

April 18, 2005

## An Ancient Masterpiece or a Master's Forgery?

By [KATHRYN SHATTUCK](#)

**A** scholar has suggested that "Laocoön," a fabled sculpture whose unearthing in 1506 has deeply influenced thinking about the ancient Greeks and the nature of the visual arts, may well be a Renaissance forgery - possibly by Michelangelo himself.

Her contention has stirred some excitement and considerable exasperation among art historians in the Classical and Renaissance fields. Many other challenges to accepted attributions have faded quickly into oblivion.

The scholar advancing the theory, Lynn Catterson, a summer lecturer in art history at Columbia University, presented her argument in a talk at the university's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America on April 6. Maneuvering through a wealth of material - including Michelangelo's drawings, records of his banking activity and his acknowledged reputation as an avid seeker of renown and wealth - she said, "He had the motives and the means."

The strikingly naturalistic sculpture, 95 1/2 inches tall, depicts a deadly attack on the Trojan priest Laocoön and his two sons by writhing sea snakes dispatched by Athena - or, some say, Poseidon - after Laocoön warned against admitting the Trojan horse during the siege of Troy. It resides in the Vatican Museums in Rome.

In a telephone interview, Dr. Catterson cited a pen study by Michelangelo dating from 1501 depicting the rear of a male torso that resembles the back of the "Laocoön" - and Michelangelo's documented finesse at copying.

"That the Laocoön was carved by Michelangelo explains why then, and why now, its effect is mesmerizing," she said.

Richard Brilliant, Anna S. Garbedian emeritus professor of the humanities at Columbia and an authority on classical antiquities - his works include "My Laocoön: Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks" (University of California Press, 2000) - said that Dr. Catterson's contention was "noncredible on any count."

For one thing, he said, "she made absolutely no reference to ancient sculptures that could be related to the 'Laocoön,' " including a large body of ancient fragments found just before World War II at Sperlonga, a site near Rome where Tiberius had a luxurious villa, that refer specifically to episodes of the Trojan war.

Some scholars have also found fault in relating the "Laocoön" to the Michelangelo drawing of a torso, now at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford.

"To my eye, the Michelangelo drawing does not bear a close resemblance to the torso of the Vatican Laocoön," said Katherine E. Welch, an associate professor at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and an expert in Hellenistic and Roman imperial antiquities, in an e-mail message. "The latter is distinguished by a vigorous torsion or twist, which is lacking in the drawing."

The "Laocoön" was placed at the Vatican Museums by Pope Julius II not long after it was discovered on Jan. 14, 1506, on the Esquiline Hill. Upon hearing the news, the pope immediately dispatched the architect Giuliano da Sangallo to view it; Sangallo brought along his colleague Michelangelo Buonarroti. The men identified the statue as that described by the first-century Roman encyclopedist Pliny the Elder in his "Natural History," who called it "a work superior to any painting and any bronze," one "carved from a single block in accordance with an agreed plan by those eminent craftsmen Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus, all of Rhodes."

Dr. Catterson, 48, said she did not set out to debunk scholarship on the "Laocoön" when she settled on a dissertation topic seven years ago: "How come Michelangelo was a sculptor? Who trained him?"

Her curiosity was soon aroused. As a young artist under the patronage of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Michelangelo had witnessed the Medici family's willingness to spend considerable sums on ancient Greek or Roman objects, which he would have had ample opportunity to study and perhaps try to recreate, she said.

He was an astute forger who earned his Bacchus commission after a carved sleeping Cupid that he had buried in the ground to "age" had been sold to a wealthy cardinal in 1495.

Then there was recent scholarship on bank withdrawals and deposits between 1498 and 1501 that suggests that the sculptor was buying chunks of marble while accumulating substantial income that could not be accounted for, Dr. Catterson said, and several letters from Michelangelo to his father that spoke of some marbles but failed to explain how he was using the others.

Dr. Catterson suggests that Michelangelo, a manic worker who carved on as few as three hours of sleep a night, would have had the time to create the "Laocoön" while working simultaneously on the "Pietà," for which he signed a contract in 1498 and which he completed by July 1500.

He had his own house, which included ample work space, and a trusted assistant, Piero d'Argenta, she said. He also had access to Greek marble, found in excavations around Rome.

That the "Laocoön" is made of seven pieces of marble may suggest that Michelangelo needed to transport the finished work unnoticed to its point of discovery, where it could have been assembled and joined on the spot, Dr. Catterson added.

William E. Wallace, a professor of art history at Washington University in St. Louis and the author of several books on Michelangelo, was not as quick as other art historians to dismiss Dr. Catterson's claims.

"Until I read the full argument in a reputable academic publication, I'm going to reserve a final judgment," he said, noting that since 1996, 17 discoveries of or attributions to Michelangelo have made national news - and then been discredited or forgotten. "My first reaction was: 'Oh, come on. Not another.' However, the more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became. I think this one has the greatest lasting power."

For Dr. Catterson everything was just a little too perfect about the discovery of the "Laocoön," which was in fairly good shape after presumably some 1,500 years when it was found by a farmer more or less where Pliny had predicted.

"It's almost as though it was discovered to order," she said.

But to Leo Steinberg, a prominent Michelangelo scholar, the evidence simply does not add up - neither the time nor the bank receipts nor the secretiveness. "We know that at least a dozen different people would have been involved in the process," he said. "And we know that Michelangelo made many enemies who would have been delighted to accuse him of a forgery of that scale. All of this strains

credulity that in an Italian community at that time in the 1490's, there was no gossip, no squealing."

Professor Wallace agreed that hard proof was lacking but said he was willing to consider Dr. Catterson's argument. "We'll never have the certitude a scientist gets," he said. "It can only be tested by the weight of scholarly opinion and time.

"But Lynn is an excellent scholar and well trained. And the intriguing thing is that nobody who studies classical art in a way wants the 'Laocoön.' They find it kind of a Hellenistic embarrassment, maybe because it really doesn't look like anything else comparable in the history of classical art."

"And besides," he added, "we can never prove that Shakespeare really wrote 'Hamlet' at this point. They're still arguing about it."

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