

From Dust to Dawn:  
The Discovery of the Laocoön and the Emergence of the Italian High Renaissance

Scholars of art history have for centuries looked to the monumental Laocoön group (dated ca. late Hellenistic Greek) as an influence on Michelangelo's sculpture, particularly his six slave sculptures that were originally intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II. After the Laocoön's discovery in Rome in 1506, it is well known that Michelangelo was greatly impressed by the ancient work, especially its massive scale and sensuous male figures. One problem with some scholarly analyses, however, is their limited nature, in that they are looking for obvious influences from sculpture to sculpture. This paper argues that the influence of the Laocoön sculpture group on Michelangelo extends further into his work, and specifically to his painting. After being forced to stop production of his six slave sculptures, Michelangelo was coerced by Pope Paul III into accepting a commission for the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel. His rendering of the *Last Judgment*, in particular, is reminiscent of the Laocoön group through Michelangelo's use of movement, gesture and expression in the figures of the fresco. These same motifs that are evident in the *Last Judgment* are echoes of the visual style used in the Laocoön group, features that were prominent in the visual language of the Hellenistic period, which was to become an important artistic inspiration in the emergence of the High Renaissance in Italy.

Through a close analysis and comparison of these two works, this paper will show a direct correlation between the use of movement, gesture and expression revealed in the Laocoön, as an ideal presentation of the style used by sculptors of the Hellenistic period, and the influence this aesthetic style had on Michelangelo's work, particularly the *Last Judgment*. This influence was most likely a direct result of his taking part in the recovery and restoration of the piece in the early sixteenth century. Yet the grotesque nature of both pieces, the ancient sculpture and the Renaissance fresco, shocked contemporary viewers of the sixteenth century. As one art historian notes: "When he was asked by Pope Paul III to make the fresco 'more suitable,' following comments that it would be more fittingly displayed in a brothel, Michelangelo replied, 'Make the world a more suitable place and the painting will follow suit'" (Bradbury 2004: 214). As a result of his involvement with the Laocoön, Michelangelo's art was forever affected in a dramatic and noticeable way. While the discovery of this incredibly influential piece is shrouded in intrigue and fascination, the visual response of this particular artist to the Laocoön demands further scholarly inquiry, as I aim to demonstrate in this illustrated presentation.

### Bibliography

Bradbury, Kirsten, Lucinda Hawksley (2000). *Michelangelo*. Parragon Publishing.