

LAOCOON AND HIS SONS. The Canova Casts (Presented 1818)

In 1818, the gift of the Canova Casts from the Prince Regent to Lord Listowel was a catalyst for the foundation of the first School of Art in Cork. Pope Pius VII had originally gifted the casts to Britain in gratitude for British help with the return of Vatican treasures taken by Napoleon. Some two hundred pieces cast from the finest sculptures in the Vatican arrived in Cork to inspire future



artists such as Daniel Maclise, Samuel Forde, and John Hogan. The famed Italian sculptor, Antonio Canova, had overseen the return of the treasures and supervised the casting of the masterpieces. Some of his works are included in the collection. The casts have had an eventful and chequered history, and a number of the finest remain in the Crawford Collection.

Laocöon and His Sons is a cast made from an original marble sculpture found in Rome in 1506. The find was made in the ruins of the palace of Titus and was one of the major discoveries of the Italian Renaissance. The piece is believed to have been carved in Greece by three sculptors; Hagesandros, Polydoros and Athenkodoros, the original is in the Vatican Museums. The scene of the Trojan priest Laocöon and his sons being strangled by sea monsters is vigorously depicted by writhing, twisting figures. Laocöon had incurred the wrath of the Gods when he tried to warn the people of Troy of his suspicions about the Trojan horse. The God Apollo, who favoured the Greeks, sent the serpents to

attack Laocöon and his sons as they were making a sacrifice at the altar of Neptune.

DISCUSSION

- What is your first reaction to this sculpture?
- Does the violence of the incident come across in the action of the figures? Where do you see this?
- In the figure of Laocöon, look at sections of his legs, his torso, his arms, each section seems to be strained and pained, where is this especially true?
- Look at the face of Laocöon, what do you read from his expression?
- Try making this face and stretching your neck like Laocöon does.
- Does this feel like pain or anger or something else to you?
- The drama of the piece is almost theatrical, can you identify the movements and poses that give this sense of the theatrical to the group?
- The sea serpents bring your eye around the sculpture group, what else draws your eye around?

- The main thrust of the sculptural group is towards the left, with one figure pulling away towards the right, what does this figure on the right do to the balance of the sculpture? Imagine how the sculpture would look without this figure, would it have the same impact?
- Do you think the work was designed to be seen from behind or not?



The original sculpture had to be pieced back together when it was found during the Italian Renaissance. Artists at the time agreed on the version seen before, but later the original arm was found and this more accurate version was assembled.

- How is the dynamic changed by the new arrangement of the sculpture?
- If you stretch into the individual poses, which one seems more real?

IN THE GALLERY

Laocöon and his Sons is one of many classical casts in plaster to be found in this room. One of the great benefits of having these figurative works was that art students traditionally drew from them to study human anatomy. Find an interesting (and comfortable) viewpoint and see how this would work, better still, do some sketching.

HANDS ON

In class, take an example (perhaps from your English play or prose) of conflict between two or three people. Imagine a group acting out this conflict. Chose poses that work to express each individual position and try to show the group dynamic. Create a tableau - a living picture, where you direct a group of pupils in your class to remain frozen in the poses of your characters. Draw or photograph this group and you could also use it as a basis for a sculpture.