

Excerpted from *Janson's History of Art*, Fifth Edition, 1995, 249-250

Vergil (70-19 B.C.)
***The Aeneid*, from Book II**

Vergil was the greatest Latin poet and the chief exponent of the Augustan age in literature. The Aeneid is an epic poem about the hero Aeneas, who fled Troy when it was destroyed by the Greeks and settled in Italy. Book II tells of the fall of Troy, including the punishment by Minerva of Laocoön for trying to warn the Trojans against the trick wooden horse. The sculptural rendition of Laocoön closely resembles Vergil's description. The Vatican Vergil contains the complete Aeneid as well as other poetry by Vergil.

Laocoön, by lot named priest of Neptune,
was sacrificing then a giant bull
upon the customary altars, when
two snakes with endless coils, from Tenedos
strike out across the tranquil deep....
They lick their hissing jaws with quivering
tongues.
We scatter at the sight, our blood is gone.
They strike a straight line toward Laocoön.
At first each snake entwines the tiny bodies
of his two sons in an embrace, then feasts
its fangs on their defenseless limbs. The pair
next seize upon Laocoön himself,
who nears to help his sons, carrying weapons.
They wind around his waist and twice around
his throat. They throttle him with scaly backs;
their heads and steep necks tower over him.
He struggles with his hands to rip their knots,
his headbands soaked in filth and in dark venom,
while he lifts high his hideous cries to heaven,
just like the bellows of a wounded bull.

NOTE: Your reading assignment also
includes [Michelangelo and Laocoön](#) -
[The Ultimate Art History Whodunit](#)

