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Classical Sculpture and The Changing Perception of Value
Three Case Studies

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Abstract:

How the public perceives works shapes their value. This aspect of value has shaped how classical works are portrayed and how particular works are treated. Some objects obtain a value far beyond the value they had upon their creation. Understanding how certain works have attained their status in popular culture and academia allows for a better understanding of the classics and their relationship to public discourse. We can examine this relationship by using the case studies of three classical works: The Venus De Milo, Laocoön and His Sons, and The Winged Victory of Samothrace. The Venus De Milo's rise from humble origins, to its current place in popular media, as an icon of feminine beauty showcases how value is assigned to an object. Laocoön's transformation from an aesthetic piece upon its creation to an inspiration for many Renaissance and Baroque artists, back to an aesthetic work showcases the fluctuation of value. Finally, The Winged Victory of Samothrace exhibits how in attaining new value, critical parts of an object's history may be lost or forgotten, giving the object a new meaning removed from its original context and history. These three statues are symbols of the classical field, and through analyzing their place in public discourse, we can understand how the classical field relates to popular media.

Introduction

The study of Classics is a unique field in that it seeks to recontextualize the world of antiquities through the lens of the present. As the present changes, so does the field of Classics. The study of classical works is shaped by our perception of what a classical work is. This perception is altered by years of scholarship, sensationalism, and lack of evidence. As the surviving works from the classical period are few in number, classicists and archaeologists must recreate an object or work's history based upon their knowledge of the world that artifact inhabited. However, as we seek to interpret the remaining information surrounding that artifact, biases and outside media can shape how that object is perceived, not just by academia, but also by popular culture. To further understand the influences of biases, sensationalism, and lack of evidence, we will examine three statues' history and how their interpretations and places in media are affected by these three factors. From this study, we can understand how the world of Classics interacts with both the past and the present.

Mary Beard in *Confronting the Classics* says, "The study of Classics is the study of what happens in the gap between antiquity and ourselves." In this essay, we shall examine this gap via three cases studies of classical statues analyzing the changes in the perceived value of those works in relation to their ancient and modern context, the context in which they were found and their cultural impact.¹ Value is a subjective term; many objects in museums are referred to as "priceless," so how does one define their actual value? For our purposes, value is defined as the role of an object in popular media. Therefore, we must analyze the media coverage and discussions surrounding a piece to define its "value." By analyzing how these objects are presented in modern media compared to their original context and history, we can evaluate how

¹ Mary Beard, *Confronting the Classics*. (London: Profile Books Limited, 2013), 11.

cultures place value on works of art. The three works of art that best exemplify the variance in value are The Venus De Milo, Laocoön, and The Winged Victory of Samothrace.

The Venus De Milo was a work that was largely inconsequential in its period, acting as a typical statue placed in a gymnasium, as revealed by later excavations.² Despite this status its history after its discovery led to the statue being a part of several exhibitions and earning itself a permanent fixture in the Louvre's gallery. This statue that was once of little note has become a symbol of classical works, despite its lackluster original history and limited technical skill. While the history of the removal of the Venus De Milo's base for show purposes, as it attributed a no name artist, is dubious, the sensationalizing of the work allows us a glimpse into how popular media can confer value to an object.

A statue that was created as a simple work from the unknown Alexandros of Antioch³, and not the famous Praxiteles, as once believed⁴, has become a prized work in the Louvre's collection. The Venus De Milo is an artifact that rarely leaves the museum floor or the public eye. The seemingly simple and mundane statue that graced the gymnasium of Melos has acquired fame far beyond its humble origins.⁵ Understanding how that fame was acquired and how The Venus De Milo reached its iconic status in popular media can enlighten us as to how we ascribe value to objects.

The Laocoön sculpture, dating to the Hellenistic Period (323 BCE-31 CE), graces The Vatican Museum's statue garden in Rome. This statue is thought to be the sculpture described by Pliny the Elder as having been made by Hagesandros, Athenodoros, and Polydoros of Rhodes. It

² Rachel Kousse, "Creating the past: The Venus de Milo and the Hellenistic reception of classical Greece." *American Journal of Archaeology* (2005): 227-250. 7.

³ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*.

⁴ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*.

⁵ Mary Beard, *Confronting the Classics*. (London: Profile Books Limited, 2013).

may have been a copy of an original Greek bronze from Pergamon.⁶ Pliny praises a statue of Laocoön for its aesthetic quality and states it was made by the three aforementioned artists from Rhodes.⁷ The Laocoön, unearthed in 1506 in the vineyard of Felice De Fredis, and acquired by Pope Julius II, is valued for its artistic and aesthetic merit.⁸ Even people of the classical period praised the work of the three Rhodians. According to Pliny, emperor Titus prized it; it sat in Titus' palace and was a sight to behold.

Laocoön's mastery in marble is what has assured its status as immortal. The recovery of a lost treasure makes it unforgettable, a crown jewel of the Vatican sculpture collection. Laocoön's fame comes with its attribution as one of the finest works of art, according to Pliny the Elder. This fact has created debate and interpretation of the work as an example of craftsmanship and artistic choice. Most notable of these analyses are Laocoön by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which discusses how visual media versus textual media display agony. Laocoön was a valued work among the collection of Emperor Titus. But being unearthed in 1506, created a transition from the original style of the Renaissance towards the exaggeration of the Baroque period. Its value was its beauty, and this perceived value continues even today.⁹ We ascribe value to Laocoön because it had value as an attractive object to the Romans, and as such, this work has the same value to us today. The Laocoön is important because Pliny the Elder decided it was, and we can agree or disagree. Laocoön's value as a work of aesthetic beauty, and some might argue perfection, has continued whether the statue has been in the possession of Emperors, Popes, or popular media.

⁶ Marianne Marcussen, "The Laocoon: Between Style and Iconography." *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 8, no. 13 (1995).

⁷ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia XXXVI*. 77, 37

⁸ Marianne Marcussen, "The Laocoon: Between Style and Iconography."

⁹ Gotthold Lessing and Edward McCormick, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1884

Winged Victory of Samothrace's history is relatively unknown, most likely belonging to the second century BCE. Its provenance is relatively unknown.¹⁰ While portions of its provenance are cloudy, it is clear that the statue once stood in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods at Samothrace. Samothrace was a sanctuary steeped in tradition and history. The Kabeiroi, fertility gods that helped protect seafarers and grant victory in war, were central to Samothrace's religious cults.¹¹ Winged Victory rose above the theater, angled facing northward towards the heart of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods. She stood as a crowning jewel among a lively sanctuary to the Great Gods of Samothrace.¹² The sculpture style is more reminiscent of the works atop the Parthenon than the Hellenistic style of its contemporaries. This suggests that Winged Victory was meant to be timeless. Nike was a part of a greater religious culture that dominated the relatively small island. Her timelessness was clear. She was discovered by Charles Champeiseau and immediately brought to the Louvre.¹³

The Winged Victory of Samothrace's fame is no longer connected with her positioning above the theater at Samothrace's sanctuary. Instead, her position atop the Louvre's Daru staircase, acquired in her second restoration, the entrance to the Louvre's classical wing, altered her value. She lost her status as a beautiful votive object; her religious origins are disparate from her aesthetic notoriety and symbolism as the Louvre's icon. The statue displayed on the cover of many guidebooks dedicated to the Louvre museum is Nike towering above guests on the Daru staircase, not atop the theater of Samothrace.

¹⁰ "A Stairway to Victory" The Louvre. Musée Du Louvre, Accessed February 1, 2021.

¹¹ Marianne Hamiaux, Ludovic Laugier and Jean-Luc Martine, *The winged victory of Samothrace: Rediscovering a Masterpiece*. (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2015).

¹² Hamiaux, Laugier. and Marianne Martinez, *The winged victory of Samothrace*.

¹³ Hamiaux, Laugier. and Marianne Martinez, *The winged victory of Samothrace*.

These three works have complicated relationships with their pasts in relation to their present statuses. By delving into these changes, we can better understand how modern scholars and media respond to the past. These works are no longer aesthetic pieces or religious dedications but instead parts of public discourse. Understanding how public discourse informs scholarship is a nuanced study and, as such, needs to be carefully deconstructed, using three works from similar periods will simplify this process.

Venus De Milo

The Venus De Milo is a piece that gained fame not from its Classical history but instead from the story created surrounding that history. When she first made her way into public view, she was falsely attributed to another artist. Her story is a carefully created fabrication that was then consumed by its own ideals and absorbed into the public discourse.

The Venus De Milo had humble beginnings before she was found partially buried at the island of Melos by Oliver Voutier in Spring 1820. Made to decorate a gymnasium in an inconsequential town, the statue was of little note, having been named by an unknown artist for a less than grand purpose, a decorative piece of no note. Her excavation was also of minor importance. It is what occurred after her discovery that catapulted her into public view and permanent fame.

Dug up by a singular farmer among several marble fragments, Venus' discovery was largely mundane. She was among two marble herms and a hand holding an apple. After her discovery, Voutier kept the statue in the farmer's shed until he was able to acquire the statue from the people of Melos.¹⁴ Through a series of political hijinks, Voutier was able to acquire the

¹⁴ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003. 23

statue with the help of Marie-Louis-Jean-André-Charles Demartin du Tirac, Comte de Marcellus and ensign Jules Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville.¹⁵ Marcellus then presented the statue to the Marquis de Rivière. The Marquis saw presenting the statue to the king of France as a means of currying favor with the king and possibly returning to France from Constantinople, a city he disliked. The statue may have enthused Voutier, but those familiar with classical works were far from impressed. The era's reinvigorated obsession for classical works, brought on by the critique of Johann Joachim, who praised the aesthetic of the Greek Hellenistic period, allowed Venus to take the spotlight. Hans Winckelmann, one of the first people to critique and popularize Hellenistic sculptures, praised Greek works as having "a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur, both in posture and expression."¹⁶ His descriptions of the Apollo Belvedere were a unique take on classical art and led to an increase in desire for Greek works.

As the Apollo Belvedere was returned to the Vatican from the Louvre, and the British Museum had acquired the Elgin marbles, the Louvre needed a classical masterpiece. The Director of the Louvre, Louis-Nicolas-Phillipe-Auguste, Comte de Forbin, searched for a work to compete with the other European countries. Thus, he purchased the statue from the Marquis. After purchasing the statue, Forbin kept it hidden in the back rooms of the Louvre to verify its status as a masterpiece of Greek craftsmanship. However, as he attempted to evaluate the statue in secret, Jules Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville, who had always desired recognition, altered the story of the statue's discovery, making himself the hero who discovered a classical masterpiece. He spread this story through all of France, making the statue famous before it had even made its way into public view. A value had already been placed on a statue before it was revealed to the public.

¹⁵ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*. 23.

¹⁶ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*. 41.

Forbin discovered the Venus de Milo to have the following inscription on its base “Xandros son of Menides citizen of Antioch of Meander made the statue.”¹⁷ A nobody had made the statue. If she was to be shown as a masterpiece the base had to be discarded, and so the portion of the base naming her creator has disappeared, presumably destroyed.¹⁸ Worse yet it, was made in a period in which Winckelmann considered art to be in decline. The statue was largely unremarkable, with its generic posing, modest technical skill, and mediocre artist. Forbin had to show a statue that had been touted as a classical marvel without revealing its mediocre origins; the solution was to dispose of the inscribed portion of the base naming her creator and the matching herms. Forbin then had Quatremère de Quincy write a paper analyzing the statue. This review was stellar, creating propaganda for the statue. The Venus de Milo was declared France’s counterpart to the Apollo Belvedere.

Through D’Urville sensationalizing his role in discovering the statue, the Louvre was forced to display the work during a period in which classical marble statues were of great value.¹⁹ This led to the statue being a part of several exhibitions and earning itself a permanent fixture in the Louvre's gallery. The declaration of the work as France’s masterpiece catapulted the work into the public discourse, and the Louvre made sure it remained in that discourse.

Amelia Arenas posits that part of The Venus De Milo’s allure lies in her unique appearance, her broken arms reduce her to Venus’ base qualities, her feminine beauty and raw allure. Her figure highlights the key features associated with the Venus figure without the limbs posing, hiding, or confusing the image of the Venus figure archetype, the breasts and feminine

¹⁷ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*. 75.

¹⁸ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*. 76.

¹⁹ Gregory Curtis, *Disarmed*.

curves. Arenas notes that the allure of the Venus De Milo is beyond that of an ordinary Venus figure.

...our Venus, though larger than life, registers as a thing because she's broken, albeit a ponderous thing: a fetish. The Surrealists were alert to this. Think of Hans Bellmer's "dolls"-bizarre columns of breasts, buttocks, and vulvas, where the chilly glamour of the Venus de Milo merges with the grotesque, primal carnality of the "Venus" of Willendorf. She has created a cult all her own because of her broken stature.²⁰

Soon the Venus de Milo was referred to as the standard for feminine beauty, the ideal woman. Her measurements were viewed as the standard for perfection, leading to the search for the living Venus. From 1916-1922 a series of contests to match the measurements of the Venus de Milo were held in America.²¹ The obsession with matching the Venus' ideal of beauty was rampant. Anette Kellerman "was named as the 'Perfect Woman' in 1908 for most closely resembling the mythical beauty, the Venus de Milo's body measurements."²² The obsession with the Venus De Milo's measurements and these contests gradually declined, but her memory as a symbol of beauty continues today.

Her form is reproduced in many modern art pieces and acts as a representation of feminine beauty.²³ Why is it that this largely unremarkable statue has continued to thrive in popular media? She is remembered because of D'Urville, Forbin, and Quatremère de Quincy. She was made a part of French, and eventually global, discourse. The Venus De Milo is here to stay.

²⁰ Amelia Arenas, "Broken: The Venus De Milo." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 9, no. 3 (2002): 35-45. Accessed March 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163855>, 38.

²¹ Amelia Arenas, "Broken: The Venus De Milo"

²² Christine Schmidt, Jinna Tay "Undressing Kellerman, Uncovering Broadhurst: The Modern Woman and 'Un-Australia', *Fashion Theory*", 13:4, 481-497, 2009.

²³ Amelia Arenas, "Broken: The Venus De Milo"

Her status as a symbol of feminine beauty has led to her likeness in modern art and many advertisements. The idea of Venus appears both in visual arts and popular music such as in the song “Venus” sung by Frankie Avalon.²⁴ One notable reinterpretation of the work is Salvador Dali’s Venus De Milo with drawers (Figure 1). The Venus de Milo has become one with popular media. Its continued existence in public discourse is a result of it attaining a value far beyond its humble beginnings. The Venus de Milo is no longer just a statue from the gymnasium in Melos; it has gained a new status as a representation of feminine beauty. Quatremère’s article detailed the work’s excellence and beauty, its classical merits, and Forbin’s desire to make the Venus a centerpiece of the Louvre, resulting in the creation of a statue far more than just a piece of marble. The Venus de Milo has become a symbol, an icon. Regardless of her missing limbs, her image is iconic. Even her face is recognizable; the work Venus with Tongue in Cheek by Clive Barker in 1990 pictures only the head of Venus making an explicit gesture. Yet, every viewer knows which statue Barker is referencing. The Venus de Milo is both a figure of feminine beauty and a figure of satire. In fact, the depiction of the Venus de Milo raising her middle finger to the European Union in Germany’s *Focus* magazine (Figure 2) resulted in six Greek individuals suing the magazine for defamation, libel, and “denigration of Greek national symbols.”²⁵ The magazine was found not guilty. She has even been used in several political comics or demonstrations. Recently a replica of the famous statue was a part of the Hong Kong protests.²⁶

Her history as a figure of Western beauty has cemented her place in public discourse, and not even the critique of Classicists or Art Critics can remove her from her pedestal as a Western

²⁴ Frankie Avalon, vocalist, “Venus” by Peter DeAngelis and Ed Marshall. Chancellor Records, Venus A-side, 1959. vinyl LP.

²⁵ Eriq Gardner, “Magazine Cover of Greek Goddess Sets Up International Defamation Showdown.” *The Hollywood Reporter*. December 2, 2011.

²⁶ Ezra Cheung, Twitter Post. May 23 2020.

<https://twitter.com/ezracheungfoto/status/1264428643880628224?lang=fr>

ideal. This statue that was once of little note has become a symbol of classical works despite its lackluster history and technical skill. While the history of the removal of the Venus De Milo's base for show purposes is dubious, the sensationalizing of the work by the public allows us a glimpse into how popular media can ascribe value onto an object.



Figure 1
Dalí, Salvador 1936 Venus de Milo with Drawers²⁷

²⁷ © Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2018



Figure 2

Focus magazine February 2010 issue with Venus Raising Her Middle Finger ²⁸

²⁸ *Focus* magazine February 2010 issue

Laocoön

The Laocoön statue group was discovered on January 14th, 1506, and features the priest Laocoön and his two sons being strangled by two serpents. Laocoön and his children were strangled after warning the Trojans against bringing the famous wooden horse within the safety of its high walls. Athena had sent the two serpents to act as if his refusal of the offering of the horse had offended her, causing the Trojans to bring the horse into the citadel. Its history and value have changed from the moment of its creation, to its discovery, to its present status.

Laocoön's value today and when it was placed in the palace of Titus are very similar. Laocoön's value lies in its aesthetic beauty. However, when the statue was first rediscovered, its value, while similar to its original and current context, grew beyond aesthetic beauty. Instead, it sparked a revolution in art style during the Renaissance period. Laocoön inspired the works of Michelangelo, Titian, and many other renaissance artists. Laocoön also sparked the changes in the aesthetic presentation that led to the Baroque period. To understand this transition from aesthetic value to a priceless transitional piece, back to aesthetic value, we must look at Laocoön and His Sons' beginnings.

The statue has a storied history if it is, indeed, the statue group mentioned by Pliny, the Elder; it had a long history before its discovery. Pliny states,

There are many whose fame is not preserved. In some cases the glory of the finest work is obscured by the number of the artists, since no one of them can monopolize the credit, nor can the names of more than one be handed down. This is the case with the Laocoön, which stands in the palace of the Emperor Titus, a work to be preferred to all that the arts of painting and sculpture have produced. Out of one block of stone the consummate artists, Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes made, after careful planning, Laocoön, his sons, and the snakes marvelously entwined about them.²⁹

²⁹ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* XXXVI. 77, 37

If Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros sculpted this work, we must question the date. “The Sperlonga marbles (and therefore Laocoön) were surely designed for the grotto (and Tiberius); a duplicate arrangement on Rhodes or elsewhere, plundered by some unknown Roman strains all credulity. This in turn excludes a mid Hellenistic date.”³⁰ Therefore, it was most likely created during the imperial period. When it was created, Laocoön’s value was based upon its aesthetic beauty. There was no greater significance or religious value. While prized for its beauty, earning its place in the grotto of Emperor Titus and the histories of Pliny, it did not have a value beyond beauty among other contemporary works. Pliny praises the craftsmanship of the work and its artists, but he does not describe its significance beyond its beauty and its status among the emperor’s collection.

However, when it was rediscovered in 1506, it sparked a revolution. When it was unearthed, the statue was at once identified as the one described by Pliny. This attribution is both a testament to its craftsmanship and an identifier that increased its fame. Upon its reintroduction into the world, this statue of Laocoön carried the history and fame of being the statue that was mentioned in Pliny’s works. Upon looking at the sculpture, Michelangelo and Giovanni Cristofano Romano found that it was carved from two blocks of marble which corrected Pliny’s previous assertion that the statue was composed of a singular block, foreshadowing Laocoön’s place in artistic and scholarly discourse as a result of Pliny’s praise.

However, the true value of Laocoön was as a catalyst. Laocoön and his sons’ figures inspired artists with its status as an “example of extreme naturalism and unrestrained emotion, that is, ideals which are in accordance with the conceptions of the then-contemporary art.”³¹

³⁰Marianne Marcussen, "The Laocoon: Between Style and Iconography." *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 8, no. 13 (1995). 39

³¹ Margarete Bieber, *Laocoön: The Influence of the Group Since its Rediscovery*. Ontario, Canada. Ambassador Books. 1967

Laocoön's unique methods of displaying human suffering and pain were innovative for Western European art at the time. This late Greek statue was able to capture human emotion in a way that hadn't been accomplished in Eastern Europe since the fall of the Republic. In some sense, Laocoön's discovery fueled the beginning of the Baroque period, its rendering of musculature and anatomy was the subject of study for Michelangelo and his contemporaries.³² Michelangelo even designed an arm to restore the statue but lost the competition to Jacopo Sansovino even, though Michelangelo argued Sansovino's placement of the arm was incorrect (Figure 3).

The agony and the fear immortalized on Laocoön and his sons' faces display human emotion in a way that was unique to this statue at the time in which it was discovered. Artists that lived in the emotional period of the Late Renaissance through the Late Baroque period connected with the pathos of Laocoön and his sons. Laocoön inspired and contributed to many works of the period. Notably, Titian in his altarpiece of the Resurrection in SS. Nazaro e Celso at Brescia used a copy of Laocoön as his Christ via a cast he made in the same year, 1522.³³ Laocoön was the subject of poetry, such as "The Poem of Jacobus Sadoletus on the Statue of Laocoön."

Then emerged the formal scholarship describing the artistic value of Laocoön. First came Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, which praised the expression of agony and the beauty in suffering that the sculpture group displayed. In 1766 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published his work, *Laocoön*. His work formalized Winckelmann's explanations stating the reason for displaying Laocoön in his moment of suffering. Not in the way unrestrained agony was portrayed in Greek literature and drama ,

...beauty was the supreme law of the visual arts...There are passions and degrees of passion which are expressed by the most hideous contortions of the face and

³² Margarete Bieber, *Laocoön: The Influence of the Group Since its Rediscovery*.

³³ Margarete Bieber, *Laocoön: The Influence of the Group Since its Rediscovery*.

which throw the whole body into such unnatural positions as to lose all the beautiful contours of its natural state. The ancient artists either refrained from depicting such emotions or reduced them to a degree where it is possible to show them with a certain measure of beauty.³⁴

The Laocoön had entranced scholars with its form but had become mundane compared to the works from the Renaissance.

Slowly the world forgot Laocoön's status as a transitional piece as the Renaissance works began to equal Laocoön's own expressions and anatomy. What had once inspired the works of many young artists and had revolutionized the depictions of the human form returned to its original value. Laocoön and His Sons were once again a piece depicting aesthetic beauty. Today, Laocoön is the subject of many papers arguing the merits of its description as one of the greatest artistic works ever created. Lessing himself critiqued previous restorations of Laocoön. He felt that restorations were too heavily focused on the works of Virgil and the descriptions of the scene in classical media. Restorers should have instead restored the statue based upon the scene's iconography in Pompeiian frescoes.³⁵

Today, Laocoön has returned to his status as an aesthetic figure, his contributions to the art world largely forgotten. Most visitors to the Vatican Museum's Museo Pio-Clementino nod their heads momentarily, take in the beauty of the work, then move on, not knowing that they are standing before the work that inspired the likes of Michelangelo and Titian. Instead, they know that it is famous, the reason for its fame forgotten as now the innovations that it inspired have reached and surpassed its artistry. The most coverage the statue has received recently is the reunification of Laocoön's missing arm with the original statue- a far cry from the artistic studies and sculpture contests it inspired upon its reintroduction in the 1500s. In 1905 the archaeologist

³⁴ Gotthold Lessing and Edward McCormick, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. 15.

³⁵ Gotthold Lessing and Edward McCormick, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. 15.

Ludwig Pollak the Czech-born curator of the Museo Barracco in Rome, was able to recognize the original arm in the shop of a Roman stonemason. After publishing the find, he donated it to the Vatican Museums.³⁶ However, despite its rediscovery it took several decades for the restoration process required to reattach the arm to take place, resulting in Laocoön's missing arm being reunited during the 1980s.³⁷ The most recent discourse surrounding Laocoön and His Sons takes on Lessing's interpretation of the statue rather than the statue itself. It is once again considered a decorative object, rather than inspirational one, decreasing the perception of its value.



Figure 3
Photograph of the original restoration of Laocoön and His Sons with Sansovino's arm still in place³⁸

³⁶ "The Digital Sculpture Project: Laocoön." Digital Sculpture Project, March 22, 2013. <http://www.digitalsculpture.org/laocoön/index02.html>.

³⁷ Seymour Howard, "Laocoön Rerestored." *American Journal of Archaeology* 93, no. 3 (1989): 417-22. Accessed March 31, 2021. doi:10.2307/505589.

³⁸ James Anderson, *Laocoön*. Rome. 1845-1855.

Winged Victory

The Winged Victory of Samothrace is an icon, a representation of the Louvre's classics collection. She stands on the landing of the Daru staircase, welcoming visitors into the Greek and Roman wing of the museum. Her position, while similar to her placement in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods on the island of Samothrace, is far removed from the religious importance it once held. She was once a grand monument in the temple complex of The Sanctuary of The Great Gods at Samothrace. The Great Gods of Samothrace's sanctuary are unknown, as they are only vaguely named by Greek authors themselves. Herodotos called them the Kabeiroi. Another author called them Axieros, Axiokersa, and Axiokersos, then equated them with Demeter, Persephone, and Hades.³⁹ The only gods that appear with some consistency are Kasmilos/Kadmilos, who resembles Hermes, and a "Kybele-like Great Mother."⁴⁰

This temple has been mentioned in many myths and stories and thus, held great power. The sanctuary collected numerous votive offerings of grand scale, such as the column monument of Philip V by the Macedonians to the Great Gods around 200 BCE.⁴¹ East of the terrace, between the stoa, is where the majority of the objects and monuments were held and where the grandest of those offerings could be seen, The Winged Victory. She is believed to have been dedicated by the people of Rhodes in recognition of a naval victory based upon the Rhodian marble that made up the monument's base. Still, we cannot confirm her true donors, just that she was most likely donated to commemorate a naval victory. One thing is clear, her form is unlike the styles typical of the Hellenistic Period and instead are reminiscent of those atop the

³⁹ Laugier Hamiaux and Marianne Martinez, *The winged victory of Samothrace*. 44.

⁴⁰ Laugier Hamiaux and Marianne Martinez, *The winged victory of Samothrace*..

⁴¹ Laugier Hamiaux and Marianne Martinez, *The winged victory of Samothrace*. 55.

Parthenon⁴². Winged Victory was meant to be a timeless work of art, standing atop the temple context for centuries to come. The Winged Victory once towered over the entire sanctuary at Samothrace, welcoming religious initiates into the complex that would guide them through the rites of the Great Gods. Her placement in a rectangular niche cut into the highest, southernmost hillside within the sacred grounds, facing northeast, pointed her toward the heart of the sanctuary. She acted as a greeting and a promise of what was to come.

She remained an icon in the complex even as the Sanctuary of the Great Gods started to decline after the second century BCE, until the temples crumbled, and she became buried in the same hillside where she once stood, towering above worshippers. In 1863, the Vice Consul Champoiseau was having his workmen excavate the antiquity-rich ruin of Samothrace to send artifacts back to the Musée Impérial, which later became the Louvre, in Paris. Then he saw the right section of Victory's bust; she was in fragments, but her beauty was undeniable.

Champoiseau described the sculpture as "sheer marble muslin pressed by the wind against the living flesh."⁴³ He had his workmen search for more fragments in hopes of finding the head and limbs; unfortunately, they were unable to find those items but were able to find fragments of her wings and drapery. His men also unearthed her base, which Champoiseau misidentified as an overturned Egyptian sarcophagus.⁴⁴ He then arranged for all the fragments to be carried to Paris. Upon her arrival, the curator of antiquities, Adrien de Longpérier, immediately identified the statue as desirable and set about readying it for exhibition. He brought in Enrico Penelli to place metal supports in the center of the statue and reattach the fragments of drapery. Longpérier also

⁴² Susan Pickford and John Tittensor, trans. "Winged Victory of Samothrace: A closer look at the Victory of Samothrace" Musée du Louvre. Accessed February 15, 2021.

http://musee.louvre.fr/oal/victoiredesamothrace/victoiredesamothrace_acc_en.html.

⁴³ Hamiaux, Laugier, and Martinez, Marianne *The winged victory of Samothrace*. 74.

⁴⁴ Hamiaux, Laugier, and Martinez, Marianne *The winged victory of Samothrace*.

chose not to display the right portion of the upper torso (Figure 4) as it would require filling in the missing portions of the body, an unconventional thought at the time.

However, with the recovery of the base in 1871, during her second restoration, Félix Ravaisson-Mollien Longpérier set about filling in the missing portions of the statue with plaster (Figure 5). This is also the restoration where Winged Victory claimed her now-iconic position on the landing of the Daru staircase so as not to overwhelm the other exhibits. The Daru staircase was first designed by Edmond Guillaume, with the dome atop the staircase decorated with vibrant and colorful mosaics and friezes. From her original restoration in 1864-1866, she has undergone four restorations as more and more fragments were discovered and rejoined. She is synonymous with the Louvre, and her image is often used to identify the Louvre in media.

Today, she is praised for her status as a masterpiece of classical art. Her beauty is undeniable, but lacks the heart and religious importance she once held to the people of Samothrace. The magnificent goddess is now known for her gorgeous drapery and not her welcoming face greeting pilgrims. Her bright white marble and plaster exterior lacks the vibrant colors that would have adorned her billowing clothes. She is divorced from her history and purpose but is valuable nonetheless. She symbolizes the beauty of classical works, but not in the same way as Venus. Victory is not a symbol of female beauty but instead artistic beauty. She is valued because she is arguably one of the best examples of Hellenistic sculpture, not because her feminine body serves as a mark for the perfect female form.

Winged Victory welcomes visitors to the Louvre's classical wing just as she greeted initiates back in her home of Samothrace. However, her religious value and the imposing placement of her monumental figure is lost. She is no longer the religious goddess that told promised fortune upon those who took part in the rites of the Great Gods, nor is she the gift of an

island grateful for its naval Victory. The Sanctuary of the Great Gods complex is long forgotten along with the gods the people once worshipped. With her removal from her complex and the decay of her temples, her religious ties faded away. Her religious history is unknown to most visitors who view her on the Daru landing. Her enclosure, carefully carved to tower above initiates, now lies empty, in shambles. Instead, she sits bare on the staircase landing, her base an unwilling chair for a few unwitting visitors. While she may tower above incoming patrons, she is below those leaving the classical wing and moving about the museum. Her wings are mutilated by plaster as the right-wing she wears today is merely a plaster copy of the left-wing. The right-wing does not align with the remaining flight feathers within the Louvre collections, her torso merely a guess of her old appearance. She is an icon but at what cost? Her history has been forgotten, and her limbs have been lost to time.

While the Venus De Milo became an icon because of her association with beauty, Victory's value now lies in her association with the Louvre and art. She is a symbol of the museum's classical pieces but has no symbolism of her own. Winged Victory is not a symbol of beauty like Venus. She is not even a symbol of Victory as her name states. She can no longer hold laurels, palm fronds, or a torch. Nike is disarticulated much like Venus, but she is not remembered for Venus' sensuality. Instead, she is known for the mastery of the art that her drapery displays. She is a symbol of the classics, old and unknown, with many critical pieces missing, her core value separated from the context that once made her vital to the people who made and lived with her. Today she is a statue. Once, she was a beloved goddess and gift.



Figure 4
The First Reconstruction of the Winged Victory at the Louvre in the Salle des Caryatides
(1866)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Susan Pickford and John Tittensor, trans. "Winged Victory of Samothrace"



Figure 5
Portions of Victory Restored in Plaster from the Front⁴⁶



Figure 6
Reconstruction of the Complete Monument Drawing by Valérie Foret, D.E.S.A
architect⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Susan Pickford and John Tittensor, trans. “Winged Victory of Samothrace”

⁴⁷ Susan Pickford and John Tittensor, trans. “Winged Victory of Samothrace”

Conclusion

Value is subjective and malleable. Using these three case studies, we can observe the changes in how value is assigned to objects. The Venus De Milo, the Laocoön, and Winged Victory of Samothrace have all changed in value from the time of their creation in the classical period to their present perceived value. The Venus De Milo gained fame far beyond her original worth. Laocoön was valued as a decorative piece with excellent craftsmanship. Upon its rediscovery, it revolutionized sculptural style in the Renaissance period, but its pivotal role in the Renaissance is forgotten. Its revolutionary detail is now the norm. It is once again valued as a decorative piece. The Winged Victory of Samothrace was always highly valued from her conception to the modern-day; however, what that value means has changed. She was once tightly linked to the religious practices at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods at Samothrace, a votive offering that welcomed initiates into the complex. Today, she is a symbol of the classics. Her religious connections have been erased by time and new connections have been formed with the Louvre museum as a classical masterpiece.

The Venus De Milo gained value beyond her humble beginnings as a decoration for a lowly gymnasium on the small island of Milos to becoming a symbol of feminine beauty. Venus gained fame through luck; her discovery was the perfect time to thrust her into the spotlight. She became a treasure through a chance discovery and the Louvre's need for a work to compete with the British Museum's Parthenon Marbles and The Vatican Museum's Apollo Belvedere. Once her discovery was sensationalized, and she was connected with the concept of female beauty, she had claimed her place in public discourse. She has gained value far beyond her origins because of how she was presented to the world. Even now that her origins have come to light and her

status as a “masterpiece” has been questioned, she remains a symbol of classical art and beauty. Once she claimed her position in public discourse, she stayed there. A sculpture made by an artist of little note has gained fame. From a mundane decoration to a priceless artifact, The Venus De Milo proves that value can be assigned to even the most pedestrian works.

The Laocoön’s value was purely aesthetic when it was created. Then its value changed as a piece that revolutionized the style of the Renaissance and Baroque period. As its unique details became the norm once again, Laocoön was reduced to an aesthetic piece. Laocoön’s rediscovery influenced the likes of Michelangelo and Titian. With their aesthetic of restrained agony and the details of the human form, he and his sons transformed art, and yet, they have returned to their original value as merely a beautiful statue. While highly valued and a gem among the Vatican museum’s collection, it serves as an aesthetic piece once again. Sitting in the Vatican Museo Pio-Clementino, many patrons know that the statue is famous but do not know why, just taking a photograph of the statue or simply walking past. Laocoön’s perceived value has existed on a continuum, further emphasizing that value is ephemeral- no object’s value is fixed; value changes as the world itself does.

The Winged Victory of Samothrace has always had value, but the nature of that value has changed. She was once a religious object, her imposing form stood atop a renowned temple complex; arms stretched wide. As the sanctuary decayed her, a portion of her torso, arms, and head were lost. Much of her original context was slowly recovered and discovered, leading to her being disassociated from her past. Instead, she became associated with the Louvre. While her placement on the Daru staircase landing is similar to how she appeared on her island, the memories of religious devotees are long forgotten. However, her beauty as a sculpture is undeniable. She was the focal point of the sanctuary for a reason. Her drapery and elegant wings

attract attention and praise. Today she is a symbol of the classical field and the peak of statuary, but is divorced from her votive origins. Her value has shifted as a result of how she was discovered, in pieces without context. She is ornamental because without her head, without her temple complex, all she can be is an ornament. Her value became one with the place she was housed, her towering sculpture, a recognition of a naval victory, now a monument to the classical style.

Public opinion of art works shapes their value, so how the public perceives an object is just as important as the history of the object itself. Whether a statue is mentioned in the works of Pliny, or has unremarkable origins, the world has decided that some objects are worthy of special attention. The reason why they are worthy changes; how they became worthy is unique to each object, but through luck or fate, they have been remembered. These three case studies are just a few examples of how value is ascribed to artifacts. They are the objects that have withstood the test of time and carved their image into the public consciousness.

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