



# Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry

*Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ellen Frothingham*

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According to Greek mythology, Laocoon was a Trojan priest who, along with his two sons, offended the gods. As punishment, the three were strangled by sea serpents. The discovery in 1506 of an ancient Greek sculpture showing the three figures in their death agony not only gave rise to renewed interest in the classical period but also created repercussions in the art world. It was this work of art that German dramatist and critic Gotthold Lessing used as a point of reference for his essay *Laocoon*. Originally published in 1766, Lessing's inspired meditation on the distinguishing characteristics of painting and poetry became a turning point in the study of Western art. His essay on the origins, forms, and influences of these art forms aided in framing modern conceptions of the artistic medium and helped establish modernist views of the uniqueness of the individual arts.

A breakthrough vision in aesthetics, *Laocoon* is essential reading for anyone interested in poetry, art history, and the fine arts.

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