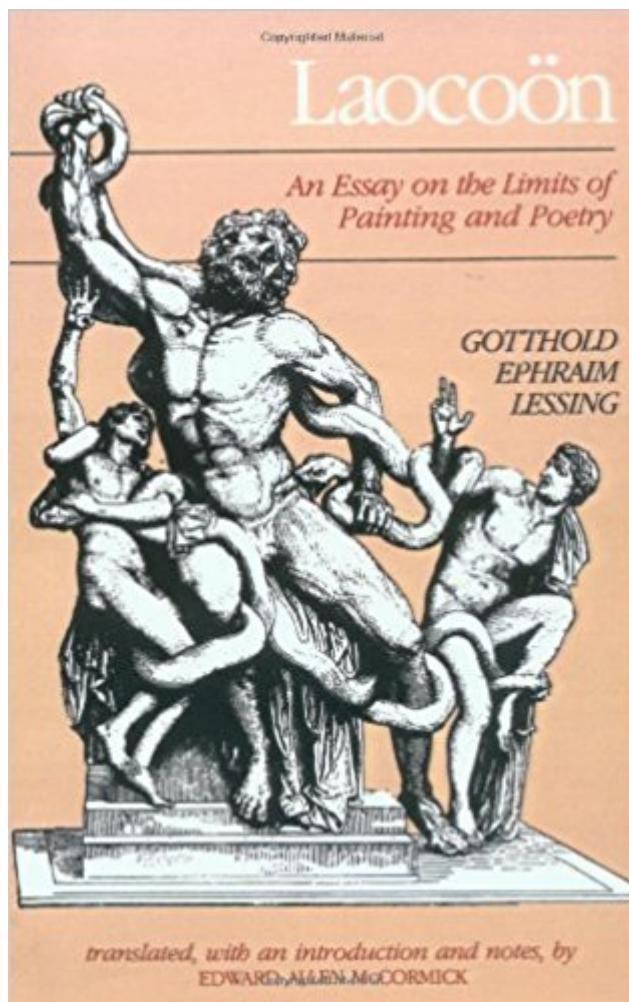


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Laocoön: An Essay On The Limits Of Painting And Poetry (Johns Hopkins Paperbacks)



Synopsis

Originally published in 1766, the *Laocoön* has been called the first extended attempt in modern times to define the distinctive spheres of art and poetry.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you are of the notion that the tide is turning in aesthetics once again, and you're right, then G.E. Lessing's seminal *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* is once again a necessary starting point. Edward A. McCormick has finally given English speaking academians a satisfactory translation of this tricky and ultimately unrealized work. Lessing had originally planned to survey music and dance as well. Nevertheless, *Laocoön* commands a formidable position in the history of letters as a breakthrough vision in aesthetics and the turning point of our notions about Western art. The author's speculations about the origin of the masterpiece, for which the essay is named, throwing his hat in the ring with commentators from Pliny to Winckelmann, gradually gives way to an inspired meditation on Homer and the greater issues at hand: What are the distinguishing characteristics of art? of poetry? G.E. Lessing's investigations show that the answers to these questions aren't as self evident as they seem. Henceforth, each practice's direction since has been the gradual essentializing of the scope of the respective mediums, Mallarme and Mondrian for instance. Impressively, in *Laocoön* Lessing turns out not only to be a forerunner of modernism but also a sophisticated semiotician long before Saussure. Edward A. McCormick's edition of *Laocoön*, with a short bio and extra bonus of a foreword by Michael Fried, is a keystone work for any

When people think of the Enlightenment, they of course turn to Voltaire. I say read this book! I have studied it for years, and taught it in many seminars about the philosophy of art. Not only is Lessing the penultimate Enlightenment figure--believing in reason, and deeply loving knowledge--he writes about things that are timely in our postmodern age. The essay (I call it that) starts off as if it will be about the ancient Hellenistic statue Laocoön, as well as the 18th-century problem of too much descriptive poetry and too much allegorical painting, but rapidly moves on to study the nature and boundaries of the different art forms. Lessing essentially argues that boundaries to art exist for good reason, and that to violate them invites bad art. This is a beautifully structured essay (the first half is inductive reasoning, the second half deductive reasoning), and it parses the differences among the arts with subtlety. Although the essay ends up centered on the differences between painting and poetry, it's really about how we grasp meaning differently depending on whether an art is in a narrative form (such as poetry) or is a still art (such as painting). Lessing's ideas are sometimes referred to as presaging Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum, "The medium is the message," which is not far off--as far as it goes. But Lessing possesses such powerful insights into human emotions, and the nature of experience, that the book really turns out to be about the human condition as much as it is about the arts. One of his most extraordinary discussions centers on the ways in which emotions always come mixed, and the consequences of this for artists who want to move their audiences. He has whole chapters on beauty and ugliness, not to mention terror and disgust. Lessing got a few things wrong (he did not accurately figure the date of the statue of the Laocoön compared to the date of Virgil's Aeneid), and the discussion of Winckelmann, Spence and Count Caylus is tedious to readers today. But the book as a whole? Brilliant!

"..succession in time is the province of the poet, co-existence in space that of the artist." This insightful and compelling excursion into comparative aesthetics led me to choose comparative literature as a graduate study and profession. It argues eloquently that the writer's ability to show events both simultaneously and in succession transcends in overall impact the painter's restriction of having to show objects that co-exist in space. In the "shield of Achilles" episode in Homer's Iliad, the poet is able to paint a "moving picture" that subsumes art into words at the same time that it praises the sculptor's work. The poet, moreover, can deal with both the visible and the invisible. All who have chosen the vocation of writing should take this book to a beach resort and read it in tranquility.

Excellent.

Before reading this essay plagued by arguable assumptions, readers must read first and foremost Italians del cinquecento: Leonardo, Lomazzo, Castiglione, Francesco D'Olanda, et.al. One can find in these Italian masters --writers and painters at once-- a good arsenal against Herr Lessing catechistic notions on painting and so forth. After reading Boccaccio, then go and read Lessing. If not, just repeat like imbeciles what Lessing declaims.

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