

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.



Laocoon 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 Athenkodos, the original is in the Vatican Museums. The scene of the Trojan priest Laocoon and his sons being strangled by sea monsters is vigorously depicted by writhing, twisting figures. Laocoon 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 Laocoon and his sons, as they were making a sacrifice at the altar of Neptune.

DISCUSSION

- Who are the people in this sculpture? (The title will help)
- What do you think is happening?
- Look at the expressions on the three faces, what do they tell you?
- Can you tell if the snake has already bitten Laocoon or if it is biting him right now? Show how your face would look if a snake was biting your ankle!
- Does any other part of the bodies show how they are feeling? How?
- Artists often practice drawing sculptures to help them draw real people, would this sculpture be good to practice with? Why?
- Although sculpture does not move, an artist often wants to get a feeling of movement into a sculpture. Do the people in this sculpture look like they are moving? What gives the sculpture this feeling of movement?

- Stretch yourself into the position of each of the people in the sculpture and imagine what they are feeling, does the position feel real? Do you feel like a frozen statue?



home made of marble? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How would a marble finish change the look of the sculpture?

- When this sculpture was found it was in many pieces, like a jigsaw, over the years it has been put together in different ways. In this picture the arm is different. Try the two poses, how different do they feel? Do you like this sculpture or the other version best? Why?
- This sculpture is a cast made from plaster, a cast is an exact copy taken from a sculpture. Why do you think casts are made?
- The original sculpture is made of white marble. Is there anything in your school or home made of marble? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How would a marble finish change the look of the sculpture?
- In the gallery, do the curves of the snake make you want to follow him around the back? What do you see from the back? Is the back view as interesting as the front?
- Do you think the artist wanted you to look at the front view or all around?
- Look at the curly hair of Laocöon, it is a very different texture to his skin, what other textures can you find within the sculpture?
- Look in the gallery for sculptures made of bronze, of stone or of wood. How are the surfaces different to plaster?

HANDS ON

With a square of soap and a plastic knife or carving tool, make a carving inspired by *Laocöon and his Sons*. You could use the image of snakes, the facial expressions you tried out, the ideas of struggle, or any other ideas you get from the sculpture.

Press a coin into a flat piece of clay, carefully remove the coin. You now have a 'mould.' Mix a little plaster (following the instructions) and pour into the mould. Leave to set, then remove your 'cast'. This can be painted with acrylic paint. Experiment with casting other flat objects.