Art Forum*, 34 (Oct 1995) 47. An auction on contemporary art was held at Christie's in New York in November 1995.
- 27 It is not uncommon for a work (especially abstraction in the twentieth century) to be named *post factum* by its resemblance to a familiar subject.
- 28 Sarat Maharaj, "Pop art's pharmacies: kitsch, consumerist objects and signs, the unmentionable," *Art History*, 15 (Sept 1992) 347-348.
- 29 "Laocoon and nun," (drwg, 1983-84), *Arts Magazine*, 59 (May 1985) 31.
- 30 Luis Camnitzer, "Roy Lichtenstein," *Art Nexus*, 12 (1994) 58. For further examples of contemporary artists' reworking of this classical theme see *D'après l'Antique*, (Paris: Seuil/Réunion de Musées Nationaux, 2000-01) An exhibition of variations on Greek and Roman sculpture was recently featured at the Louvre.
- 31 A similar cyclic pattern has been evidenced earlier in the Vatican antique by the Rhodian sculptors and in the *Laocoon* of El Greco. The three idioms, sculpture, painting, and poetry, have thus shared the same structural composition.
- 32 Bernard Knox, "The serpent and the flame," *American Journal of Philology* 71 (1950) 379-400. ". . . *labi* and its compounds are words that occur sooner or later in almost any passage which describes the movement of the serpent." 386. This is one of the best sources on the serpentine imagery in Aen.ii. Knox contends that the description of the death of Laocoön and his sons serves as the principal basis on which any subsequent use of serpentine imagery occurs. This passage depicts the symbolic prophecy of the fall of Troy as a whole, a fact evidenced by Servius and Donatus.
- 33 Servius (*Commentarii*, edd Georg Thilo and Herman Hagen (Leipzig: Teubner, 1881-1887) distinguished the serpents by name according to their venue: *Angues aquarum sunt; serpentes terrarum; dracones templorum*. He further comments that this observation is applicable only for this particular episode in Vergil. No such

specification is made by the poet in other verses.

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