



*Laocoön*, 1965-66

Eva Hesse (American, 1936-1970)

Acrylic, paint, cloth-covered cord, wire, papier-mâché over plastic plumbers' pipe

130 x 23 ¼ x 23 ¼ in.

(330.2 x 59 x 59 cm)

### VISUAL ANALYSIS

Completed in 1966, *Laocoön* is one of Eva Hesse's first large-scale freestanding sculptures. Constructed out of plastic tubing, rope, wire, papier-mâché, and covered with a uniform, muted grey paint, the entire structure forms a ladder standing 10 feet high, with each section a cube measuring two feet per side. Ropes made of wire wrapped around cloth-covered cords drape and coil around the geometric framework. The snake-like ropes evoke a sense of organic chaos, contrasting with the overall *austerity* of the sculpture. Ellen H. Johnson, Oberlin's late professor of Modern Art and friend of the artist's, described the piece as "stacked vertically rather than horizontally...the omission of cross bars on the top emphasizes the upward thrust of the four-sided 'ladder,' as it rises above the tangled, parasitic, downward-pulling ropes."

### FUNCTION/Form & Style

Hesse was extremely interested in the choice of materials used in her sculptures, one of the hallmarks of her soft, "biomorphic" style. Fabrics like the cheesecloth suggest feminine domesticity and were contrasted with more impersonal materials like fiberglass and plumbers pipe. Hesse was a pioneer of her generation in this way, incorporating industrial materials into the realm of fine art, and using a wide range of media—as evidenced in *Laocoön*. This sculpture, and many of Hesse's works, form part of her response to the *Minimalist* movement of her male contemporaries. The stacked open cubes recall works by her friend Sol LeWitt. His *49 Three-Part Variations on Three Different Types of Cubes* (also in the AMAM collection) exemplifies the type of minimalist aesthetic to

- What kinds of shapes and forms are evident in this sculpture?
- Why might Hesse have wanted to use both organic and industrial materials for this sculpture?
- How do these materials effect the viewer's response to this work?

which Hesse was responding. While both are made from stacked and incomplete cubes, LeWitt's work is metallic, wholly impersonal and mechanical in creation, while Hesse's *Laocoön* evokes an organic quality stemming from the cloth material, the rope-snake created by Hesse herself, and the evident hand working of the papier-mâché.

### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The title of the work is borrowed from the famed *Hellenistic* sculpture, currently in the Vatican's collection, which illuminates a story from Virgil's *Aeneid*, an ancient Latin epic poem. Laocoön was a priest of Poseidon who warned the Trojans against accepting the Trojan Horse from the Greeks. Poseidon, who favored the Greeks, was angered by Laocoön's warning and sent sea serpents to strangle the priest and his two sons—it is this moment of drama that the Hellenistic work depicts. The sculpture was lost for several hundred years, but its existence always remained a point of interest due to the detailed accounts of its perfection. When the sculpture was recovered in 1506, it created a sensation and has served to inspire many artists,

including Michelangelo. Hesse had seen the ancient sculpture in person at the Vatican on a trip to Europe the year before beginning her sculpture.

Hesse's vision of *Laocoön* is especially interesting in light of the original sculpture as a significant Roman work in the muscled, masculine tradition of Western art—in her version, Laocoön has no gender, and, indeed, no figural representation at all. This is a definite contrast to the 1st century BCE statue, with its aggressive and yet rounded, fluid forms.

The mid-1960s was a time of social and political turmoil in the United States, due to the Vietnam War, subsequent anti-war sentiment, the Civil Rights Movement, and a host of other cultural and political changes. This upheaval influenced the work of artists at the time and led to a huge quantity of artistic output—the visual arts and popular music in particular saw a vast amount of growth and the increasing adoption of avant-garde ideas and philosophies. Hesse was a part of this world, working alongside contemporaries such as Sol LeWitt, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, and Dan Graham.

### VOCABULARY

**Aeneid:** An epic Latin poem by Virgil that tells the adventures of Aeneas after the Trojan War and provides an illustrious historical background for the Roman Empire.

**Austerity:** Severity of manner, life, etc.; sternness.

**Hellenistic:** Of or pertaining to the Greeks or their language, culture, etc. after the time of Alexander the Great, when Greek characteristics were modified by foreign elements; pertaining to or designating the style of the fine arts, especially sculpture, chiefly characterized by delicate and highly finished modeling, dramatic, often violent movement of forms in space, representations of extreme emotion, highly individuated characterization, and a wide variety of subject matter.

**Minimalist:** Term used in the 20th century, in particular from the 1960s, to describe a style characterized by an impersonal austerity, plain geometric configurations and industrially processed materials.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies, and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement; Number, Number Sense, and Operations
- **Sciences:** Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Economics; Geography; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Hesse was born in Nazi Germany, in 1936, and her family fled the country when she was a young child, eventually settling in New York in 1939. Her childhood was tumultuous—the strain of emigration and settling into life in a new country led to her parents' divorce, and her mother committed suicide several years later.

Hesse studied studio art at Cooper Union, and later at the Yale School of Art under Josef Albers. There, she turned her focus to abstract drawings and received her BFA in 1959. In 1961, she married the sculptor Tom Doyle. Three years into this unhappy marriage, Hesse

started producing sculptures of her own. She struggled to work outside the shadow of her husband's career and the two separated in 1965. Hesse worked as an artist-in-residence at Oberlin College in January of 1968, as her then-husband had in 1961. The *Laocoön* sculpture was donated to Oberlin out of the artist's appreciation for her time spent there. Also in the AMAM collection are an abstract drawing, and a large portion of Hesse's archives, including notebooks, diaries, photographs, and letters.

Tragically, Eva Hesse died in 1970 at the age of 34, of a brain tumor, possibly as a result of her wide use of industrial materials.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**MATHEMATICS:** How many cubes are there in this work? Count all the sides of the cubes. Using the measurement of each cube (listed in the analysis above), determine the height and width of the work. (*Elementary School*)

**SCIENCE/VISUAL ART:** Hesse often worked using industrial materials that were newly manufactured substances at the time. These materials had not often been used in sculpture until the late 20th century. Examine the types of materials Hesse, Sol LeWitt, and other artists used in their experimental works. What kinds of problems are associated with these materials—think about safety hazards and their longevity. What kinds of new materials and media are artists of the present using in their works, and what problems might they encounter? (*Middle and High School*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** How can the figure of *Laocoön* be seen in relation to the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 70s? What are some other important works from this era? Did these artists choose to make explicit commentaries on the political and social events of the time? (*Middle and High School*)

**VISUAL ARTS:** Both Hesse's sculpture and the famous sculpture from the 1st century BCE illustrate the story of *Laocoön* from the *Aeneid*, yet they are very different works.

Create a sculpture that depicts a scene from a story from ancient mythology. The sculpture can be realistic or abstract, like Hesse's work. Think about what is happening in the moment depicted, who the characters are, what they are feeling, and the overall mood of the scene. Use unconventional materials, as Hesse did, such as clay, play dough, popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners, string, metal scraps, newspaper, recycled materials, glue, tape, hot glue, etc. (*All Ages*)