

## Introduction:

### Rethinking Lessing's *Laocoon* from across the humanities

Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire

The first person to compare painting and poetry with one another was a man of fine feeling who observed that both arts produced a similar effect on him. Both, he felt, place before us absent things as present, and appearance as reality. Both create an illusion (*beide täuschen*), and in both cases the illusion is pleasing.

A second person attempted to get at the inner core of this pleasure, and discovered that in both cases it springs from the same source. Beauty, the concept of which we first derive from physical objects, has general rules that allow themselves to be applied to numerous things: to actions, to thoughts, as indeed to forms.

A third person – who reflected on the value and distribution of these general rules – observed that some of them reign more prominently over painting, others over poetry: that in the one case poetry can therefore help to elucidate and illustrate painting, and that in the other painting can do so for poetry.

The first was the amateur [*Liebhaber*], the second the philosopher [*Philosoph*], and the third the critic [*Kunstrichter*].<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translated after Lessing 2012: 7 (cf. Lessing 1984: 3). Throughout this introductory chapter, references are given to Edward Allan McCormick's English translation of *Laocoon* (Lessing 1984),

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon*, first published in 1766, has proved one of the most abiding texts of the European Enlightenment. As the original, full title of the essay makes clear, *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie* ('*Laocoon*, or on the boundaries of painting and poetry') takes on no less a subject than the 'limits' – *Grenzen* – of visual and verbal representation: it tackles the essential ways in which 'painting' and 'poetry' affect their readers and viewers. But while shaping modern critical debates about the arts, sensory perception, and aesthetic experience, Lessing's treatise is also rooted in the historical interpretation of ancient art and literature. For Lessing, thinking about the medial mechanics of 'painting' and 'poetry' went hand in hand with reflections on the paradigmatic models of Greece and Rome: if the *Laocoon* has played a key role in recalibrating modern aesthetics, it takes its lead from a particular engagement with – and indeed construction of – the classical past.<sup>2</sup>

The present volume brings together a range of different disciplinary perspectives to re-examine the aesthetic arguments, intellectual debts, and manifold influences of Lessing's text. Our objective has not been to impose some particular 'party-line', directing contributors towards a specific framework for interpreting (or indeed refashioning) its critical core; given the interpretive richness and wide-ranging afterlife of Lessing's treatise, moreover, we have not tried to offer a single 'handbook' guide to this text and its reception. In devising our anthology – the first

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albeit often with translations significantly modified; our references to the German text follow Vollhardt's edition of Lessing 2012 (complete with detailed notes and further bibliography at 291–384).

<sup>2</sup> We use 'aesthetics' here in its modern meaning of a theory of the arts rather than in its eighteenth-century sense of a theory of sensual perception (as defined by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1750 – namely, as a *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*: Baumgarten 2007: I.21).

such edited book dedicated to *Laocoon* in English<sup>3</sup> – we have instead taken our cue from the essay’s 250th anniversary (1766–2016). Individually, all of the subsequent chapters tackle a particular aspect of Lessing’s essay, its thinking or its historical context. As a collective, though, the volume exploits *Laocoon*’s anniversary to offer an array of different celebratory (as indeed critical) evaluations, and from multiple vantage points from across the humanities.

That broad spectrum of responses is hugely important. In bringing together a motley crew of classicists, intellectual historians, philosophers, aestheticians, literary critics, and historians of art (among others), the book’s foremost aim is to spark new sorts of dialogue between different disciplinary specialists. Lessing’s very attempt to delineate the *Grenzen* of literary and artistic media, we might say, tenders a unique opportunity to move backwards and forwards across the disciplinary boundaries of modern-day academia.

The fact this book should appear within a series dedicated to ‘classical presences’ also has a programmatic significance. One recurrent interest in the essays that follow concerns *Laocoon* as a work of classical reception. As we shall see, Lessing played a key role in directing nascent eighteenth-century traditions of

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<sup>3</sup> The most important previous edited volume (in German) is that of Robert and Vollhardt (eds.) 2013 – albeit focused primarily on the text’s *Entstehungsgeschichte*. Previous edited collections include Gebauer (ed.) (1984) and Baxmann, Franz, and Schäffner (eds.) (2000), both dedicated to the semiotic implications of the essay, and with only minimal interest in its Enlightenment historical context; Koebner (ed.) (1989), focused on elaborating the theoretical insights of *Laocoon* for contemporary art criticism; a special issue of *Poetics Today* (= Burwick (ed.) 1999); and Beyer and Valentin (eds.) 2014 (albeit not concentrating on the *Laocoon* exclusively).

*Altertumswissenschaft*:<sup>4</sup> discussing aspects of classical philosophy, critiquing ancient traditions of image-making, and contemplating both the proximity and distance between the Graeco-Roman world and Lessing's own, this treatise articulates a certain view of the Greek and Roman past. But the 'classical presences' run much deeper. As an anthology, our book is concerned not just with the reception of antiquity, but also with the legacy of that reception over the ensuing 250 years – stretching right up to the present day. While some contributors draw out *Laocoon*'s engagement with its Graeco-Roman heritage, others explore how Lessing's text, so heavily indebted to classical thinking, has itself determined the direction of more modern criticism about the 'arts'. *Laocoon*, we suggest, is a liminal text that has helped define 'modernity' against an 'ancient' alter ego: in grappling with Lessing's *Laocoon* over the last quarter-millennium, and thereby with Lessing's own thinking about the legacy of antiquity, modern aesthetic traditions too have grappled with 'classical presences' – albeit often without fully recognizing the fact.

Before outlining the specific contributions of individual chapters (cf. pp. XX–XX), we use this introduction to sketch just some of the different disciplinary horizons that our book brings together. In the opening paragraphs of his *Laocoon* preface – translated in our epigraph – Lessing situated his project against the background of a wide-ranging critical tradition. Right from the outset, *Laocoon* sketches a tripartite development in thinking about the arts, and from an array of intellectual perspectives: for Lessing, it is a history that progresses from the 'amateur'

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<sup>4</sup> See below, pp. XX–XX. On Greek antiquity's grip over the aesthetic thinking of the German Enlightenment, see now Valdez 2014 (discussing *Laocoon* at pp. 44–52), along with the masterful overview of Marchand 1996 and the earlier analysis of Butler 1935. On the formation of German *Altertumswissenschaft* – in the mid-eighteenth century, and especially in Winckelmann's wake – see now Harloe 2013; cf. Marchand 1996: esp. 16–24; Heidenreich 2006.

(*Liebhaber*) who first compared painting and poetry, through the ‘philosopher’ (*Philosoph*) who related both forms to the aesthetics of beauty, and then third to the ‘critic’ – literally ‘art-judge’ (*Kunstrichter*) – who distinguished between the aesthetic workings of each medium. The *Laocoon* essay will champion the ‘critical’ acumen of its author: Lessing emerges as the ultimate *Kunstrichter*, albeit one whose verdicts have judicious recourse to the verdicts of earlier ‘judges’.<sup>5</sup> Yet intrinsic to this opening paragraph is the concession that a project as ambitious and all-encompassing as Lessing’s had to encompass different critical perspectives. Indeed, one of the reasons *Laocoon* has proved so stimulating and provocative a text over the last 250 years lies precisely in the way it brings together such diverse materials, argumentative modes, and critical insights.

Although Lessing’s three strands cannot in any straightforward way be mapped onto the interdisciplinary perspectives brought together in this book, the remainder of our introductory overview likewise situates our anthology against a triad of different academic perspectives. First, we introduce some of the many ways in which *Laocoon* forged its conceptual archaeology from the literary and material traces of antiquity: as a piece of aesthetic criticism, the essay is founded upon the assumed aesthetic exemplarity of the classical past. Lessing’s self-consciously ‘modern’ intervention in ‘ancient’ critical debates leads us, second, to *Laocoon*’s own eighteenth-century contexts – that is, to the essay’s place within the Enlightenment, its engagement with contemporary debates, and not least its relationship with Lessing’s other works. Third, we briefly chart the importance of *Laocoon* within

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<sup>5</sup> On the abiding importance of the amateur’s response, however, and its implication for understanding the nature of Lessing’s ‘criticism’, see Kottman’s chapter in this volume, discussing the opening of the *Laocoon* preface.

ongoing debates about semiotics, aesthetics, and *Medienwissenschaft*: over the last 250 years, we argue, Lessing's treatise has played a key role in mediating between the legacies of antiquity and modern aesthetic critical theory.

#### LAOCOON AND THE EXEMPLARITY OF ANTIQUITY

The opening paragraph of *Laocoon's* preface – with its tripartite history of the amateur, philosopher, and critic – launches us directly into the text's 'classical presences'. Already in his first paragraph, Lessing situates his essay against the background of an ancient history of comparing painting with poetry. The prefatory paragraphs that follow develop this point, introducing some of antiquity's most celebrated painters ('Apelles and Protogenes') and writers ('Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian'): 'it is the prerogative of the ancients never to have done too much or too little in anything', as Lessing muses.<sup>6</sup>

Before commenting further on how Lessing exploits that classical heritage, it is perhaps worth saying something more about the particular thesis developed in his essay. At the core of *Laocoon*, we have said, is an argument about the operative mechanics of visual and verbal art-forms, no less than a prescription about the proper 'boundaries' of what Lessing labels 'painting' and 'poetry'. Yet as our epigraph makes clear, this thesis is itself indebted to a particular idea of representation. For Lessing, visual and verbal media both work mimetically, according to what Lessing programmatically calls *Täuschung* ('illusion', 'deception', 'fallacy'): painting and poetry represent 'absent things as being present and appearance as reality' (*Beyde ...*

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<sup>6</sup> Lessing 1984: 4. Particularly insightful on Lessing's recourse to ancient precedent is Sichtermann 1968.

*stellen uns abwesende Dinge als gegenwärtig, den Schein als Wirklichkeit vor*).<sup>7</sup>

Despite (or rather because of) their shared mimetic workings, not to mention their similarity in pleasing effect, painted and poetic media are said to differ from one another in both the form and manner of their imitation: for all their shared nature as ‘signs’, the material forms of painting differ from the immaterial representations of poetry.<sup>8</sup>

The clearest articulation of this difference can be found in *Laocoon*’s sixteenth chapter. In a passage to which numerous contributions to this volume will return, Lessing explains how painting handles bodies that exist in space, whereas poetry represents actions unfolding in time:<sup>9</sup>

Painting can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible.

Similarly, poetry in its progressive imitations can use only one single property of a body. It must therefore choose that one which awakes the most vivid image of the body, looked at from the point of view under which poetry can best use it. From this comes the rule concerning the

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<sup>7</sup> On Lessing’s debts to – and recalibrations of – ancient ideas of mimesis, see especially Halliwell 2002: 119–21, along with the chapters by Grethlein, Squire, and Trabant in this volume.

<sup>8</sup> The key analysis of Lessing’s theory of ‘signs’ here are Todorov 1973 and 1982, and Wellbery 1984 (as discussed below, pp. XX–XX); cf. the discussions by Wellbery, Beiser, Gaiger, Lifschitz, Grethlein, Robertson, Squire, and Trabant in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Lessing 1984: 78–9: for an explanation of Lessing’s thinking, see Giuliani in this volume, with further discussions by Squire, Fulda, and Grethlein.

harmony of descriptive adjectives and economy in description of physical objects.

For all its diverse contributions and observations, at the heart of *Laocoon* lies an argument about medial distinction: Lessing brings aesthetic criticism into line with an Enlightenment dialectic of space and time.<sup>10</sup>

We shall return in the third section of our introduction to the larger framework of Lessing's argument in this passage, as well as its subsequent reception over the last 250 years. For now, though, we restrict ourselves to a more basic point. After all, *Laocoon's* thesis is here premised on a series of close engagements with the literary and artistic exempla of Graeco-Roman antiquity. At the beginning of chapter 16, Lessing introduces his programmatic thesis by signposting a shift in argumentative mode: his formulation attempts 'to derive the matter from its first principles' (*die Sache aus ihren ersten Gründen herzuleiten*).<sup>11</sup> Throughout the treatise, however, it is classical materials that provide the basis for Lessing to construct his modern critical argument: ancient case studies provide the essential thread from which *Laocoon* is spun.

If Lessing's thesis is derived from a careful analysis of ancient art and literature, the same ancient materials also serve as a barometer for testing his hypotheses. The sixteenth chapter itself nicely demonstrates the point. No sooner does Lessing embark on his self-declared 'dry chain of reasoning' (*diese trockene*

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<sup>10</sup> For the key championing of this point, see Mitchell 1984a (revised in Mitchell 1986: 95–115).

<sup>11</sup> Lessing 1984: 78.



*Schlusskette*) than he tests his proposition against the touchstone of ancient precedent – and above all, the supreme paradigm of Homeric epic:<sup>12</sup>

I should put little faith in this dry chain of reasoning did I not find it completely confirmed by the procedure of Homer, or rather if it had not been just this procedure that led me to my conclusions. Only on these principles can the grand style of the Greek be defined and explained, and only thus can the proper position be assigned to the opposite style of so many modern poets, who attempt to rival the painter at a point where they must necessarily be surpassed by him.

As a work of modern aesthetics – and one, as we shall see, that is addressed as a corrective to ‘modern poets’ (*neuere Dichter*) in particular<sup>13</sup> – the arguments of the *Laocoon* are founded on the models of the Greek and Roman past: this is a treatise that bridges history and criticism, founding its aesthetic decrees on the historical study of ancient precedent, while also exploiting those arguments to shed new light on classical materials.

INSERT Fig. 1.1 (can proceed present paragraph but ideally on same double-page spread)

Of all the varied ‘classical presences’ that illuminate *Laocoon*, none proves more luminescent than the Vatican statue-group that provided the essay with its title

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<sup>12</sup> Lessing 1984: 79.

<sup>13</sup> On the underlying theme of the ‘Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’, see below, pp. XX–XX.

[Fig. 1.1].<sup>14</sup> The marble sculpture has attracted a large bibliography in its own right – both as a work of ancient art, and as an image that has spurred all manner of artistic and critical responses since its 1506 unearthing in Rome [Fig. 1.2]:<sup>15</sup> for eighteenth-century audiences, the group was understood as one of classical art’s most iconic survivals – a must-see among imagined Grand Tourists to Rome [cf. e.g. Fig. 1.3],<sup>16</sup> a case study for formalist explorations of beauty [e.g. Fig. 1.4],<sup>17</sup> and a spur for imagining the original contexts of ancient sculpture, as well as their Renaissance discovery [cf. e.g. Fig. 1.5].<sup>18</sup> The 500th anniversary of the statue’s discovery in 2006 occasioned a particularly rich spate of publications, prompting scholars to re-evaluate the statue and its varied receptions over the last half-millennium.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the

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<sup>14</sup> On the importance of the Laocoon group to Lessing’s argument, see Squire (this volume), with further bibliography.

<sup>15</sup> Muth 2005 provides the best introduction to the ancient statue; cf. Simon 1992; Ridgway 2000: 87–90; and the more detailed bibliographic overview in Squire 2012: 471–8. On the statue’s discovery and immediate Renaissance impact, see also Barkan 1999: esp. 2–17.

<sup>16</sup> For a lavishly illustrated introduction to the eighteenth-century Grand Tour (accompanying a landmark exhibition at the Tate Gallery), see Wilton and Bignamini 1996: Figure 1.3 is discussed at pp. 277–8, no. 233 (for contemporary depictions of the eighteenth-century display of the group in the Cortile del Belvedere, cf. also pp. 248–9, nos. 201–02).

<sup>17</sup> For discussion of Hogarth’s image, see Burke 1955: xi–xii, with further comments in Squire 2011: 15–16.

<sup>18</sup> For discussion, see Faroult and Voiriot 2016: 252–3, no. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Particularly important anniversary publications include Buranelli, Liverani, and Nesselrath (eds.) 2006; Schmälzle (ed.) 2006; Bejor (ed.) 2007; and Gall and Wolkenhauer (eds.) 2009. On the statue’s reception, see e.g. Bieber 1967; Haskell and Penny 1981: 243–7; Settis 1999: esp. 85–230; Brilliant 2000; Décultot, Le Rider, and Queyrel (eds.) 2003; specifically on the German reception of the group, see Nisbet 1979. Muth (ed.) 2016 provides the most recent overview – a catalogue accompanying an

Laocoon group, issues of reception have influenced not only how the statue has been seen, but also, in a literal sense, its physical form: in the mid-twentieth century, the debatable decision was made to remove the right arm of Laocoon that had been created in the sixteenth century [cf. Fig. 1.2], replacing it with an ‘original’ ancient fragment (albeit one that was alien to the composition of the statue as known in the centuries since the Renaissance – and indeed, as it would have been recognized by Lessing’s contemporaries [cf. Fig. 3.1]).<sup>20</sup>

**INSERT FIGs. 1.2–1.5 over the next few pages**

So what did Lessing see in the Laocoon group, and why did he decide to structure his essay around this particular example? Before tackling that question, it is worth noting that, at least by 1766, Lessing had not cast eyes on the original statue-group. Barring a brief spell in Paris during the early nineteenth century (following Napoleon’s conquests in Italy), the statue has been displayed in Rome ever since its discovery; as far as we know, Lessing did not inspect a plaster cast of the statue either – he must have derived his knowledge of the group entirely from critical descriptions and contemporary engravings [e.g. Fig. 3.1].<sup>21</sup> For Lessing, the Laocoon group could nonetheless be harnessed as an iconic frame: not only did it allow him to anchor his argument in a series of inductive inferences about a particular case study, it also provided a means of relating Lessing’s own response to a much longer critical

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exhibition at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; the book was published while the current volume was in production.

<sup>20</sup> On the issue of restoration, see Wiggen 2001; Hoffer 2003; Muth 2005: 78–82; cf. also several of the essays in Muth (ed.) 2016. A photograph of the statue’s modern-day presentation can be found on the frontispiece of this book.

<sup>21</sup> For the point, see especially the chapters in this volume by Squire (p. XX, with further bibliography) and Giuliani (p. XX).

tradition – one that stretched from Lessing’s immediate contemporaries, through Renaissance reactions (including Sadolet’s famous poetic response on its discovery),<sup>22</sup> all the way back to ancient musings (not least the Elder Pliny’s discussion of either this or a related group, associated with three Rhodian artists named Hagesander, Polydorus, and Athanadorus: *HN* 36.37).<sup>23</sup>

In Lessing’s hands, the chief importance of the Laocoon group lay in its relationship with literary narratives of the same mythical story. What we see in the statue is of course Laocoon, a Trojan priest,<sup>24</sup> along with his two sons, struggling in vain against the ensnaring embrace of two snakes. According to ancient mythology, Laocoon had advised his fellow Trojans against accepting the wooden horse left outside the city’s walls: the snakes that envelop Laocoon in the statue-group had been sent by the gods – dispatched as a conspicuous portent to punish the priest on the one hand, and to persuade the Trojans that his fears were unfounded on the other. Like numerous other critics, and none more so than Johann Joachim Winckelmann [Fig. 1.6], Lessing looked to the Laocoon statue as an embodiment of the supreme achievements of ancient art. Ultimately, however, Lessing’s interest lay less in the group itself than in its relationship with poetic renditions of the underlying story: as a

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Lessing 1984: 42–4, along with the note at 178–81 (labelling Sadolet’s poem ‘worthy of an ancient poet’).

<sup>23</sup> The attribution of the statue – and its relationship to other ‘Rhodian’ works – has attracted an enormous bibliography: for an overview, cf. Kansteiner *et al.* 2014: V.491–503, no. 4106–17 (discussing the Laocoon group at 496–8, no. 4110).

<sup>24</sup> The unspoken *religious* themes at work here – Laocoon as not only a priest, but also an iconoclast (who advocates, in vain, the destruction of fetishized and treacherous images) – have been rather underplayed among those charting the reception of the statue-group in Germany: cf. Squire (this volume).

work of critical appreciation, Lessing's *Laocoon* aimed to shed light on the statue (and indeed on the workings of the visual arts *tout court*) by comparing its form and interpretative effects with those of Greek and Latin poetry, above all that of Virgil in the second book of the *Aeneid*.<sup>25</sup>

INSERT FIG. 1.6 HERE

This aspect helps to explain *Laocoon*'s ring-compositional structure in its opening and closing chapters, organized around a response to Winckelmann's descriptions of the statue, first in his 1755 *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, and later in his 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst der Alterthums*.<sup>26</sup> More than any of his contemporaries, Winckelmann set the agenda for late eighteenth-century views of the classical (especially 'Greek') past, and not least the Enlightenment's recourse to classical art as aesthetic paradigm. In the opening paragraph of *Laocoon*'s first chapter, Lessing hones in on Winckelmann's famous celebration of the 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' (*edle Einfalt und stille Größe*) of Greek art. But he nonetheless takes issue with Winckelmann's conclusions about the Laocoon statue, citing his 1755 description in full:<sup>27</sup>

Such a soul is depicted in Laocoon's face – and not only in his face – under the most violent suffering. The pain is revealed in every muscle and sinew of his body, and one can almost feel in oneself the painful

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<sup>25</sup> For Lessing's discussion of the group and its relationship to the Virgilian description of the episode (*Aen.* 2.213–24), see above all *Laocoon*'s fifth chapter (= Lessing 1984: 33–9).

<sup>26</sup> On Lessing's response to Winckelmann, cf. Squire and Décultot (this volume).

<sup>27</sup> Lessing 1984: 7; for the original context of the passage, in English translation, see Winckelmann 2006: 30–1.

contraction of the abdomen without looking at the face or other parts of the body at all. However, this pain expresses itself without any sign of rage either in his face or in his posture. He does not raise his voice in a terrible scream, which Virgil describes his Laocoon as doing; the way in which his mouth is open does not permit it. Rather he emits the anxious and subdued sigh described by Sadolet. The pain of the body and the nobility of the soul are distributed and weighed out, as it were, over the entire figure with equal intensity. Laocoon suffers, but he suffers like the Philoctetes of Sophocles; his anguish pierces our very soul, but at the same time we wish that we were able to endure our suffering as well as this great man does.

Expressing so noble a soul goes far beyond the formation of a beautiful body. The artist must have felt within himself that strength of spirit which he imparted to his marble. In Greece artists and philosophers were united in one person, and there was more than one Metrodorus. Philosophy extended its hand to art and breathed into its figures more than common souls...

With this quotation, Lessing at once relates his project in *Laocoon* to Winckelmann's responses and introduces a key interpretive departure. By examining the statue-group in relation to poetic narratives of the same episode (including texts by Sophocles, Virgil, and Sadolet's poetic rhapsody), Lessing argues, Winckelmann had been right to observe a disparity between the visualization of the story and its ancient literary renditions: as Winckelmann had recognized, the sculpted protagonist 'does not raise his voice in a terrible scream, which Virgil describes his Laocoon as doing' [cf. Fig.

1.7]. Where Lessing deems Winckelmann mistaken, however, is in his explanations of why poetic and visual representations differ from one another. Turning to a variety of ancient sources, and correcting (what he considered to be) Winckelmann's 'disparaging reference to Virgil',<sup>28</sup> Lessing argues that crying aloud was the natural and proper response to physical suffering in antiquity. Since 'crying aloud when in physical pain is compatible with nobility of soul' – 'especially according to an ancient Greek way of thinking' (*besonders nach der alten griechischen Denkungsart*) – 'then the desire to express such nobility could not have prevented the artist from representing his scream in his marble': 'there must be another reason why he differs on this point from his rival the poet, who expresses this scream with deliberate intention'.<sup>29</sup>

**INSERT FIG. 1.7 HERE**

The question of the statue-group's 'invisible scream' – and above all its departure from the Virgilian telling of the same moment of Laocoon's death (*Aen.* 2.220–4) – emerges as the central fulcrum around which the *Laocoon* essay revolves. On the one hand, the statue-group provides a skeletal frame for the serpentine twists and turns of Lessing's argument. On the other, the exemplarity of the statue is imbued with a looming presence: the group presides over Lessing's prescriptions about the realm of the visual arts in relation to poetry – and not only in its first chapters, but also over its close (where, in chapters 26 to 29, Lessing ends the essay by evaluating Winckelmann's discussion of the statue in his *Geschichte*).<sup>30</sup> In his preface, Lessing

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<sup>28</sup> Lessing 1984: 8.

<sup>29</sup> Lessing 1984: 11 (translation adapted): for further discussion, cf. Squire (this volume).

<sup>30</sup> On the ring-compositional rationale – and the deliberate avoidance of Winckelmann's 2004 *Geschichte* in the opening chapter – see Décultot (this volume).

acknowledges that presence explicitly, explaining his choice of title, while also justifying his decision to centre a critical work on ‘painting’ around a sculptural touchstone.<sup>31</sup>

Since I started, as it were, with the Laocoon and return to it a number of times, I wished to give it a share in the title too. Other short digressions on various points of ancient art history contribute less to my intent and are included only because I can never hope to find a more suitable place for them.

I should like to remark, finally, that by ‘painting’ I mean the visual arts in general; further, I do not promise that, under the name of poetry, I shall not devote some consideration also to those other arts in which the method of presentation is progressive in time.

Lessing’s comments in this passage anticipate a key organizational aspect of his essay: taking its lead from the statue-group, *Laocoon* will be structured around a series of inductive arguments, organising its critical comments around the historical interpretation of a material case study and associated literary parallels.

As this prefatory passage indicates, *Laocoon* will contain all manner of ‘short digressions’ on points of ancient art history. Crucially, however, such observations do not take on a subsidiary role: they will be tied to Lessing’s broader critical arguments about the respective ends to which painters and poets can – and should – aspire. For modern classicist readers, it can be all too tempting to approach *Laocoon*’s detailed

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<sup>31</sup> Lessing 1984: 5–6. On Lessing’s programmatic collapsing of ‘sculpture’ into ‘painting’, see especially Grethlein (this volume).



comments on various aspects of Graeco-Roman art and literature as historicist footnotes, seemingly removed from the essay's larger critical remit. For Lessing, however, such details of historical interpretation frequently play a critical aesthetic role. One thinks in particular of Lessing's arguments about the chronological precedence of Virgil's poetic account of the Laocoon episode over the statue-group. Among classical archaeologists, much ink has been spilt trying to settle arguments about the sculpture's date – the question of whether we are dealing with a second-century BC Hellenistic 'original', or else a Roman 'copy' of the first century AD.<sup>32</sup> Within the *Laocoon* essay, by contrast, Lessing's thesis that the statue postdates Virgil takes on a programmatic critical significance: were the Virgilian account to have followed the sculpture, Lessing explains, the poetic description would 'lose its merit', grounding its progressive narrative of the story in the material details of the statue.<sup>33</sup> Not only might the material and literary remains of antiquity lead the critic to a better understanding of aesthetics. By the same logic, aesthetic considerations can themselves also shed light on the historical interpretation of ancient texts and images.

Yet the 'classical presences' of Lessing's essay are not limited to discussions of ancient material and literary case studies alone. Along the way, *Laocoon* certainly introduces a staggering array of Greek and Latin texts – ranging from a long excursus on the Homeric description of the shield of Achilles (*Il.* 18.478–608) in chapter 18,<sup>34</sup> to supporting asides on wholly less canonical passages and authors (among them

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<sup>32</sup> On the vexed issue of date, cf. Himmelmann 1991; Maurach 1992; Simon 1992: 199–201; Kunze 1996; Brilliant 2000: 67–71; Kunze 2009: 41–3.

<sup>33</sup> See Squire (this volume), with further discussion at **XX, n. XX**.

<sup>34</sup> See Lessing 1984: 94–7, with discussion in Iribarren 2012: 308–11; and Squire 2013: esp. 160–1.

Petronius, Lucian, and Quintus of Smyrna);<sup>35</sup> likewise, all manner of ancient images are introduced – from discussions of extant sculptural objects, to (even more frequent) analyses of ancient texts responding to lost Greek artworks.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the treatise, Lessing relates these material and literary examples to the fundamental question of *how* visual and verbal representations differ from one another, and indeed what these differences mean for conceptualizing respective modes of aesthetically responding to paintings and pictures. Lessing’s *Laocoon* does not just discuss the aesthetic exemplarity of ancient exempla, then; it also relates these examples back to a critical tradition of comparing and contrasting the resources of poetic and painted media – and one that itself follows in the footsteps of an ancient critical tradition.

INSERT FIG. 1.8 HERE

As Lessing knew full well, *Laocoon*’s central theme of the relationship between visual and verbal representation was one with which Greek and Roman thinkers themselves had wrestled.<sup>37</sup> From Simonides’ famous analogy between painting and

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<sup>35</sup> Petronius: Lessing 1984: 170–05 (note to chapter 5); Lucian: Lessing 1984: 109–10; Quintus of Smyrna: Lessing 1984: 203–4 (note to chapter 12). For Lessing’s frequent textual critical *emendations* of classical texts, see also Squire (this volume), p. XX, n. XX.

<sup>36</sup> Particularly important in this regard are Lessing’s discussions of lost paintings by Timomachus (Lessing 1984: 20–01), Timanthes (Lessing 1984: 16–17), and Zeuxis (Lessing 1984: 115–20); the names and works of numerous other artists are mentioned in passing (e.g. works by Apelles, Lysippus, Myron, Pasiteles, Pausias, Pauson, Pheidias, Polyclitus, Polygnotus, Posidonius, Praxiteles, Pyraeicus, and Scopas).

<sup>37</sup> For an overview here, see Benediktson 2000, along with the important analysis of Männlein-Robert 2007. On ancient traditions of comparing/contrasting the literary and visual arts – and a guide to the extensive bibliography – see Squire 2015.

poetry in the fifth century ('painting is silent poetry, and poetry is talking painting'),<sup>38</sup> to Horace's celebrated first-century BC aphorism of *ut pictura poesis* ('as is painting, so is poetry'),<sup>39</sup> antiquity had laid the ground for Lessing's own exploration of medial distinction. So important was that ancient legacy that Lessing emblazons it on the frontispiece of his essay [Fig. 1.8]: on the one hand, this title-page bills *Laocoon* as an essay complete 'with passing elucidations of different points of ancient art history' (*mit beiläufigen Erläuterungen verschiedener Punkte der alten Kunstgeschichte*); on the other, the frontispiece seals the treatise with an epigraph from Plutarch, one that sums up the essay's argument that painting and poetry 'differ in their medium and manners of mimesis' (ὕλη καὶ τρόποις μιμήσεως διαφέρουσι: *Mor. (De glor. Ath.)* 347a).<sup>40</sup> Once again, Lessing unpacks the thinking in his preface:<sup>41</sup>

The brilliant antithesis of the Greek Voltaire<sup>42</sup> that painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking painting was doubtless not to be found in any textbook. It was a sudden fancy – among others that Simonides had – and

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Plut. *Mor. (De glor. Ath.)* 346f): πλὴν ὁ Σιμωνίδης τὴν μὲν ζωγραφίαν ποιήσιν σιωπῶσαν προσαγορεύει, τὴν δὲ ποιήσιν ζωγραφίαν λαλοῦσαν: for discussion, see e.g. Carson 1992; Manieri 1995; Franz 1999: 61–83; Sprigath 2004; Männlein-Robert 2007: 20–2.

<sup>39</sup> See *Ars P.* 361–5; with Brink 1971: 368–72; Trimpi 1973; and above all Hardie 1993. Much has been written on the subsequent European tradition of the 'sister arts' (following in particular Hagstrum 1955; Lee 1967; and Praz 1970): for a provocative guide and further bibliography, see Barkan 2013.

<sup>40</sup> On the importance of this Plutarchian 'classical presence', see Teinturier 2014: 47–8; for a recent overview of Plutarch's own ideas about the relationship between visual and verbal modes of presentation, see now Hirsch-Luipold 2002, discussing this passage at pp. 55–72.

<sup>41</sup> Lessing 1984: 4–5.

<sup>42</sup> On this loaded reference to Simonides, see Vollhardt 2012: 293.

the truth it contains is so evident that one feels compelled to overlook the indefinite and untrue statements that accompany it.

The ancients, however, did not overlook them. In restricting Simonides' statement to the effect achieved by the two arts, they nevertheless did not forget to stress that, despite the complete similarity of effect, the two arts differed both in the objects imitated as well as in the manner of imitation (ὅλη καὶ τρόποις μιμήσεως).

Still, many of the most recent critics have drawn the most ill-digested conclusions imaginable from this correspondence between painting and poetry just as though no such difference existed. In some instances they force poetry into the narrower limits of painting; in others they allow painting to fill the whole wide sphere of poetry. Whatever one is entitled to must be permitted to the other also; whatever pleases or displeases in one must necessarily please or displease the other. And so, full of this idea, they pronounce the shallowest judgments with the greatest self-assurance and, in criticizing the work of a poet and a painter on the same subject, they regard the differences of treatment observed in them as errors, which they blame on one or the other, depending on whether they happen to prefer painting or poetry.

Indeed, this spurious criticism has to some degree misled even the masters of the arts. In poetry it has engendered a mania for description and in painting a mania for allegory, by attempting to make the former a speaking picture, without actually knowing what it could and ought to paint, and the latter a silent poem, without having considered to what

degree it is able to express general ideas without denying its true function and degenerating into a purely arbitrary means of expression.

To counteract this false taste and these unfounded judgments is the principal aim of the following chapters...

The ‘ancients’ are here presented as Lessing’s foremost ally.<sup>43</sup> Where modern critics are said to have overlooked the critical differences between painting and poetry – and where modern writers and artists are said to delight in ‘pictorial’ poems that wallow in description, or ‘poetic’ pictures that allegorize and abstractify – antiquity can serve to remind us of the proper ‘boundaries’ between the two media. Just as ancient literature and art therefore set the standard to which modernity should aspire, so too should modern criticism be founded on a more solid understanding of its ancient roots.

All this makes *Laocoon* a key text for anyone interested in the eighteenth-century reception of ancient materials, and above all the Enlightenment’s recalibration of a classical critical tradition. For classicists, what is perhaps most striking about the essay is the way it harnesses different philosophical schools: from its fundamental distrust of matter, to its systemic theorizations of mimesis and imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), this is a text that navigates between Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical traditions, while always situating its readings of ancient texts against the backdrop of the insights (as indeed the antitypes) of more modern critical thinkers, poets, and artists. No less importantly, *Laocoon* also constructs a particular view of classical antiquity: it has played a key role in recalibrating what the ‘ancients’ mean to the ‘moderns’, engendering a certain view of the classical past that has continued to

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<sup>43</sup> On the underlying ‘Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns’ at stake here, see below, pp. XX–XX.

resonate all the way down to the present day. One need only think of *Laocoon*'s contribution to the development of Neoclassicism in the eighteenth century – above all, its formulation of an ideal of painting's 'pregnant moment', one that would be replayed in the classicizing tableaux of Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Jean-Baptiste Greuze (among numerous others).<sup>44</sup>

## LESSING AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

So far in this introduction, we have focused on *Laocoon* as a work of classical reception, one that forges its aesthetic critique from the analysis of ancient works of poetry and painting. Yet for all the 'classical presences' of Lessing's essay, we have also said that *Laocoon*'s arguments construct a particular view of antiquity, one bound up with the intellectual preoccupations of the eighteenth century. At this point, we therefore attempt to contextualize *Laocoon* against a wider set of cultural attitudes towards the classical past in the eighteenth century, both in Germany specifically and within Europe at large. After surveying the Enlightenment's complex attitudes towards the classical heritage, we sketch Lessing's own biography, situating *Laocoon* (and its concern with ancient materials) within Lessing's other antiquarian, theatrical, and critical works.

In 1764, when *Laocoon* was first published, Neoclassicism in the arts was but one way in which Lessing's contemporaries played out their fascination with antiquity. This is not necessarily an obvious point: after all, the Enlightenment is often

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<sup>44</sup> For Lessing's palpable influences on Neoclassical painting, above all in France, Gombrich 1957 is key. For Lessing's argument about the 'pregnant moment' (Lessing 1984: 99), see e.g. Giuliani and Squire (this volume): the most important recent return to the concept – illustrated once again, among numerous other examples, using classical Greek and Roman materials – is Westerkamp 2015.

equated with a straightforward rupture in Western thought, one in which all forms of knowledge (not least ‘science’ or *Wissenschaft*) were established on a radically new foundation. So what sort of place did the Enlightenment find for the traditions of Graeco-Roman art, literature and thinking? How could the models of the past be reconciled with a new vision for the present and future? And what did the ‘ancients’ mean to the ‘moderns’?

The most obvious way of tackling those questions is in relation to the ‘second observer’ of Lessing’s preface – namely, the ‘philosopher’ who, in his attempt to understand why painting and poetry both pleased their respondents, ‘discovered that both proceed from the same source’. During the seventeenth century, as is well known, the project of philosophy had been profoundly rethought. According to René Descartes (1596–1650), the only tenets to be retained were those which were demonstrably – which is to say rationally – ‘true’.<sup>45</sup> Such Cartesian strictures might be expected to leave little of the classical legacy intact: after all, information transmitted through the ages, prestigious as its point of departure might have been, could not aspire to more than mere probability. Yet already in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Cartesian epistemology found vociferous critics – from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in England to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in Germany and Giambattista Vico in Italy. Throughout this period, and right up to the time when Lessing was writing, the classical tradition never lost its place as a formative (if not necessarily all-encompassing) model for Enlightenment authors.

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<sup>45</sup> For the clearest articulation of the thinking, cf. Descartes 2013: 23: ‘I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. [...] Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false.’

One conventional critical framework for approaching the ‘classical presences’ of this period has been in relation to the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. This ‘quarrel’ was one of the chief ways in which French poets and scholars assessed the cumulative achievements of European culture since the Renaissance by measuring them against those of Graeco-Roman antiquity.<sup>46</sup> It is frequently assumed that, by the time of Louis XIV’s death in 1715, the ‘Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns’ had, even if it had never quite been settled, at least fizzled out. But as Patrick Riley has reminded us, the ‘quarrel’ remained a recurring trope in the Enlightenment – and one that even extended well into the nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup> While the first stage of this ‘quarrel’ was the well-known debate among French authors, from around 1685 to 1715, about the aesthetic superiority of ancient or modern literature, a second – much broader but less widely recognized – dimension of it was pan-European, unfolding in a variety of political, cultural, and philosophical realms. Lessing’s *Laocoon* demonstrates the point in a very tangible way: in the passage of the preface cited above (p. XX), Lessing establishes a clear polarity between ‘the ancients’ (*die Alten*) and ‘many of the most recent critics’ (*viele der neuesten Kunstrichter*); modern poets and painters have misunderstood the ancient thinking of *ut pictura poesis*, Lessing argues, whether in their mania for poetic description (*Schilderungssucht*), or else in the painterly turn to ‘allegorization’ (*Allegoristerey*).<sup>48</sup> The very framework of

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<sup>46</sup> For a useful overview of responses to antiquity in eighteenth-century thought, see Grell 1995. Among a plethora of recent publications, see e.g. Moore, Macgregor Morris, and Bayliss (eds.) 2008 and Elm, Lottes, and de Senarclens (eds.) 2009. On the *Querelle* specifically, see Levine 1991 and 1999; DeJean 1997; and Fumaroli 2001; on the German reception of this French trope, key contributions include Jauss 1970: 67–106 and Kapitza 1981.

<sup>47</sup> Riley 2001: 86.

<sup>48</sup> On Lessing’s polemic against *Allegoristerey* here, see Squire (this volume).



*Laocoon*'s argument here shows how antiquity enjoyed a continuous presence in the 1760s: Lessing at once refashions the 'quarrel' of Francophone critics and renders it a polemic against contemporary 'French' tastes.<sup>49</sup>

Riley's argument about the recurring *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, and above all its eighteenth-century extension from France to other European lands, in turn embroils us in a larger academic 'quarrel' about *how* eighteenth-century intellectuals approached the classical past. The controversy is best represented by a debate, played out in the late 1960s and early 1970s, between two eminent intellectual historians: Franco Venturi and Peter Gay. For Venturi, whose cross-European research focused on political and economic reforms, the political experience of the surviving republics in Europe eclipsed manifestations of the classical legacy.<sup>50</sup> Venturi's prioritization of actual experience over ancient echoes may be attributed to his principled resistance to Italian fascism and its abuse of the Roman legacy, but it also provided a rejoinder to Peter Gay's seminal study, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (published as two volumes in 1966 and 1969). The first volume of Gay's study, subtitled *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, emphasized the multiple ways in which Enlightenment authors resorted to antiquity as an inexhaustible source for arguments against Christianity on the one hand, and as a tool to refashion Christian faith on the other. For Gay, the Enlightenment did not draw on the classical heritage in any single or simplistic way; instead, Gay insisted on the modernity of the

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<sup>49</sup> For a brief sketch of those French traditions, see Iribarren 2012: 303–8 – along with the broader history of Wallenstein 2010. On *Laocoon*'s self-consciously 'German' responses to 'French' *sensibilité* (above all to the Comte de Caylus in chapters 11 to 14), cf. e.g. Lessing 1984: 5, 27; cf. Robert 2013: esp. 26–32; and the discussions by e.g. Squire, Harloe, and Grethlein (this volume).

<sup>50</sup> Venturi 1971: 18. On Venturi's *magnum opus*, the multi-volume *Settecento Riformatore* (1969–90), see Robertson 1992; Ricuperati 1997; on the historian himself, Viarengo 2014.

*philosophes*' amalgam – dependent as it was on both the ancient legacy and eighteenth-century concerns and realities.<sup>51</sup> Venturi himself was unconvinced about such 'classical presences': responding to Gay's arguments, he countered that 'the survival of the ancient world may not be a presence, an identification, as Peter Gay maintains'; for Venturi, rather, 'it is often an ornament, not a reality; a superstition, not a religion'.<sup>52</sup>

More recent studies have tended to side with Gay rather than Venturi, highlighting the constitutive role that the classical legacy played in shaping the self-consciously 'Enlightened' parameters of eighteenth-century culture. A particular landmark comes in Dan Edelstein's 2010 book, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy*. In this study, Edelstein attempted to recover the historical self-awareness of the age through the narrative it constructed of its own genesis. In doing so, he criticized teleological accounts of the Enlightenment as the self-evident origin of present-day 'modernity', which are for Edelstein 'thinly veiled ideological manifestos or pale reflections of current trends'.<sup>53</sup> Edelstein consequently suggested that eighteenth-century identifications of the age with *lumières* or the *esprit philosophique* reflected

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Gay 1966: xi: 'I see the *philosophes*' rebellion succeeding in both of its aims: theirs was a paganism directed against their Christian inheritance and dependent upon the paganism of classical antiquity, but it was also a *modern* paganism, emancipated from classical thought as much as from Christian dogma.'

<sup>52</sup> Venturi 1971: 6.

<sup>53</sup> Edelstein 2010: 17. The main target of Edelstein's critique is Jonathan Israel's project concerning the radical Enlightenment, emphasizing a philosophical combination of materialism or 'one-substance monism', atheism, and political commitment to democracy and egalitarianism – a synthesis which Israel ultimately traces back to Spinoza's works (see Israel 2001, 2006, 2011, and 2014). Among Israel's critics, see La Vopa 2009 and Lilti 2009. On the pitfalls of habitually identifying Enlightenment with 'modernity', see also Robertson 2015: 121–30.

an awareness of the cumulative intellectual and (no less significantly) social change ever since the break with scholastic philosophy and the scientific revolution. It follows, according to Edelstein, that the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* functioned less as a *cause* of the Enlightenment than a *catalyst* for the formation of a narrative that served to explain the Enlightenment to itself. Fundamental to this eighteenth-century account was the gradual extension of new forms of knowledge and critical attitudes from professional scholars to society at large. Just as Gay had emphasized the appeal of the ancients' unprejudiced investigation of man and nature, Edelstein finds that in different domains 'the *philosophes* themselves ultimately owed more to the party of the Ancients, who could accommodate modern scientific achievements into their platform, than to that of the Moderns, who could not find any place for antiquity'.<sup>54</sup>

Lessing's own example corroborates Edelstein's portrait of the Enlightenment as more self-consciously 'ancient' than 'modern'. Like numerous other contemporary writers, Lessing went out of his way to present himself as a direct inheritor of the ancient legacy, recovering the impartial spirit of classical inquiry (unencumbered by layers of religious dogma and philosophical scholasticism), while also harnessing the latest scholarship to his arguments. In a recent study of the contexts of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89), J. G. A. Pocock has argued that 'the function of ancient history was to problematise modernity'.<sup>55</sup> If we substituted 'the eighteenth-century present' for the value-laden

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<sup>54</sup> Edelstein 2010: 37. Edelstein's approach echoes the views of other recent works – not least, Levent Yilmaz's study of the 'Quarrel', which claims that the controversy was actually between two modern factions: the 'ancients' were all the more flexible and modern, Yilmaz argues, in their ability to create a 'dialectical synthesis between two only apparently opposed claims' (Yilmaz 2004; Edelstein 2010: 40).

<sup>55</sup> Pocock 2003: 349.

concept of ‘modernity’, Pocock’s observation would hold true for numerous other Enlightenment thinkers elsewhere in Europe – not just for Lessing, but also for (*inter alios*) Giambattista Vico, Adam Ferguson, and Johann Gottfried Herder.

Whatever else we make of such scholarly debates, the important point lies in the active recourse to antiquity to define the intellectual, social, and cultural predicament of the eighteenth century. As measure, mirror, or model – and not least, at times, also as antitype – antiquity lit up the Enlightenment: the ancient world provided a mirage against which the eighteenth century could both inspect, and indeed re-fashion, itself.<sup>56</sup>

This point holds true not only for the French Enlightenment, the focus of Edelstein’s and Gay’s works, but also specifically for the German Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*. During the second half of the eighteenth century in particular, it was Germany that pioneered new methodologies for historical research, above all with regard to the scientific study of antiquity (*Altertumswissenschaft*).<sup>57</sup> In German universities, ancient sources and authors loomed large in the emergence of novel ways to assess probability in the transmission of sources from all periods and areas

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<sup>56</sup> For an exemplary demonstration of the point in the context of late eighteenth-century Germany, see Güthenke 2008: esp. 20–43. On the one hand, the legacy of classical antiquity, in Güthenke’s suggestive image, constituted the ‘Greek landscape of the German soul’ (44–92). On the other, it also gave rise to a particular self-defining attitude of ‘modernity’, shaped by the Hellenophilia of German Romanticism: “‘Modern’ is seen in opposition to two notions: that of the complete or harmonious or not fragmented, which is its lost origin and in an altered shape its driving goal, and secondly, that of the past or ancient, especially at a time when artistic debate redefined or at least still remembered the normative character of ancient models. The difference from the past becomes the condition of modernity... Here Greece enters’ (41).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. above, n. XX.

(especially at the University of Göttingen, which Lessing at one point considered joining as an assistant to the renowned classicist Johann Matthias Gesner).<sup>58</sup> Likewise, recent reinterpretations of the Enlightenment place the German *Aufklärung* on a par with its Scottish, French, and Italian equivalents.<sup>59</sup> It is now clear that German *Aufklärer* were self-consciously engaged (from the late seventeenth century onwards) in attempts at political, educational, legal, and religious reform. From this perspective, Jürgen Habermas's thesis concerning the late arrival and politicization of the Enlightenment in Germany has proved unsustainable on several counts,<sup>60</sup> while Reinhart Koselleck's early critique of Enlightenment authors as hypocritically subverting the political sphere has been undermined (along with his almost exclusive focus on masonic lodges as venues of Enlightenment sociability).<sup>61</sup> Though many contributors to the German Enlightenment held academic positions, the main thrust of the *Aufklärung* was – just as in France – directed not at professional scholars (*Gelehrte*) but rather at the general educated public (*Gebildete*).<sup>62</sup> The most renowned

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<sup>58</sup> Nisbet 2013a: 86–7. On the new historical scholarship in Göttingen (above all the likes of Chladenius, Gatterer, and Schlözer) see Reill 1975 and 1985; Bödeker, Iggers, and Knudsen (eds.) (1986); Blanke and Fleischer (eds.) 1990; Marino 1995; Escudier 2006; and Gierl 2012.

<sup>59</sup> On the perennial question of the intellectual unity of the Enlightenment in relation to its geographical and cultural diversity, see Porter and Teich (eds.) 1981; Pocock 1999 and 2008; Robertson 2005; and Butterwick, Davies, and Sánchez Espinosa (eds.) 2008.

<sup>60</sup> For Habermas's thesis (first published in German in 1962), see Habermas 1989, along with the reassessments in Vierhaus (ed.) 1987; Bödeker and Herrmann (eds.) 1987; Gestrich 1994; and Goldenbaum (ed.) 2004; cf. also Mulsow 2002.

<sup>61</sup> For Koselleck's early work – first published in German in 1959 – see Koselleck 1988 (esp. his preface on pp. 1–4); for discussions, cf. La Vopa 1992 and Bödeker 2013.

<sup>62</sup> See recently Goldenbaum (ed.) 2004 and Schmidt 2009. A helpful overview of the historiography of the German Enlightenment can be found in Whaley 2007.

intellectual groups working towards the realization of this ideal were based in Berlin, where the lack of a university in the eighteenth century meant the absence of a professoriate enjoying corporate academic privileges (including, at times, the censorship of local publications). The Academy of Sciences in the Prussian capital, revamped by Frederick II and the French physicist Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, differed in structure as well as function from traditional universities, providing substantial stimuli for intellectual debates across Germany from the mid-1740s until the end of the century.<sup>63</sup>

Lessing's own career epitomizes the *Aufklärung's* openness to the wider educated public, above all in the context of research into the classical past; indeed, Lessing himself may be considered the first German 'public intellectual' in today's sense of the term.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to his contemporaries at German universities – as indeed to authors such as Leibniz, who spent their entire careers at the service of rulers – Lessing played alternately (and at times simultaneously) the roles of journalist, playwright, critic, poet, scholar, and controversialist; moreover, he did so in diverse areas and genres – extending from comedy, fables, and poetry to theology, history, and aesthetics. Despite his peripatetic lifestyle, Lessing kept in constant touch with his Berlin acquaintances of the 1750s, especially the publisher-author Friedrich Nicolai and the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, with whom he collaborated on various projects.<sup>65</sup> In all these activities, Lessing's familiarity with – and recurrent recourse to – the literary and intellectual heritage of the Graeco-Roman world is striking.

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Förster (ed.) 1989; Goldenbaum and Košenina (eds.) 1999–2013; Lifschitz 2012a.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Demetz 1991: xxi.

<sup>65</sup> There is a useful discussion of 'Lessing und die Berliner Aufklärung' in Weber 2006: 41–60.

To demonstrate what we mean here, it is necessary to say a little more about Lessing's works and their place within his larger biographical trajectory.<sup>66</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born the son of a Lutheran pastor on 29 January 1729 in the small town of Kamenz in Saxony (northeast of Dresden). The Lutheranism with which the young Gotthold Ephraim was inculcated would be a spur for constant reflection throughout his career.<sup>67</sup> Following a rigorous classical training at the distinguished boarding school of St Afra in Meissen (1741–6), Lessing enrolled as a student of theology at the University of Leipzig, his first experience of a larger city (1746–8). The theatrical scene in Leipzig profited from a range of different performing groups in various genres, as well as from Johann Christoph Gottsched's attempts to raise the status of theatre in German on the model of French Neoclassical drama. Lessing was attracted by the buoyant social life in Leipzig, where his first comedy ('The Young Scholar' – *Der junge Gelehrte*) was performed in 1748, and where he began to compose Anacreontic poetry. Yet financial troubles – and the emergence of a newer cultural centre – attracted him in 1748 to Berlin, where he worked intensively as a journalist, critic, translator, and playwright.

Already in his early career, Lessing reiteratively turned to ancient materials in his attempts to recalibrate the 'modern' – above all in religious, literary, or philosophical debates. In doing so, he engaged in specific antiquarian controversies,

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<sup>66</sup> The most detailed biography of Lessing is Nisbet 2013a, first published in German as Nisbet 2008. Since Nisbet provides a masterful survey of the huge bibliography dedicated to all aspects of Lessing's career and writings, we refer readers to Nisbet's more extensive discussions.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. below, n. XX.

taking on those adversaries who posed as guardians of the classical legacy.<sup>68</sup> From the outset, Lessing's pronounced refusal to bow before accepted intellectual, religious, and social opinions involved innovative mobilizations of antiquity. On the one hand, Lessing's earliest theatrical comedies reassessed common prejudices concerning women, religious minorities, dissenters, and clergymen – including in his 1748 'The Mysoginist' (*Der Mysogin*), and during the following year in his 'The Freethinker' (*Der Freigeist*) and 'The Jews' (*Die Juden*). On the other hand, Lessing's translations of Plautus's plays (and his essay on the Roman playwright) acted both as homage to ancient theatre and as an attempt to reinvigorate a 'modern' German genre.<sup>69</sup>

Despite shorter sojourns in Wittenberg (1751) and Leipzig (including an abortive Grand Tour as a tutor to the son of a local merchant, 1755–8), Lessing stayed in Berlin until 1760. It was during this time in the Prussian capital that he wrote *Miß Sara Sampson* (1755), widely regarded as the first 'bourgeois' or domestic tragedy in German (and a model for playwrights of Schiller's generation and their successors). It was also in Berlin that Lessing, together with his cousin and close collaborator Christlob Mylius, founded a periodical entitled *Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*, initiating his long-lasting collaborations with Nicolai and Mendelssohn. With the latter he composed a mock entry to a prize contest at the Berlin Academy

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<sup>68</sup> As Nisbet puts it, pointing to a recurrent pattern in Lessing's writings, the young Lessing deemed 'the ancients ... far too useful as allies to be left in the hands of the conservatives' (Nisbet 2013a: 70). On Lessing's setting and transgressing of 'boundaries', see Zeuch 2005.

<sup>69</sup> In his early twenties Lessing further wrote an essay 'On the Pantomime of the Ancients' and translated three volumes of Charles Rollin's *Histoire romaine*. These early works would later be complemented by treatises on Hercules and Omphale, the tragedies of Seneca, Latin fables, Sophocles, Horace, and Aristotle's *Poetics* (among numerous other ancient texts and classical subjects).



(*Pope – ein Metaphysiker!*, 1755) which set out to vindicate the autonomy of poetry.<sup>70</sup> The collaboration between Lessing, Nicolai, and Mendelssohn found additional public outlets in their journal *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* and afterwards in *Briefe, die Neueste Litteratur betreffend*, as well as in the renowned correspondence between the three friends on the theory of tragedy (1756–7). In these epistolary exchanges Lessing emphasized the foremost importance of pity or sympathy (*Mitleid*) in dramatic theory and practice, while somewhat downplaying the issue of illusion that would play a more central role in his *Laocoon*.<sup>71</sup>

INSERT FIG. 1.9 HERE

The same years also provided a catalyst for Lessing's theatrical compositions. While in Berlin, Lessing published his one-act tragedy *Philotas* (1759), whose main topic was self-sacrifice for the fatherland – a much-discussed issue in Prussia in the middle of the Seven Years War.<sup>72</sup> Lessing continued to be well informed about dramatic and philosophical developments elsewhere (above all in France), publishing in 1760 his translations of and commentaries on Diderot's plays in *Das Theater des Herrn Diderot*. In the following five years Lessing was mainly based in Breslau as secretary of the Prussian general and governor of Silesia, Friedrich Bogislav von Tauentzien. Beyond studies of Spinoza's philosophy, Lessing closely engaged in the Silesian capital with classical antiquity; he likewise began work on *Laocoon*.

Lessing's observation of military life and bureaucracy in Silesia was manifest in what

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<sup>70</sup> On Lessing's collaboration with Mendelssohn on *Pope – ein Metaphysiker!*, see Décultot (this volume). During this time, Lessing also encouraged Mendelssohn to publish the first translation of Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité* into German (1756) – a treatise to which Mendelssohn appended an essay addressed to Lessing, based on their discussions of Rousseau's groundbreaking tract.

<sup>71</sup> For the continuities between this correspondence and the *Laocoon*, see Harloe (this volume).

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Clark 2006: 219–30; Van der Zande 2007.

is now his best known theatrical comedy, *Minna von Barnhelm* (published in Berlin in 1767), which dealt with the tension between a Prussian officer and his Saxon fiancée, the eponymous Minna. The premiere was held at the new National Theatre in Hamburg, where Lessing moved earlier in 1767 to act as a dramatic adviser and critic; it was during this time that one of the most iconic portraits of Lessing was painted (by Barbara Anna Rosina Lisiewska) [Fig. 1.9]. Lessing's experience at the short-lived National Theatre formed the basis for his theoretical musings on drama, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, published as a book in 1769. While continuing and sharpening his critique of French Neoclassical drama, Lessing also took his dramatic theory in directions different from the ones explored in the correspondence of the previous decade with Mendelssohn and Nicolai; here, and following the earlier work represented by *Laocoon*, theatrical illusion received much greater critical attention.

Finally, in 1770, Lessing succeeded in his long quest to secure a more permanent position as a librarian or curator. He was appointed Ducal Librarian at Wolfenbüttel, where local rulers had built up one of the most impressive European collections (and where Leibniz had earlier acted in a similar capacity). In 1772 the small town witnessed the premiere of Lessing's tragedy *Emilia Galotti* (a modern retelling of the Roman legend of Virginia). The treasures of the local library and Lessing's protected position also allowed him to publish the series of essays that formed the basis of the *Fragmentenstreit* ('Fragment Quarrel') over the reliability of Scripture. This public debate eventually prompted the duke to withdraw Lessing's immunity from censorship in religious matters. Parallel to essays in the context of the *Fragmentenstreit*, Lessing published two other important works: on the one hand, a dialogue on freemasonry which touched upon various ethical, theological, and political issues (*Ernst und Falk*, 1777–8); and on the other, the first part of *Die*

*Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* ('The Education of Mankind', 1777) – a conjectural account of the evolution of religious and ethical thought, focused on the tension between revelation and reason (its final sections were published in 1780).

After his subjection to censorship in religious affairs following the *Fragmentenstreit*, Lessing took to the stage to express his liberal theological stance, as expressed in his final masterpiece, written in 1779, 'Nathan the Wise' (*Nathan der Weise*, first performed in Berlin in 1783). The play – which is still one of Lessing's most respected dramatic works, and taught as an established 'classic' in the German literary canon – takes place in Jerusalem at the time of the Crusades. It deals with the story of its eponymous Jewish protagonist (Nathan) and his daughter (Recha), who are embroiled in familial, religious, and economic complications involving a Christian Templar knight and the Muslim ruler Saladin. The most famous section of the play comes in the 'parable of the rings' that Lessing puts in the mouth of Nathan (a character probably modelled on Mendelssohn). Developing a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the parable likens the three monotheistic religions to the rings inherited by three brothers. The brothers, Nathan recounts, do not know which of them possesses the genuine ancestral ring from their father – the one that renders its owner pleasing to God and mankind alike; at this point, a wise judge suggests that, since the real ring cannot be adequately distinguished, all of the brothers must lead their lives in such a way as to please God and their fellow men, thereby meriting the alleged power of the original ring. Though *Nathan der Weise* might not reveal the depth and multifaceted character of Lessing's long-lasting engagement with theological issues, it has come to represent his various pleas for religious toleration (which, as noted

above, were already conspicuous in his earliest plays).<sup>73</sup> Although he wrote the play in 1779, Lessing himself never saw *Nathan der Weise* on the stage: he died on 15 February 1781 during a visit to Braunschweig.

This brief biographical sketch provides an important lens through which to make sense of *Laocoon*. First published in 1766, *Laocoon* enjoys a central position both chronologically and intellectually within Lessing's *œuvre*. While drawing on the author's permanent fascination with classical literature, the essay was written at a time of change – above all, from his early plays to what Lessing scholars would call the 'mature drama' (represented mainly by *Minna von Barnhelm*, *Emilia Galotti*, and *Nathan der Weise*). Although this shift is usually associated with Lessing's subsequent *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* in the late 1760s, the *Laocoon* essay already contains in it the seeds of Lessing's modified views about aesthetic experience. If *Laocoon* distinguishes between the media employed in different forms of arts, Lessing still adheres to a view of their shared mimetic purpose. In this context, *Laocoon* encourages the creative poet (perhaps unexpectedly in a treatise on the 'limits' of poetry and painting) to engage in what he labels 'poetic painting' (*poetisches Gemählde*). What matters, Lessing suggests, is the vividness of illusion that would make readers ignore (at least momentarily) the linguistic medium, immersing themselves in instantaneous action – and thereby, at least according to Lessing, emulating an ideal mode of responding to pictures.<sup>74</sup> As several contributors to this volume point out, Lessing would later emphasize that, of all poetic genres,

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<sup>73</sup> In the twentieth century especially, the play enjoyed a symbolic prominence: banned by the Nazi regime, *Nathan der Weise* inaugurated the programme of many German theatres as they reopened in 1945 (cf. Fischer and Fox 2005: 33; Nisbet 2013a: 621).

<sup>74</sup> See in particular the critical note to chapter 14 (Lessing 1984: 207–8), with particular reference to Pseudo-Longinus' *On the Sublime*.

drama alone can approximate this feat in its act of rendering arbitrary signs natural.<sup>75</sup>

At any rate, Lessing's new emphasis on illusion rather than sympathy or pity is elaborated in *Laocoon* despite the absence of explicit discussions of drama in the published work.<sup>76</sup>

Seen from the perspective of Lessing's later works, *Laocoon* also marks the beginning of a particularly intensive period of engagement with ancient Greek and Roman themes. Lessing's 'Letters of Antiquarian Content' (*Briefe, antiquarischen Inhalts*, 1768–9) were quite unlike *Laocoon* in the sense of lacking a strong central thesis, primarily focused on a demolition of the arguments made by Christian Adolph Klotz in various essays (especially on ancient gems) and reviews (not least a review of Lessing's own *Laocoon*). As with those later letters, however, *Laocoon* starts out from a series of 'antiquarian' insights – explicitly heralded as a work containing, as we have said, 'passing elucidations of different points of ancient art history' (*mit beiläufigen Erläuterungen verschiedener Punkte der alten Kunstgeschichte*).

The *Laocoon*'s explicit art historical concerns also lay the ground for a series of subsequent forays into ancient visual culture, not least in Lessing's essay – published in autumn 1769 – on 'How the Ancients Depicted Death' (*Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet*). The starting point for this treatise was yet another disagreement with Klotz. In a footnote to chapter 11 of *Laocoon*, Lessing had claimed (against the Comte de Caylus) that death and sleep were usually depicted as young twins in antiquity, thereby highlighting the difference between this portrayal and the modern

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<sup>75</sup> Lessing to Nicolai, 26 May 1769, in Lessing 1987: 608–10: for an English translation, see Nisbet 1985: 133–4.

<sup>76</sup> Note, though, that drama does play an important role in *Laocoon*'s first four chapters: see Harloe (this volume).

image of death as a terrifying skeleton.<sup>77</sup> Klotz had replied, earlier in 1769, that skeletons had been portrayed in ancient art. Responding to Klotz, Lessing's 1769 essay argues that such skeletons were primarily intended to depict dead individuals rather than symbolize death in a general manner. According to Lessing, death was represented more often by *Thanatos* in the form of a beautiful boy (usually holding his torch upside down).<sup>78</sup> As critics from Herder onwards have noted, Lessing's theory here – like many of his points in *Laocoon* itself – is rather general, and at times plainly mistaken from the vantage point of modern classical archaeological research. Yet Lessing's dichotomous distinction between a more positive (or neutral) ancient depiction of death and what he saw as an excessively foreboding Christian image had its parallels in his negative reaction to Catholic imagery and its uses throughout his career.<sup>79</sup>

If *Laocoon* anticipates much of Lessing's later critical takes on ancient art, literature, and philosophy, it also capitalizes on some of the author's earlier formative exchanges. Most of the *Laocoon* essay was written while Lessing was in Breslau, away from his friends and collaborators in Berlin. By charting the development of the essay through successive drafts, however, we can see how it came to respond to the specific critiques and interventions of his contemporaries.

With those contemporary critiques in mind, we should perhaps note here that scholars have charted the archaeology of *Laocoon* through at least three distinct rewritings between 1762 and 1765. Despite being based in Breslau, Lessing used the

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<sup>77</sup> Lessing 1984: 200–01.

<sup>78</sup> Lessing 1914: 171–26.

<sup>79</sup> As a handful of recent critics have suggested, Lessing's own Lutheran background was critical in moulding his attitudes towards the visual: cf. especially Mitchell 1986: esp. 109–12; Pizer 1994; and Squire 2009: 90–113 (as well as Squire's chapter in this book).

opportunity of a visit to Potsdam in the summer 1763 to send his initial plans to Mendelssohn and Nicolai; indeed, the immediate incentive for the essay might have been the publication in 1761 of Mendelssohn's philosophical works, including a new edition of his treatise on differences between the arts and their media.<sup>80</sup> During the 1763 visit to Potsdam, Lessing discussed with Mendelssohn and Nicolai their observations on the first drafts of the treatise, paying particular attention to Mendelssohn's detailed comments. We know that it was in the resulting second draft of the essay (possibly written in winter 1763–4) that Lessing made the Laocoon statue-group its focal point. In a third draft (probably composed in summer 1764), the analysis of different representations of Laocoon's pain was moved to the forefront of the essay, while the analytic distinction between different art forms, their objects, and their signs was delayed to the end; likewise, it was in this third version that Lessing further integrated a discussion of Winckelmann's recent *Geschichte* (which appeared in late 1763).<sup>81</sup> Having returned to Berlin from Breslau, Lessing composed the final manuscript of *Laocoon* in late 1765, preparing the book for publication in April 1766. Crucially, however, this was never intended as Lessing's last word on the *Grenzen* of the arts: following Mendelssohn's example, the published version of the essay repeatedly mentions its author's plans to extend his analysis to drama, music, and other artistic genres. Although these plans were never realized, a particular scholarly concern among those working on *Laocoon* has been to reconstruct the development of

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<sup>80</sup> Our account here is indebted to Nisbet 2013a: 304–7; Lessing 1990: 631–50; Lessing 2012: 442–6. Mendelssohn's treatise was originally published in 1757 with the title *Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*; the subsequent version in the *Philosophische Schriften* of 1761 was called *Über die Hauptgrundsätze der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*. See Fritz Bamberger's introduction in Mendelssohn 1929: xxxiv–xxxvi.

<sup>81</sup> On the chronology here, cf. Décultot's chapter in this volume.

Lessing's thinking, using his earlier drafts and subsequent notes (*Paralipomena*) to chart the author's changing views.

Why should readers of *Laocoon* care about the essay's Enlightenment context, or indeed about its place within Lessing's life-history and larger *œuvre*? As numerous contributors to this volume emphasize, the various historical, biographical, and critical contexts of the text matter precisely because they illuminate what it was that Lessing saw himself to be doing in *Laocoon*. Whether we are interested in the essay as a case study for thinking about the eighteenth-century German reception of the classical past, or as a work of transhistorical aesthetic criticism, considering its Enlightenment *Entstehungsgeschichte* helps us to understand our own relationship with Lessing's arguments. In spite of its retrospective championing of classical paradigms, Lessing's essay is ultimately rooted in the intellectual and cultural history of eighteenth-century Germany and the wider European Enlightenment. Indeed, *Laocoon*'s recourse to classical materials can only be appreciated in light of its eighteenth-century milieu – the present concerns which illuminate (and indeed determine) Lessing's own view of the Graeco-Roman past. Approached from this perspective, *Laocoon* provides an important gateway for tackling a much larger nexus of issues in intellectual history, whether in relation to Lessing's other works, or indeed those of his contemporaries and successors.

#### AESTHETICS AND RECEPTION

*Laocoon*'s contemporary and subsequent reception leads to our third framework for introducing the text: namely, in relation to the history of modern aesthetic criticism. Regarded by some as paradigmatic model and debunked by others as flawed foil and antitype, Lessing's essay has served as the bedrock for wholly different theories not



just about words and images specifically, but also about the role of the subjective imagination in aesthetic experience, the nature (and conventions) of signs, and by extension the privileged realms of pictorial and poetic ‘art’. Often such aesthetic readings have been developed without considering either Lessing’s own eighteenth-century intellectual context, or indeed his defining recourse to ancient literary, artistic, and philosophical exempla. Over the last thirty years or so, however, some of the most scintillating work on *Laocoon* has sought to understand Lessing’s particular aesthetic ideas in relation to their own Enlightenment context, and not least Lessing’s particular view of his classical heritage.<sup>82</sup>

The huge influence – some might say burden – of *Laocoon* on subsequent thinking means that we are unable to survey every aspect of its afterlife here.<sup>83</sup> Suffice it to say that, just as *Laocoon* helped define the direction and scope of Enlightenment and Romantic aesthetics in Germany (and indeed beyond), so too it has shaped the very form and practices of modern European poetry and painting. At different moments within the twentieth century in particular, Lessing has been both heroized and demonized for his carefully calibrated (and for many, deeply hierarchical)<sup>84</sup> delineation between the temporal linearity of poetry and the spatial field of the visual arts. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of *Laocoon*’s legacy lies in giving rise

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<sup>82</sup> Particularly important are Mitchell 1984a (revised in 1986: 95–115) and Wellbery 1984, discussed below, pp. XX–XX, XX–XX.

<sup>83</sup> On the ‘productivity’ of *Laocoon*, especially in the twentieth century, see Wellbery (this volume); cf. also Sternberg 1999. More generally, see the contributions in McCarthy, Rowland, and Schade (eds.) 2000 (= *Lessing Yearbook* 33), covering Lessing’s international influence from a variety of different angles.

<sup>84</sup> See the discussions in this volume by e.g. Squire, Giuliani, and Trabant. Foundational on the hierarchical distinctions of *Laocoon* are Gombrich 1957 and 1984: 28–40.

to so many modernist ‘new Laocoons’, each one finding an earlier archaeology for its own view of what art and poetry are (or rather, what art and poetry *should* be). For Irving Babbitt in 1910, for example, Lessing’s essay could provide the basis for a ‘New Humanist’ manifesto – a self-declared ‘*New Laocoon*’ that rallied against a supposed ‘Romantic’ mongrelization of literature with music and painting (whereby contemporary poems are said to ‘depict’, contemporary music to ‘narrate’, and contemporary paintings to seek the effects of music and literature).<sup>85</sup> Perhaps still more influentially, Clement Greenberg would turn to Lessing to herald a new mode of painterly modernism in the 1940s. Greenberg’s ‘Towards a newer Laocoon’ essay, first published in 1940, focused above all on the paintings of Jackson Pollock: making explicit reference to Lessing’s model, Greenberg laid out a new materialist programme for contemporary sculpture and painting, arguing that the visual artwork should aim to ‘exhaust itself in the visual sensation it produces’.<sup>86</sup>

Our aim in introducing these various engagements is not to propose that Lessing gave rise to some *single* model or theory. Instead, we suggest that *Laocoon*’s richness lies precisely in spurring such a range of critical responses and reactions, and

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<sup>85</sup> Babbitt 1910, esp. 217–52. Claiming to be a ‘humble imitator of Lessing’ (viii), Babbitt complains of the same ‘general confusion of the arts, as well as of the different genres within the confines of each art’ (ix), citing the work of (among others) Gautier, Rossetti, and Mallarmé as examples; for further discussion, cf. the chapters by Mitchell and Squire (this volume).

<sup>86</sup> Greenberg 1940: 307. Cf. Greenberg 1940: 305: ‘the arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically.’ For Greenberg’s debt to Lessing, see Greenberg 1940: 298–9; for a brief discussion of Greenberg’s thinking, see Prettejohn 2005: 180–91. More generally on the twentieth-century aesthetic reception, see also Allert 2000.

in the wake of divergent ‘modern’ cultural, artistic, and literary movements: in engaging with the essay, different generations have made Lessing’s essay mean radically different things, shaped by their own critical and aesthetic outlooks. If *Laocoon* has been a constant companion for traversing moments in the history of modern aesthetics, it has also mediated a particular view of the Graeco-Roman heritage, leading critics – whether knowingly or not – to define different episodes of modernity against a particular backdrop of antiquity. To put the point more strongly, we might say that Lessing’s *Laocoon* has made the classical ‘present’ in a way rivalled by few other critical treatises over the last 250 years.

Although this is not the place to attempt a full chronological survey of responses to *Laocoon*, nor to chart how Lessing’s essay has been read from different national traditions, it is worth emphasizing how its sway extends all the way back to the late 1760s and 1770s. Winckelmann himself – around whose responses to ancient art the essay, as we have said, was framed – never tendered an official reaction (privately feigning bemusement at Lessing’s criticisms).<sup>87</sup> But other German critics were quick to respond at length, sometimes even drawing elaborate comparisons between the respective critical modes of Winckelmann and Lessing, as indeed between their different approaches to the classical past.

Particularly important here are the reactions of the young Johann Gottfried Herder. So enthused was Herder by *Laocoon*, or so the author recounts, that he read the entire treatise three times in one sitting.<sup>88</sup> Not everything in Lessing’s essay proved convincing to Herder. In the first of his ‘Critical Groves’ (*Kritische Wälder*), the author lamented the absence of music in Lessing’s bifocal discussion: for Herder,

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<sup>87</sup> For discussion, see especially Décultot 2014a (with further bibliography at 95, n. 33).

<sup>88</sup> Herder 2006: 7–8.

attention to an art that employs natural signs successively could have qualified Lessing's strict delimitation of poetry and painting. Concentrating on the meaning of words rather than on their medial function, Herder also claimed that temporal successiveness was not the main feature of poetry (which, instead, should consist in 'the force that arbitrarily attaches to these sounds and operates on the soul according to laws other than the succession of sounds').<sup>89</sup> Despite this criticism, Herder nonetheless praised *Laocoon* as a milestone in contemporary aesthetics. Perhaps most memorably, his response also gave rise to a telling comparison between the respective styles of Lessing and Winckelmann.<sup>90</sup>

Winckelmann's style is like an ancient work of art. Formed in all its parts, each thought obtrudes and stands there, noble, simple, sublime, complete: it *is*. [...] Lessing's style of writing is that of a poet, that is, of a writer, one who has not made but is making, who does not present a finished train of thought but who thinks out loud; we see his work *as it comes into being*, like the shield of Achilles in Homer.

Both Lessing and Winckelmann, Herder suggests, wrote in ways that uncannily resemble what they wished to celebrate – poetry in Lessing's case, and the plastic arts in Winckelmann's writings. At the same time, Herder characterizes both champions of Enlightenment criticism in relation to ancient exempla: it is not just that Winckelmann's style brings to mind an artwork, and Lessing's a work of poetry;

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<sup>89</sup> Herder 2006: 144.

<sup>90</sup> Herder 2006: 54 (as also discussed in Décultot's chapter in this volume). On the model of the 'shield of Achilles' – as itself discussed by Lessing – see above, n. XX.

rather, each modern stalwart embodies an aspect of *ancient* art and literature. Taking his inspiration from Lessing, Herder would later return to the medium that, in his view, *Laocoon* had conspicuously downplayed. In his 1778 *Plastik: Einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traume* ('Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream'), Herder developed the critical framework of *Laocoon* in order to discuss the specific relationship between painting and sculpture, with particular reference to ancient case studies and philosophy.<sup>91</sup>

If Herder encapsulates one strand of *Laocoon*'s immediate reception, a still more influential reaction came in the reactions of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.<sup>92</sup> In his autobiographical work 'Poetry and Truth' (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*), Goethe described the indelible mark *Laocoon* essay had left upon him as a young student. This now-famous tribute is worth quoting in full, not least because of the considerable authority with which it endowed *Laocoon* for subsequent generations.<sup>93</sup>

One has to be a young man to visualize what an effect Lessing's *Laocoon* had on us, this work that swept us away from the regions of meager contemplation and onto the open terrain of thought. The saying "Ut pictura poesis", so long misunderstood, was now suddenly set aside, and the difference between the pictorial [sic] and verbal arts was now clear.

The peaks of both now appeared separate, however closely they touched

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<sup>91</sup> For a translation (with useful introductory discussion), see Herder 2002.

<sup>92</sup> On Goethe's reformulation of Lessing's thinking – in particular, with regard to the aesthetics of representing pain – see Robertson (this volume), with further bibliography; cf. Barner 2001, along with Nisbet 1979.

<sup>93</sup> Goethe 1995: 4.238.

at the base. ...The full consequence of this brilliant thought was illuminated for us as though by a flash of lightning. We cast off all previous critical instructions and judgments like a worn-out coat, we considered ourselves delivered from all evil, and we felt justified in looking down somewhat pityingly at the otherwise very magnificent sixteenth century.

The young Goethe had good reason for finding *Laocoon* so productive (a ‘flash of lightning’, to quote the author’s own illuminating metaphor). Seen from Goethe’s later perspective, Lessing’s whole attempt to reconfigure the spheres of modern poetry and painting – itself founded upon a judicious and historical re-evaluation of ancient exempla – could be thought to align with a radical new aesthetic programme. Just as Lessing’s prescriptions about the properly ‘spatial’ realm of painting had an incalculable influence on contemporary painting, so too his emphasis on poetry as a mode premised around temporal action rather than description in one sense can be said to have laid the ground for German Romanticism.<sup>94</sup>

If *Laocoon* has had a profound influence on the actual forms of Western literature and art over the last 250 years, a still greater bequest arguably lies in its impact on the broader development of philosophy, aesthetics, and semiotic theory. A full account of Lessing’s place within the history of modern aesthetics would have to take into account its numerous anticipations of (if not overt influence on) late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German philosophy – including Kant’s third *Critique* (his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, or *Critique of Judgment*), and not least Hegel’s

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<sup>94</sup> For the relationship, see the insightful early analysis of Hamann 1878: xxvi.

1820s *Lectures on Aesthetics (Vorträge über Ästhetik)*.<sup>95</sup> For our purposes here, however, a more immediate focus comes in multifarious recourse to *Laocoon* to articulate the nature of visual and verbal signs, as indeed the evolving Western intellectual history of semiotics.

A particular resurgence of interest in *Laocoon* came amid late nineteenth and early twentieth-century ‘structuralist’ approaches to the signs of language and visual imagery. This should come as no surprise, for Lessing not only related the differences between art forms to their use of space and time, but also made a decisive distinction between the signs that they employ. The painter, Lessing argues in chapter 16 of *Laocoon*, makes use of signs that are ‘figures and colours in space’ (*Figuren und Farben in dem Raume*), while the poet must resort to ‘articulated sounds in time’ (*artikulierte Töne in der Zeit*). For Lessing, the signs of each medium of art must bear a ‘suitable relation [*bequemes Verhältniß*] to the thing signified’: spatially contiguous signs can depict ‘only objects whose wholes or parts coexist’ (namely, in Lessing’s term, ‘bodies’), while temporally successive signs ‘can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive’ (namely ‘actions’).<sup>96</sup> Lessing’s comments here set the agenda for more recent semiotic theory, not least following the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (in his posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale*, 1916) and Charles Sanders Peirce’s distinctions between ‘iconic’, ‘symbolic’, and ‘indexical’ signs. In both cases, we find a tradition of formalist semiotics (whether treating verbal or visual

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<sup>95</sup> Specifically on the relationship between the aesthetics of Lessing and Hegel, see now Hien 2013 (along with Squire, this volume).

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Lessing 1984: 78; for the key terms of the original German text, see Lessing 2012: 115; on the problematic thinking behind Lessing’s ‘*bequemes Verhältnis*’, see especially Beiser’s chapter in this volume.

signs) wrestling with Lessing's distinctions between signs that are either 'arbitrary' or 'natural'. In his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), Saussure made the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign a major tenet in his theory of semiotics.<sup>97</sup> This point may sound similar to Lessing's central thesis about the conventionality of language as a poetic medium, something that renders it particularly useful for the description of action in time. Yet as the chapters in this volume by Beiser and Lifschitz highlight, Lessing did not himself adhere to his own initially strict distinction between natural signs in painting and arbitrary ones for poetry. This assertion, made in the drafts for *Laocoon*, was significantly qualified in the final version of the essay; indeed, one of Lessing's major points in the published treatise is that the poet must endeavour to naturalize the arbitrary signs of poetry.<sup>98</sup>

It was in fact in the wake of such formalist and structuralist thought – during the time when Saussure's theory began to be systematically questioned – that Lessing's *Laocoon* enjoyed a new lease of life. Among 'poststructuralist' thinkers, and above all theoreticians of language, the essay could be harnessed not just as a blueprint for Saussurian structuralism, but also a useful alternative and corrective. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, there emerged a new generation that challenged earlier structuralist approaches to signs; likewise, it was argued, the history of

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<sup>97</sup> Saussure 1916: 102. On the differences and similarities between Saussure's notion of arbitrariness and Enlightenment views, see Lifschitz 2012b.

<sup>98</sup> In Saussure's system, moreover, arbitrariness refers primarily to the unmotivated character of the linguistic sign, or else to the lack of any necessary or 'natural' link between it and the signified. It does not relate to any free choice on the part of the speaking subject; indeed, within Saussure's synchronic system, there is little that a single speaker can, as an individual, do to modify the value of signifiers (cf. Saussure 1916: 103, with Derrida 1997: 44–73).



semiotics could open up new perspectives on larger patterns of cognition, mental processing and cultural organization.

This new development is most discernible in Michel Foucault's classic 1966 work, *Les mots et les choses* (translated into English as *The Order of Things*).<sup>99</sup> In this book, published exactly 200 years after Lessing's *Laocoon*, Foucault traced the transition between different historical semiotic regimes. Such *epistemes*, Foucault argued, could provide the conceptual grids for almost every intellectual activity in a certain period, ranging from religious worship to the classification of nature to economic theory. Although Foucault was fairly deterministic in this respect – each period was characterized and controlled by a single 'general theory of the sign' that necessarily pervaded all intellectual domains – he attempted to highlight the most significant changes in a pattern of evolution; above all, he traced an early modern shift away from a Renaissance *Weltanschauung* (focused on the resemblance between sign and world). According to Foucault, the *âge classique* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was dominated by a very different theory of signification (one that came to replace 'resemblance'), prioritizing conventional signs that could be manipulated in analysis, combination, and their various applications in the theory of probability, natural history, and other scientific and social domains.<sup>100</sup>

Writing in the following year, but approaching his subject from a different critical angle, Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* ('Of Grammatology') waged its own attack on Saussure and strict linguistic structuralism. Derrida highlighted the fissure in Western thought between writing, usually seen as secondary and derivative, and the vocal aspects of language (which had been considered its essence, thereby

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<sup>99</sup> Foucault 2002.

<sup>100</sup> Foucault 2002: esp. 64–70.

providing a supposedly reliable link to mental processes).<sup>101</sup> By reassessing the importance and indispensability of writing, Derrida enhanced the diversification of semiotic theories by emphasizing the very *media* of signification – that is, *how* they signified, rather than just *what* they conveyed. In 1970 Jürgen Trabant added his own contribution to this ongoing reassessment of structuralism by emphasizing the speech acts involved in the actualization of literary texts during aesthetic reception – embedded as the original texts may have been in particular structural contexts and constraints.<sup>102</sup>

Needless to say, these larger shifts in twentieth-century critical thought were not always directed against (or indeed oriented around) Lessing's *Laocoon* alone. Yet, throughout the various debates that ensued, Lessing's writings about the signs of painting and poetry were harnessed for different critical and intellectual-historical ends. Indeed, the very reception of Lessing's text, focused around its own reception of classical materials, in turn testifies to shifting critical attitudes to linguistic and visual media, aesthetic reception, and theories of semiotics.

Two particularly decisive interventions deserve mention here: first, Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of *Laocoon* (on the one hand, his 1973 article on eighteenth-century semiotics, and on the other his 1977 book, *Theories of the Symbol*); and second, David Wellbery's groundbreaking book of 1984, *Lessing's Laocoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*.<sup>103</sup> The chief importance of Todorov's *Theories of the Symbol* lay in the author's self-conscious attempt to pluralize theories

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<sup>101</sup> For fierce criticism of Saussure on this point, see Derrida 1997: 30–44.

<sup>102</sup> Trabant 1970: esp. 13–17. For Trabant's turn to the historical anthropology of language, cf. also Trabant 1990, 1998, and 2003 (along with Trabant's contribution to this volume).

<sup>103</sup> Todorov 1973, 1982; Wellbery 1984.

of the sign through historical contextualization (despite, or rather on account of, Todorov's view of historical fact as 'wholly constructed').<sup>104</sup> For Todorov, Lessing's *Laocoon* explicitly embodied a transition from a 'classic' mimetic theory of art and language to a Romantic theory of poetry. Examining theories that treat imitation in art as the motivation of its signs, Todorov located the difference between Lessing and his predecessors in his view that both painting and poetry employed motivated signs (instead of the traditional distinction between 'natural painting' and 'arbitrary poetry'). It follows, according to Todorov, that Lessing's attempt to defend a theory of artistic imitation is contradicted precisely by his insistence that the poetic sign can be motivated or naturalized. Despite himself, as Todorov puts it, Lessing 'proved *a contrario* that the reign of imitation over aesthetic thought was approaching its end'.<sup>105</sup>

Like Todorov, David Wellbery attempted to situate the *Laocoon's* semiotic thinking against a larger historical backdrop. For all Lessing's recourse to the exemplary paradigms of antiquity, Wellbery argued, the *Laocoon* is founded upon a number of aesthetic assumptions, themselves rooted in his specific cultural outlook. Wellbery's argument is founded on the following two premises in particular:<sup>106</sup>

- (1) that the production, circulation and interpretation of signs within a culture are governed by a kind of deep-structural theory, a system of assumptions, let us say, about what constitutes a sign and what it is proper to do with one; and
- (2) that this general theory of language and signs lays

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<sup>104</sup> Todorov 1982: 12.

<sup>105</sup> Todorov 1982: 146.

<sup>106</sup> Wellbery 1984: 2.

down guidelines for the organization of the aesthetic field (as well as other domains).

This view of the connection between theories of language and art proved especially fruitful for an analysis of *Laocoon*, where such a link is overtly stated and discussed. Wellbery set out to reconstruct the Enlightenment's theory (sometimes rechristened a 'myth' or a 'metasemiotic') of the sign, which he regarded as possessing an overall 'systematic coherence'.<sup>107</sup> In an important epilogue, and one that progresses from historical contextualization to transhistorical aesthetic critique, Wellbery also reflected on his own endeavours in the early 1980s, finding hitherto neglected similarities between Enlightenment semiotics and some presuppositions of modern phenomenology and universal pragmatics. Wellbery even suggested ways in which, just as contemporary semiotics could inform a reading of *Laocoon*, Lessing's essay itself could contribute to contemporary semiotics. Among the areas Wellbery marked for further elaboration were accounts of the 'changes in the mode of sign production within individual arts' and the temporal instantiation that is involved in narrative.<sup>108</sup>

If *Laocoon* has spurred numerous aesthetic debates about semiotics and the changing history of Western 'sign systems', it has also of course served as both paradigm and punch-bag within attempts to articulate the specific differences between visual and verbal media. Once again, the 'boundaries' or *Grenzen* that Lessing

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<sup>107</sup> Wellbery 1984: 5.

<sup>108</sup> Wellbery 1984: 245–6. Some of the chapters in this book duly follow up on Wellbery's suggestions: for example, Robertson discusses changes in the poetic and pictorial depiction of pain during the turn between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; likewise, Grethlein reads *Laocoon* through the lens of modern narratology. For Wellbery's retrospective reflections on that earlier work, and commentary on its particular intellectual context in the 1980s, see his contribution to this volume.

attempted to draw up between the ‘temporality’ of actions mediated by poetry and the ‘spatiality’ of bodies that are the subject of painting have sparked divergent responses. Among literary critics, numerous scholars have attempted to address the means by which literary texts might aspire to a ‘spatial’ dimension – demonstrated by Joseph Frank’s 1945 essay on ‘Spatial form in modern literature’,<sup>109</sup> for example, or indeed Murray Krieger’s analysis of the ‘spatiality’ of literary ecphrasis (whereby ‘the stilled world of plastic relationships’ can be ‘superimposed on literature’s turning world to “still” it’).<sup>110</sup> Within the field of art history, too, Lessing’s distinctions have challenged scholars to think about how visual media might aspire to ‘poetic’ qualities – about the different ways in which images might visualize narrative texts, rendering their ‘spatial’ medium ‘temporal’.<sup>111</sup>

These various interventions also of course extend back earlier to the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Indeed, in a very real sense, Lessing’s essay defined the whole field of what German-speaking scholars today call *Medienwissenschaft* (and, albeit in a rather different guise, the ‘media studies’ of the Anglo-Saxon world). As ever, it was also against the context of later twentieth-century poststructuralist debates that Lessing’s medial distinctions between visual and verbal signs were most vehemently fought over. Foucault himself addressed Lessing’s question of the specific

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<sup>109</sup> Frank 1945 (reprinted, along with several other seminal contributions, in Frank 1991).

<sup>110</sup> Krieger 1967: 5 – in the context of an essay on ‘the Laocoon revisited’; cf. Krieger 1992: esp. 285. The larger topic of ecphrasis has spurred a large bibliography (with much of the thinking indebted directly or indirectly to Lessing): for an introduction, and references to the wider critical literature, see e.g. Brassat and Squire 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Particularly important here is Schapiro 1973, on the differences between the two media that arise from ‘the conciseness or generality of the word and from the resources peculiar to verbal and visual art’ (12); the essay is reprinted in Schapiro 1996: 11–114.

resources of words and pictures (not least in his *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, written in response to Fig. 0.3): 'the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation', he concluded, treating the fraction and fissure between the sayable and seeable as a fundamental dialectic that structures human knowledge, power, and history.<sup>112</sup> In the wake of Foucault, Derrida, and others, Lessing's essay has come to play a key role not just in the emergence of 'visual cultural' studies,<sup>113</sup> but more specifically in the rise of a field dedicated precisely to the intersection between 'words' and 'images'.<sup>114</sup>

From the late 1970s onwards, *Laocoon* has served as a recurrent arena for debating the ways in which visual and verbal media function in ways that are like or unlike the other. Numerous critics might be cited here, among them Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson, Michael Camille, James Elkins, and Wendy Steiner.<sup>115</sup> But arguably

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<sup>112</sup> Foucault 1983; cf. Foucault 2002: 10: 'It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted with the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax.' On Foucault's contributions here, see above all Deleuze 1988: esp. 47–69; Mitchell 1994: esp. pp. 58–76, 83–4.

<sup>113</sup> For the rise of 'visual culture' as a critical term, see e.g. Herbert 2003, together with the discussions in Bryson, Holly, and Moxey (eds.) 1994; Jencks (ed.) 1995; Mitchell 1995; and Mirzoeff 1999. For some sharp-sighted overviews of the term's epistemological stakes, see Moxey 2001: 103–23; Bal 2003; and Cherry 2004. The earliest programmatic use of the term known to us is Alpers 1983: xxv.

<sup>114</sup> The explosion of interest in the theme is best represented by the international journal *Word and Image: A Journal of Visual and Verbal Interaction*, founded in 1985. Bateman 2014 offers a useful 'critical introduction'.

<sup>115</sup> See especially Bal 1991, 1998; Bal and Bryson 1991; Bryson 1981; Bryson (ed.) 1988; Camille 1985a; Camille 1985b; Camille 1992; Elkins 1998; Steiner 1982; Steiner 1988.

the most influential has been W. J. T. Mitchell, who tackled Lessing's *Laocoon* head-on in an article first published in 1984.<sup>116</sup> Analyzing the inherent 'ideological' stakes of Lessing's distinction between painting and poetry, and self-consciously approaching *Laocoon* from the perspective of what he labelled the 'pictorial turn' of the late twentieth century,<sup>117</sup> Mitchell's reading forms part and parcel of a larger argument about the shared mechanics of words and pictures. Both visual and verbal media are *mixed* media, Mitchell argued, comprising a combination of natural and arbitrary signs alike: 'there are no "purely" visual or verbal arts', it follows, 'though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism'.<sup>118</sup> While approaching the question from a different theoretical perspective, Mieke Bal reaches a similar judgment about the modern 'dichotomistic fallacy' that underpins Lessing's essay.<sup>119</sup> Arguing that such strict delineations between verbal and visual realms are an artificial invention of modern academia rather than an essential category of cultural life, Bal suggested that the formal differences between images and texts (the demonstrable fact that images can never simply 'visualize' a verbal story) do not belie their cultural inextricability. If we define images as 'visual' on the grounds of

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<sup>116</sup> Mitchell 1984a, revised in 1986: 95–115; cf. also Mitchell 1980, Mitchell 1994; and the concise overview in Mitchell 2003.

<sup>117</sup> On the 'pictorial turn', see Mitchell 1994: 11–34, along with e.g. Mitchell 2002: 240–1; compare also Boehm 1995.

<sup>118</sup> See Mitchell 1994: 5. Mitchell imbues the point with a more programmatic significance (161): 'one lesson of a general semiotics, then, is that there is, semantically speaking (that is, in the pragmatics of communication, symbolic behavior, expression, signification) no *essential* difference between text and images; the other is that there are important differences between visual and verbal media at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions'. For a concise recapitulation of these critical ideas, see Mitchell 2003.

<sup>119</sup> See Bal 1991: 27.

their material form, and not least because of our ‘clichéd norms of word-and-image distinctions’, any response to an image inevitably engages with, and thereby reshapes, verbal discourse (and vice versa). ‘Just as all language is an articulation of nonverbal as well as verbal practices’, in the words of Paul Mattick, ‘so nondiscursive form – visual, aural, and other – shares its world of meaning with that constructed in speech’.<sup>120</sup>

Such (post-)postmodern responses will hardly constitute the last word on *Laocoon*’s aesthetic and medial arguments. Indeed, it can be no coincidence that recent crusades against Lessing’s ‘boundaries’ come at precisely the time when twenty-first century technologies are reconfiguring modes of visual and verbal communication – from the SMS-‘language’ of Emoji, to the visual-verbal workings of contemporary social media. Yet whether we read *Laocoon* with a view to articulating essential medial distinctions, or else in order to situate our own culturally loaded views against those of our forbears, the fundamental questions asked in Lessing’s essay show no sign of abating. More than that, Lessing’s special blend of antiquarian retrospection and aesthetic critique responds to a timeless problem, namely that of navigating between historical critique and essentializing philosophical evaluation: within a series dedicated to ‘classical presences’, *Laocoon* reminds us just how much modern aesthetics can learn from the perspectives of the past – and not least, from our simultaneous proximity to and remove from the precedents of antiquity.

#### *UNORDENTLICHE COLLECTANEA?*

Much more could be said by way of introduction. The tripartite framework of the preceding overview nonetheless reflects the presiding concerns of our larger volume,

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<sup>120</sup> Mattick 2003: 6–7.



simultaneously dedicated (as the subtitle puts it) to ‘Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the “Limits” of Painting and Poetry’. In bringing together these different interests, our collection of essays responds to the very fabric of Lessing’s essay. After all, one of the reasons *Laocoon* has proved so stimulating over the last quarter-millennium lies in its varied critical texture – its shifting argumentative modes, diverse materials, and oscillation between ancient and modern frames of reference. Throughout the treatise, Lessing refers to his essay as a sort of metaphorical ‘journey’: it is said to comprise a meandering ‘stroll’ across diverse fields of intellectual enquiry.<sup>121</sup> More programmatically still, the preface presents *Laocoon* as a sort of ‘rag-bag’ – a ‘disorderly collection’, or *unordentliche Collectanea*, that flies in the face of German rationalist traditions:<sup>122</sup>

[The following chapters] were written as chance dictated and more in keeping with my reading than through any systematic development of general principles. Hence they are to be regarded more as unordered notes for a book than as a book itself.

Yet I flatter myself that even in this form they will not be treated wholly with contempt. We Germans suffer from no lack of systematic books. We know better than any other nation in the world how to deduce anything we want in the most beautiful order from a few postulated definitions.

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<sup>121</sup> For further discussion (and further references), see the chapters by Squire, Décultot, and Grethlein in this book.

<sup>122</sup> Lessing 1984: 5. The phrase ‘*unordentliche Collectanea*’ also provides a title for the essays in Robert and Vollhardt (eds.) 2013.

Lessing's self-deprecating rationale here – his supposed rejection of any 'systematic development of general principles' – to some extent foreshadows our own thinking in this book. Whether or not our anthology should be 'regarded more as unordered notes for a book than as a book itself' we leave our readers to decide. Yet what motivates the collection is precisely the provocation of Lessing's essay, and across so wide a range of academic fields.

As a collection, the overriding remit of this book is to combine *different* modes of approaching the text, at once rethinking the medial 'limits' defined by the *Laocoon*, and situating the text within its *Entstehungs-* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Rather than just engage in polarized debates about whether or not Lessing was right in his delineations of poetry and painting, the book engages scholars from divergent academic backgrounds, each reading the text with their own concerns, questions, and interests. Some contributors address *Laocoon* from a systematic theoretical and conceptual perspective, returning to timeless issues about the 'boundaries' between word and image (no less than hierarchies between poetry, drama, sculpture, and painting). Other chapters, by contrast, stress the historicizing stakes – whether exploiting aspects in the text's reception to shed light on its original theoretical framework, or championing the historical and ideological conditions that moulded the systematic conclusions of Lessing's essay (as indeed his particular view of the classical past). Our objective has been to rally behind – rather than reconcile – such divergent diachronic, conceptual, and historicizing approaches: the *Ordnung* of these *unordentliche Collectanea* lies in bringing different modes of criticism into closer contact with one another.

The point lies at the heart of the following chapter by David Wellbery, who begins by charting some of the ways in which *Laocoon* has been ‘good to think with’ among the various artistic and literary theoreticians of the twentieth century. In Lessingian circles, as we have said, Wellbery is best known for his work on *Laocoon’s* relation to *Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Wellbery 1984). In his chapter here, though, Wellbery revises his earlier readings: rather than see ‘media theory’ as Lessing’s primary contribution (a view bound up with the intellectual preoccupations of the 1980s), Wellbery suggests that this might in fact amount to something of ‘secondary’ importance. For contemporary readers, Lessing’s contribution in the field of semiotics is arguably less valuable than the ‘conceptual constellation’ of his essay (as discussed here in terms of the nature of critical judgment, the primacy of human action, and the texture of human emotion). If *Laocoon* is a work of classical reception, reading this text in light of its own posthumous receptions can illuminate both what Lessing shares with his critical heirs and, no less importantly, where posthumous responses part company with Lessing’s own intellectual assumptions.

In the following chapter, Michael Squire throws a spotlight on how Greek and Roman materials might illuminate Lessing’s essay. The project of *Laocoon* can in part be understood as a historicist one, Squire demonstrates: as we have already noted, the opening and closing sections of the essay are structured around the interpretation of a single ancient statue (together with Winckelmann’s interpretation of it), introducing all manner of ancient historical testimonia to illuminate the transhistorical differences between ‘painting’ and ‘poetry’. Yet for all its debts to ancient thinking, the *Laocoon’s* conclusions about the two media – not least, Lessing’s implicit argument concerning the superiority of ‘ancient’ words over images – are predicated on a

particular set of ‘modern’ ideas, themselves conditioned by a certain theological outlook. While purporting to talk about antiquity, Lessing re-imagines that Graeco-Roman ‘world full of gods’ in distinctly ‘Protestant’ terms: it is Lessing’s deeply Lutheran assumptions that ultimately instantiate his delineation of poetry from painting on the one hand, and his demonization of the visual arts on the other.

Luca Giuliani likewise approaches *Laocoon* from the perspective of contemporary classical scholarship. Just as Lessing grounded his analysis of medial limits in inductive arguments drawn from ancient Greek and Roman case studies, Giuliani evaluates *Laocoon* as an ‘analytical tool’ for the twenty-first-century classical archaeologist. In doing so, Giuliani returns to some of the same literary case studies that so engrossed Lessing 250 years ago – and none of them more so than Homer’s *Iliad*. At the same time, Giuliani introduces into the mix (what we now know to be) our best source for Archaic and Classical Greek *Malerei*: namely Greek vase-painting. By probing Lessing’s theories of the respective workings of art and text, and exploring them in the context of ancient depictions of the *Iliad* (especially seventh- and sixth-century BC vase-paintings), the chapter explores both the virtues *and* problems of Lessing’s account. As Giuliani argues, this historical perspective can help us formulate (and indeed delimit) the analytical importance of Lessing’s framework; at the same time, the perspective of ancient art can help us see how Lessing’s text is as much a treatise *against* as about the visual arts.

While many of the chapters in this volume focus on Lessing’s distinction between ‘painting’ and ‘poetry’, Katherine Harloe demonstrates *Laocoon*’s important contributions to the wider field of eighteenth-century aesthetics. The particular focus of her chapter lies in Lessing’s thinking about ‘sympathy’ (*Mitleid*), above all in the context of drama. Anticipating numerous aspects of Lessing’s later *Hamburgische*

*Dramaturgie*, *Laocoon* shows Lessing – himself a major playwright – forging a theory of drama against the backdrop of both Aristotelian philosophy and ancient dramatic paradigms. Harloe hones in on a particular passage in the fourth chapter of *Laocoon*, where Lessing has recourse to Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* in order to engage with Adam Smith’s arguments about the moral force of sympathy. In doing so, she champions the wide range of contemporary critical themes brought together in the essay, as well as the international scope of Lessing’s Enlightenment thinking.

Where Harloe focuses on *Laocoon*’s engagement with the work of Adam Smith, Frederick Beiser’s chapter deals with the palpable impact of another central eighteenth-century author (and one of Lessing’s closest personal friends): Moses Mendelssohn. As noted above, Mendelssohn composed his own treatise about the differences between the arts in 1757, paying particular attention to hybrid artistic forms that combined ‘natural’ and ‘arbitrary’ signs through their fusion of ‘successive’ and ‘instantaneous’ elements. In his comments on an early draft of *Laocoon*, Mendelssohn reminded Lessing that poetry – due to the arbitrariness of its signs – could also succeed in expressing objects that co-exist with one another rather than only consecutive actions in time. Of all Mendelssohn’s comments on *Laocoon*, Beiser argues, this was the one that most troubled Lessing. Although Beiser does not find *Laocoon*’s response to Mendelssohn convincing, he uses the exchange between the two writers to clarify aspects of Lessing’s own thinking, demonstrating how Lessing’s arguments are bound up with a larger nexus of contemporary debates, ideologies, and assumptions.

Lessing’s arguments about the ‘arbitrariness’ of poetic signs – together with his response to Mendelssohn’s objections in *Laocoon*’s seventeenth chapter – likewise provides the backdrop for Avi Lifschitz’s essay. As Beiser’s chapter makes

clear, Lessing dismisses Mendelssohn's counter-arguments by pointing out that while language in general is arbitrary, this should not be the specific attribute of poetry. According to Lessing, who bases his arguments on the analysis of ancient case studies, the particular purpose of poetry must be the creation of a vivid illusion that approximates the immediacy of pictorial representation. Lessing attempts to cast the poet as 'elevating' arbitrary linguistic signs to the status of the natural signs of painting. Lifschitz sets out to explore the seeming paradox of this position. He argues that Lessing drew upon a wide range of French and German thinkers who downplayed the arbitrariness of language while simultaneously emphasizing its natural features (among them, Rousseau's projection of a performative 'language of signs' onto classical antiquity, Condillac's 'language of action', and not least Diderot's musings on what he termed 'poetic hieroglyphs'). Lifschitz consequently shows how *Laocoon* takes its inspiration from multiple sources, extending far beyond the intellectual remit of Christian Wolff and his German followers: Lessing's call for the naturalization of arbitrary signs, and his discussion of ancient poetry in this light, can only be understood against the backdrop of a cross-European debate about linguistic signs.

Whereas Beiser and Lifschitz examine *Laocoon* as a key contribution to eighteenth-century semiotics, Daniel Fulda evaluates the text against the backdrop of contemporary historiography. For many scholars, the *Laocoon*'s edicts have been understood to pertain to 'poetry' and 'painting' plain and simple. But as Fulda explains, Lessing's underlying prescriptions about painterly 'space' and poetic 'time' are also shaped by debates on how to write history – debates that themselves stretch all the way back (as indeed waged in response) to Graeco-Roman precedent. Ultimately, Fulda argues, Lessing's prescriptions about the *proper* 'limits' of 'poetry' and 'painting' respond to what was seen as a weakness of German historiography in

the eighteenth century: namely, the struggle to reconcile the spatial and temporal dimensions of historical writing.

With Élisabeth Décultot's chapter we shift attention to the actual *medium* of Lessing's text. If *Laocoon* constitutes an attempt to delineate the boundaries of poetry and painting, to what extent can these categories be applied to Lessing's essay? How aware of these poles is the author in writing his own text that unfolds in time? Indeed, might *Laocoon* itself be understood as an exercise in 'poetry'? To answer these questions, Décultot first turns to a 1755 text that Lessing had earlier composed with Mendelssohn (*Pope – a Metaphysician!*), a treatise in which both thinkers had tried to delineate the different realms of poetry and philosophy. Décultot proceeds to argue that there is a close proximity between what Lessing calls 'poetry' and his own philosophical writing: criticism, at least as practised in *Laocoon*, narrates action in time through the representation of a sequence of readings and debates with Lessing's contemporaries. Along the way, the chapter argues that Lessing's respective methods of distinguishing between two domains – whether between metaphysics and poetry (in *Pope – a Metaphysician!*), and between poetry and painting (in *Laocoon*) – prepared the way for an expanded aesthetic understanding of poetry.

Moving forward to the immediate reception of Lessing's *Laocoon* – that is, to the reception of Lessing's own reception of classical art and literature – Ritchie Robertson situates Lessing's text within emerging debates over the proper depiction of suffering in art. More specifically, Robertson's chapter focuses on Goethe's writings on the ancient Laocoon group, as well as on other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century treatises dealing with the representation of pain. The issue of suffering in art was of utmost significance to Goethe's understanding of the classical, Robertson explains; more than that, the themes introduced in Lessing's essay – above

all, its concerns with *how* suffering can be depicted in words and images – proved pivotal for Goethe’s prescriptions about the relationship between idealism and individuality (or ‘the characteristic’) in art. As part of a larger campaign against what he called ‘naturalism’ in art (a crusade that Goethe waged in alliance with Schiller), Goethe argued that the ancients did not share the false notion that art must imitate nature. For Goethe, responding to Lessing, the power of the Laocoon group lay instead in its depiction of bodily suffering as something not just beautiful but also *anmutig* (‘sensuously pleasing’).

The topic of beauty resurfaces in a different form in Jason Gaiger’s chapter, which examines Lessing’s approach to the medium of the artwork from an unabashedly art theoretical perspective. One of the most challenging – and widely misunderstood – aspects of the essay, in Gaiger’s view, is its argument about the interplay between an artwork and the imaginative response of the subject. What role does the actual medium of a representation play in *Laocoon*? Does Lessing champion a ‘transparency theory of art’ (whereby the medium of representation is ideally ‘transparent’ to what it represents)? Or does *Laocoon* assume a more dynamic mode of engagement between material form and subjective imagination? Gaiger explores how different critics have differently approached these questions (with particular reference to the work of Anthony Savile, Arthur Danto, and David Wellbery). In casting doubt on the idea that Lessing subscribed to a ‘transparency theory of art’, moreover, Gaiger joins Lifschitz in suggesting that *Laocoon* works within a more complex framework of semiotic theory than is often assumed.

Jonas Grethlein, like Gaiger, tackles *Laocoon* from the perspective of aesthetics, developing Gaiger’s interest in issues of subjective imaginative response. Grethlein begins by surveying some of the different ‘ideological’ critiques of



Lessing's thesis – its notional nationalist undertones, its supposed anti-visual stance, and not least the gendered stakes of its dichotomy between painting and poetry. Responding to such 'deconstructionist' readings, Grethlein argues that Lessing's insights are fundamental for articulating *how* aesthetic experience works, and in a series of transhistorical ways. Reformulating Lessing's categories of temporal 'poetry' and spatial 'painting', while also concentrating on aesthetic response rather than formal medial difference, Grethlein treats the essay as a guide for delineating what he labels 'narratives' and 'pictures': Lessing's arguments about 'poetry' and 'painting' can help to advance a phenomenological argument about the 'as if' (in Kendall Walton's terms) of aesthetic experience, in particular the different modes of spatial and temporal response involved in reacting to narratives and pictures.

Where Grethlein (like others in the book) focuses first and foremost on the medial distinctions at work in Lessing's essay, Paul Kottman sets out to rethink Lessing's fundamental contribution to the history of aesthetics. For Kottman, Lessing talks of the differences between visual and verbal media primarily only to demonstrate their shared aesthetic effects. At stake, Kottman claims, is the very question of how art contributes to criticism – as played out in Lessing's opening distinction between the perspectives of the 'amateur', 'philosopher', and 'critic'. Like Wellbery, Kottman subsequently argues that what drives Lessing's interest in different media is less their specific properties or constraints than their respective ways of soliciting the aesthetic imagination: through its careful examination of literary and visual products, Lessing's essay is an attempt to grapple with the special ways in which the practice of art makes the world intelligible.

If Gaiger, Grethlein, and Kottman all approach Lessing's treatise from the critical viewpoints of modern aesthetics, Jürgen Trabant introduces an

anthropological-historical perspective. For Trabant, Lessing's distinction between poetry and painting can stand for a wider controversy about the respective status (and indeed relative developmental history) of words and images. The historical anthropology of language, Trabant argues, can help substantiate many of Lessing's theories, not least the idea that word and image share substantial common ground as embodiments of human thought. In particular, Trabant explores Lessing's *Grenzen* in relation to the concept of 'articulation' – not only of sounds, but also of cognitive distinctions. Returning to the themes discussed by (among others) Beiser and Lifschitz, Trabant concludes that the specific structure of phonetic articulation allows greater arbitrariness and combinatory possibilities than visual images. Ultimately, he suggests, it is phonetic articulation that enabled the rise of human culture: if Lessing prompts us to imagine 'word' and 'image' as occupying two floors within a shared house, we are justified in assuming a certain topography – one in which language occupies the first floor above the realm of visual imagery.

In his closing epilogue, returning full-circle to the themes explored in W. J. T. Mitchell's preface, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht ends the volume by examining what it means to read Lessing's text from a distance of 250 years. Throughout the book, several contributors make reference to Gumbrecht's arguments concerning aesthetic 'presence', in particular his polemics about the legacy of Enlightenment semiotic modes. In tackling issues about hermeneutics, materiality, and the reception of the past head-on, however, Gumbrecht explores both the proximity and distance between our intellectual concerns in 2016 and those that motivated Lessing's essay in 1766. The mediation of so many 'classical presences' within Lessing's treatise, we might say, finds a parallel in our own mediations of Lessing's essay.

So much for the parts. But what of the volume as a whole? We end this introduction by reiterating that this book offers only a selective ‘re-thinking’ of Lessing’s *Laocoon*: just as Lessing’s views of ancient art and literature were coloured by the concerns of his Enlightenment *milieu* in 1766, so too are our own responses to *Laocoon* no doubt shaped by our own specific disciplinary and cultural contexts on the occasion of the essay’s 2016 anniversary. We do not claim to have addressed every aspect of *Laocoon*; indeed, our combined argument is that so wide-ranging an essay must resist any such closure. Yet it is the very breadth of responses, drawn from across the humanities, that our book sets out to champion. The sentiment seems a fitting tribute to the provocations of Lessing’s original essay: as the essay embarks on its next quarter-millennium, we hope that future audiences will find in it as much to entice, bait, and goad as previous readers have done over the last 250 years.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> We are grateful to contributors to this volume – as well as to Jaś Elsner, Constanze Güthenke, and Oxford University Press’ two anonymous readers – for their comments on an earlier draft of our introduction.