



# The Complete(ish) History of Sculpture in One Lecture

**Noah Charney**

Thursday, May 29, 2025 - 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. ET



Welcome to “The Complete(ish) History of Sculpture in One Lecture,” a Smithsonian lecture that combines adrenaline with art history. Can professor Noah Charney guide you through a rapid-fire survey of sculpture, touching on the major turning points and key works in the European tradition, all in the course of a reasonably-long evening talk? You’re about to find out!

At the bottom of this handout is a bonus text, unpublished and exclusively for those enrolled in Noah’s lecture, about his first visit to one of the sculptures we’ll talk about.

## **Noah’s Other Books**

Noah is the author of more than 25 books, including best-sellers and a Pulitzer finalist.

Explore them wherever you buy books or on Noah’s Amazon page.

## **Video Materials**

Noah is a TV and radio presenter, and also writes for platforms like TED. You can see some of his work on fields related to art forgery, including a TED video about “The art forger who tricked the Nazis” and “Why is the Mona Lisa famous,” all written by Noah. Find them on YouTube or on Noah’s website, [www.noahcharney.com](http://www.noahcharney.com). Noah presented and wrote a BBC series, “China’s Stolen Treasures,” that is available for free here.

## **Future Courses**

Dr Charney teaches online for other venues besides the Smithsonian, including the National Gallery UK and Yale University. These courses are open to all. To keep abreast of Charney’s next online appearances, including a planned six-lecture series for The Smithsonian starting in the fall on iconography (learning the symbols in art), sign up for his newsletter [here](#).

## **ARCA**

To learn more about the research group on art crime that Noah founded, the Association for Research into Crimes against Art, visit [www.artcrimeresearch.org](http://www.artcrimeresearch.org). You can join the annual, summer-long Postgraduate Program in Art Crime and Cultural Heritage Protection, the world’s first academic program in the field; subscribe to The Journal of Art Crime, the first peer-reviewed academic journal in the field, and much more.

#### **Bonus Unpublished Exclusive Text:**

The sky turned iron as we pulled up to the gates of the Pratolino. Rain was due, but perhaps we still had time? Somehow I'd never gotten here before. It's only fifteen minutes north of Florence, and I'd lived in Florence and taught art history there. This was finally my chance. My wife and daughters, nine and eleven, were with me as we passed the gate and walked the path. We'd been driving for hours from our holiday house in Umbria back home to the Slovenian Alps, so we skipped to stretch our legs. I was skipping for joy, the anticipation of seeing a much-studied masterpiece in situ, for the first time, propelling me forward. I couldn't wait. That childlike, Christmas morning rush was upon me.

We wound along the path through Pratolino, now called Villa Demidoff. It was once the summer getaway for the Medici family, during those long, hot months when the center of Florence is weighty with heat and ladles of sunlight. The forested garden estate would have been refreshing, airy, green while Florence is all tans and yellows. But today, we were bundled up and also realized we'd left our umbrellas back in the car.

A sign indicated that it was just ahead, around the bend. The Apennine Colossus by Giambologna. It's a work I'd seen in books, but somehow never had registered its size. I'd thought it was man-sized, perhaps two meters tall. It's a sculpture of a personification of the Apennine mountain range, imagined as an old man three-quarters carved out of a huge boulder, with one-quarter of the original stone remaining, cragged and organic. But on our way here, I checked the details and realized that L'Apennino, as it's called in Italian, is 11 meters (36 feet) tall! It's the size of a two-story house.

And then I saw it.

It's a rare thing when the delightful tease of anticipation matches the payoff, and it certainly did here. It truly is a colossus. It's carved like some proto-Tolkien creature, seated above a cascade of rocks around a cave entrance. This mountain personified is twisted, looking down at the handiwork of its muscled left hand, which avalanches the rocks before it as its fingers choke a sea monster. Its beard is a forest of stalactites, its hair like a coral reef, but its facial features are cleanly carved. It sits eternally at the edge of a vast pond, staring at its own reflection in the water.

It was carved by Jean de Boulogne, Giambologna as he was known in Italy, a Flemish sculptor, from 1579-1580. Giambologna was a Mannerist, part of a movement of artists in the second half of the 16th century who idolized Michelangelo and tried to emulate the style he developed. Mannerism involved the hyperextension of bodies and shapes for dramatic effect. This includes adding muscles where there shouldn't be—Michelangelo's Christ in his Last Judgment fresco in the Sistine Chapel has an eight-pack, when the artist knew full well that there are only six abdominal muscles—and defying the laws of physics, making figures seem to float or appear out of nowhere.

It's reasonable to argue that the Apennine Colossus was the first conceptual artwork. It's an installation as much as a sculpture. It crouches over the water source of the Pratolino gardens, but it's meant to look alive. A network of pipes within it could be used to guide water around its face, so that it appears to sweat, or even weep tears. In the winter, these pipes could make it so that icicles would form around its beard, turning it into a frost giant. The statue is meant to evolve and change, with lichen and moss growing over parts of it, and different looks based on the seasons.

The colossus is also a building of sorts, with rooms inside it on three levels, accessible from the back. The ground floor is a cave, or grotto, with an octagonal fountain inside it, dedicated to Thetys, the Greek sea nymph. The walls are painted with frescoes of villages from the coast of Tuscany, the water access for the Medici's small empire. Another room included paintings of mining based on the book, *De Re Metallica*, by the mineralogist, Georgius Agricola. The middle level includes a chamber for chamber musicians to perform, the sound emanating from out of the belly of the stone giant. The top level, the head of the colossus, includes a room with a fireplace, the chimney from which funnels smoke out of the great empty nostrils of the colossus, while the fire is visible through its eyes. When a fire burned inside by night, Medici and their guests would think that the colossus' irises were glowing in the darkness. It was meant to be engaging, everchanging, a site for durational performances in a very contemporary, conceptual sense. It is also a key in the cog of the development of sculpture.

I thought of all this as I stared at it for the first time. Then the iron sky opened. It was an absolute, sudden downpour. My family and I giddily sprinted back the way we came, bidding farewell to the Apennine Colossus as, umbrella-less, we made for our car.

As a professor of art history, I often teach the story of sculpture, and I can trace a pathway of influences from ancient Egyptian funerary statues through archaic Hellenistic kouroi to Myron's *Diskobolos*, the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Laocoön*, and then from Michelangelo to the Mannerists, like Giambologna, and up to Futurists like Boccioni, minimalists like Brancusi, and then to contemporary sculptors. I have a popular lecture that I teasingly call "The Complete(ish) History of Sculpture in 60 Minutes" in which I race the clock to convey the key ideas using a finite number of statues and turning points that each represents.

Of all sculptors, Michelangelo was the most innovative and influential. And of all sculptures, one rises above as the most important to the story of art: *Laocoön and His Sons*.

The Trojan War has been dragging on for a decade, when it appeared that the Greeks gave up. The Trojan awoke one day and looked from their mighty ramparts down at an empty plain: the Greek army's camps had been packed up and their ships were nowhere to be seen. All that was left was a giant wooden horse. It appeared to the Trojans that the Greeks had finally given up on conquering Troy, and had left this colossal statue as a gift, honoring their vanquishers. It

was all celebrations, and the Trojans were going to haul the horse into the city, through those impenetrable gates, when a Trojan priest to the temple of Poseidon, god of the sea, intervened.

According to Virgil's Aeneid, he said: "O unhappy citizens, what madness? Do you think the enemy's sailed away? Or do you think any Greek gift's free of treachery? Is that Odysseus' reputation? Either there are Greeks in hiding, concealed by the wood, or it's been built as a machine to use against our walls, or spy on our homes, or fall on the city from above, or it hides some other trick: Trojans, don't trust this horse." And then he added a line that has become famous and often quoted in paraphrase: "Whatever it is, I'm afraid of Greeks, even those bearing gifts."

To prove his point, Laocoön picked up a spear and thrust it into the horse. But the Trojans, exhausted after ten years under siege, refused to heed the warning. The gods who favored the Greeks, however, were not about to overlook someone almost spoiling their triumph. They sent a pair of sea serpents who killed Laocoön and his two sons. The Trojans thought that this was his punishment for refusing a gift. They kept the wooden horse. Which was hollow and contained Greek soldiers, who crept out at night, opened the gates to the hiding Greek army, and conquered Troy through his ruse.

The moment of the hopeless battle of Laocoön and his sons against the sea serpents is one of high drama, and it has often been depicted in works of art. Most of these works were based on a description of the event in Virgil's Aeneid.

But at least one work may have been made long before Virgil wrote The Aeneid. It is a large marble sculpture that shows Laocoön, muscles straining at the inevitable might of the sea serpents, as they entwine around him and his sons. The figures in it are nearly life-sized, and the drama in the pose, a paused moment of maximum drama and violence—the venomous jaws of one of the serpents about to bite down—made this the talk of the ancient world...and also of the Renaissance.

The statue group officially called Laocoön and His Sons is on display in the Vatican in Rome. Scholars are divided as to when it was originally made by three sculptors from Rhodes: Agesander, Athenodoros, and Polydorus. Some think it was as early as 200 BC, some as late as 68 AD. It resembles work made in the 2nd century AD, in a style called "Hellenistic Baroque," suggesting that this was when an original version of it was made, probably in bronze.

It's not clear who commissioned it, but it was displayed in the palace of the Emperor Titus in Rome. Pliny the Elder, the author of Natural History, one of the most useful sources of information about ancient Rome, described it as "a work that may be looked upon as preferable to any other production of the art of painting or of statuary." That's right: this was considered the greatest artwork, in any medium, of the ancient world.

In February of 1506, Michelangelo Buonarrotti—then the most famous sculptor in Rome—was at the home of his friend, the architect Giuliano Sangallo, when a messenger rushed in. Pope Julius II wanted his court artists to come and see something marvelous that had just been dug up from the earth in a vineyard near the center of Rome.

Michelangelo and Sangallo were among the first to see Laocoön and His Sons, still caked with dirt. Michelangelo was floored by what he saw. It looked unlike any ancient sculpture he had seen before. It was so much more dramatic, the musculature hyperextended and bulging out of Laocoön's body to the point of being unrealistic—yet it felt more powerful for this fact. He was particularly taken with the movement of the sculpture, how the eye was drawn in various slithering S-shapes, from Laocoön's contorted body (right arm bent up, left arm bent down) to the serpents themselves.

Pope Julius acquired the statue, and it has had a prominent place at the Vatican ever since. But its influence on the Renaissance was thanks to how much Michelangelo admired it.

Michelangelo had once said that the most beautiful thing he had seen was the flicker of a candle flame in a gentle breeze. Here was a sculpture that seemed to embody, in marble, that image. Based on this, Michelangelo developed a pose that he frequently used in his paintings and sculptures that has been called "figura serpentinata," or snake-like shape. He was inspired directly by Laocoön and His Sons, and you can see this in some of the figures he carved for the Tomb of Pope Julius II, in figures painted on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, in his pose of the Virgin Mary in the Doni Tondo, in the shape of Christ in his Last Judgment and beyond.

Michelangelo was the most influential artist of the 16th century. The predominant movement of the second half of that century, Mannerism, consisted of artists seeking to emulate Michelangelo's style. So we have a chain of influence from Laocoön to Michelangelo to the Mannerists.

Not everyone was equally in awe. Some felt that Laocoön and His Sons was over-the-top in its muscley frozen pose. Titian painted three monkeys in the Laocoön statue's pose, possibly making fun of the original statue, or possibly making fun of a copy made by Michelangelo's rival, Baccio Bandinelli (now at the Uffizi Museum) which "aped" the brilliance of the ancient original...unsuccessfully.

Laocoön has influenced not only artists but also philosophers and theorists. The ancient playwright Sophocles wrote a tragedy about Laocoön's story. Art historians have often commented on it, particularly since Pliny described it as the best artwork of the ancient world—an ideal of art. Numerous books and essays have been built around it, from art historians like Gottfried Lessing and Johan Winckelman in the 18th century to Clement Greenberg in the 20th, from the artist William Blake to the philosopher Goethe. It's become a touchstone of pop culture, too. In A Christmas Carol Charles Dickens writes that Scrooge was "making a perfect Laocoön of himself with his stockings."

It's also an ideal key work through which to tell the story of sculpture. It was the greatest statue of the ancient world, and the most inspirational for Michelangelo, who in turn was the most influential sculptor of all.