The ultimate art history whodunit: a Michelangelo forgery or a classical antiquity?

By Jennifer Grogan, Columbia News Service, May 3, 2005

High resolution photos and text-only

The Laocoon, a famous statue currently held at the Vatican, has traditionally been ascribed to classical sculptors. Recently, Lynn Catterson, who teaches art history at Columbia University, has proposed that the statue was in fact a forgery by Michelangelo. Catterson, coordinator for the art history summer program at Columbia University, looks through a book of sketches by Michelangelo. She believes the sketches show that a classical statue called the Laocoon was in fact a forgery by Michelangelo. (Amanda Bensen/CNS) (Lynn Catterson/CNS)

When art historians heard the suggestion in April that a famous statue believed to be the work of classical sculptors was in fact a forgery by the Renaissance artist Michelangelo, they were skeptical.

After all, a new work by Michelangelo has been "discovered," on average, every two or three years for the past 75 years, and not one of them is universally accepted as authentic. Many are attempts by art dealers to raise the value of their merchandise.

But this time, it's a fellow art historian making the proposal. And she is not just saying the "Laocoön" statue is the work of Michelangelo: She says she has evidence to prove it.

For art historians, this may be the ultimate whodunit.

When Lynn Catterson, coordinator for Columbia University's art history summer program, began looking at the "Laocoön" more closely last August, she noticed that a sketch of the back of a male torso by Michelangelo was practically identical to a photograph of the "Laocoön."

"It's the same thing in reverse," said Catterson, 48, whose doctoral thesis focused on 15th-century Florentine sculptors associated with the Medici family. The drawing can be almost perfectly superimposed on a photograph of the back of the statue, she noted.

That was astonishing, because Catterson knew that when one artist copies another's work, the finished product cannot be perfectly superimposed because they have different ideas about how to represent the human body. For example, Michelangelo's drawing after the Italian painter Masaccio's figure of St. Peter from the Brancacci Chapel in Florence does not match the original work.

There is one important difference that indicates that the sketch of the torso was not a copy made after the statue, Catterson said. In the drawing, the left arm is raised, but in the finished statue, the right arm is raised.

“This is the kind of compositional revision that a sculptor would make in order to make the best use of the marble at hand, as well as for the overall balance in the finished group,” Catterson said.

The drawing, which is currently at the Oxford Ashmolean Museum in England, has been dated to 1501, but the “Laocoön” was not discovered until five years later. Catterson said that it was the strongest piece of evidence to support her theory that the “Laocoön,” which currently resides at the Vatican Museums in Rome, is a forgery by Michelangelo.

“I was in disbelief because this would be a 500-year-old secret involving both a well-known artist and a well-known statue,” Catterson said.

The sculpture, whose origins are already a source of debate because some say it is a Greek original while others say it is a later Roman copy, depicts Laocoön, the Trojan high priest, and his two sons being strangled by sea serpents for warning the city of Troy not to touch the Trojan horse during the siege of the city. According to a description by Pliny the Elder, a Roman officer and encyclopedist, the original “Laocoön” was carved by the Rhodian sculptors Hagesandros, Polydoros and Athenodoros. He described it as “a work superior to all the pictures and bronzes of the world,” and noted that it was constructed from a single piece of marble.

Shortly after the “Laocoön” in question was discovered in 1506 in an ancient underground room in a Roman vineyard, it was purchased by Pope Julius II and installed in the sculpture courtyard of the Vatican palace. Questions first began to surface when it was noticed that the sculpture was composed of seven pieces of marble. The discrepancy was explained by the fact that either Pliny was deceived or he wished to deceive others to render the work more impressive.

Catterson said Michelangelo’s motive for the forgery was profit. At the time, he was at the beginning of his career as a sculptor under the patronage of the Medici family, which had amassed a large collection of ancient works. When the Medici family was expelled from Florence, Michelangelo was under increasing financial strain. The artist knew more money could be made in forging antiquities than in creating contemporary works. Many art historians have long believed that Michelangelo carved a sleeping Cupid, which he aged in the ground and then sold as an antique.

“It was about money, but he must have been pretty pleased with himself,” Catterson said. “He made a work that was mistaken for the greatest sculpture in antiquity.”

Catterson alleges that Michelangelo got the idea for the “Laocoön” from another older Medici artist, Filippino Lippi, the son of the better known friar painter Filippo Lippi. Filippino Lippi painted a fresco, “Death of Laocoön,” at a Medici villa just outside of Florence. Catterson said the Laocoön in Lippi’s preparatory drawings for this fresco bears an uncanny relationship to the 1506 “Laocoön,” which at the time had not yet been discovered.

“They share the prominent full bushy beard, the same configuration of the arms with the right one raised and the left one lowered, as well as the very same placement of the feet where one rests on the altar ledge while the other extends back and below,” she said in reference to Lippi’s drawing of Laocoön, which is now in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow.

But if Michelangelo literally translated the drawing, which shows a tremendous amount of instability in the flailing figure, into a sculpture, it would have tipped over. Michelangelo also found the solution in Lippi’s fresco, Catterson alleges.

“Michelangelo realized that for an otherwise seated stationary figure, a sense of impending motion, in this case, a struggle, could be conveyed through the flexing of an ankle, a wrist or a neck,” she said. “The crook of the head, the dip of the shoulder--he got all of that from Filippino.”

In the summers of 1497 and 1498, Michelangelo bought several blocks of marble which cannot be accounted for in his other works, Catterson said. He also made substantial deposits in his bank account, which also cannot be connected with his known projects from 1497 to 1501. Therefore, she said, he would have most likely carved the “Laocoön” and his

famous "Pieta," which depicts Mary holding the dead body of Christ in her lap, at the same time because the "Pieta" was completed in 1500. Catterson said both sculptures also share the same optical correction: to make it look correct from the front, both have oversized laps.

Reaction has been mixed since she presented her ideas at a talk at Columbia in April.

“The majority reaction, at least that I’ve heard, has been, ‘Of course, how come we haven’t seen this before?’” Catterson said. “The other side of the coin is that it is seemingly preposterous, but no one has yet offered any evidence to say it’s impossible.”

William E. Wallace, chairman of the art history and archaeology department at Washington University in St. Louis, had already been approached with two Michelangelo “discoveries” this year when he heard about Catterson’s proposal. He was naturally skeptical that this was Michelangelo’s work. But what makes this attribution different, he said, is that the object being credited to Michelangelo is not up for sale, as has been the case with past discoveries.

“As a scholar, I am much more willing to entertain a scholarly argument than an attribution that’s going to potentially make someone a lot of money,” he said. “I’m in a suspended state of judgment, but I’m open to being persuaded.”

Catterson’s theory forms the last chapter of her book on the evolution of sculptors to be published by the Princeton University Press.

While Wallace is receptive, others say it is impossible that the “Laocoön” could be the work of Michelangelo.

“She has put this together like a 'Da Vinci Code'-type thing. The value is that it opens up debate and lets us rethink things,” said David Mitten, James C. Loeb professor of classical art and archaeology at Harvard University. “But I just don’t believe it.”

Mitten said his main objections are that Catterson left out any discussion of the type of marble that was used and where it could have come from, and that she did not take into account the discovery of materials related to the sculpture in Sperlonga, a town in central Italy.

In 1957, construction workers discovered thousands of marble statuary fragments there. When one of the larger sculptural groups was reconstituted, it revealed an inscription with the names of the three sculptors who Pliny the Elder said made the Laocoön.

“The works were directly comparable to the ‘Laocoön’ and established the connection so firmly that it was clearly a matter of association that she could not deal with,” said Richard Brilliant, Anna S. Garbedian emeritus professor of humanities at Columbia and author of “My Laocoön: Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks.”

Brilliant said Catterson should have compared the “Laocoön” to other works from the Hellenistic period.

“One way to show that something does not belong to a series is to show that the series has characteristics that the work does not share,” he said. The “Laocoön” is very similar to other sculptures dating to that time, he noted.

Despite criticism, Catterson does not think her idea will meet the same fate as the other Michelangelo discoveries.

“We have always looked at the “Laocoön” as a Greek or Roman sculpture, but now there is an alternative context in which to consider it,” she said. “It’s unlikely that it will be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt either way, but this is not going to fade away so quickly because it’s such a spectacular object.”