The Formula For Portraying Pain in Art;

Building Chairs or Forging Tools to Ease Suffering Can Transform It Into a Creative Force

New York Times SEPT. 15, 2001 by Sarah Boxer (4 pages; all bolded comments are mine, not the author's)

"To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt," Elaine Scarry wrote in her classic, "The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World." One reason that pain is hard to understand from the outside is that a body in pain is often reduced to moans, cries and whispers. Physical pain, Ms. Scarry writes, is language-destroying.

To talk about pain, one must step outside it. When people do speak of pain, Ms. Scarry noted, the adjectives they often use -- burning, stabbing, drilling, pinching, gnawing -- refer to the kinds of objects and actions that cause pain. For example, the McGill Pain Questionnaire, a list of terms developed by Ronald Melzack and W. S. Torgerson to help patients in hospitals and clinics to pinpoint their pain, is stocked with words like these. **The only way people can really describe pain is to objectify it.**

Indeed, Ms. Scarry suggested that the desire to describe pain objectively (and by describing it, remove it) is, in one sense, a creative force. When people forge tools or build things, they are often trying to alleviate discomfort. But first they must define the discomfort. To use a mundane example, she wrote, "the human body, troubled by weight, creates a chair; the chair recreates him to be weightless."

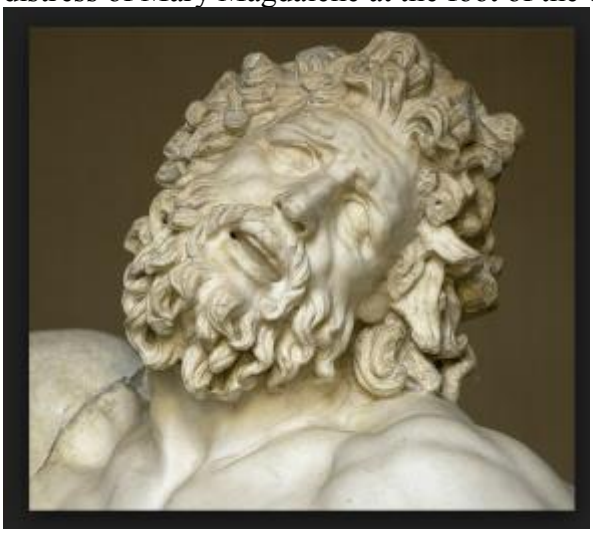
The idea that creativity is fueled by pain puts a new spin on the history of Western art. Is making art the ultimate attempt to turn pain into an object? Nigel Spivey, a lecturer in classics at Cambridge University and the author of "Enduring Creation: Art, Pain and Fortitude" (University of California, 2001), writes that the history of Western art is the story of pain's progress or at least of changes in the depiction of pain.

"In the history of Western art," he writes, "one antique sculpture furnishes us with the prototypical icon of human agony." It is a marble statue known as Laocoön, or the Laocoön group, which was made between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D. It shows a man, Laocoön, in agony as he and his sons are squeezed to death by serpents.

courtesy of Khan Academy.org (Anna Purves addition)

Mr. Spivey calls Laocoön a perfect example of what Aby Warburg, a late 19th- and early 20th-century German art historian, called a pathos formula, a recipe for rendering "the extremes of physiognomic expression in the moment of the highest excitement." Warburg cited as an example the maenads dancing on Greek vases. With their heads tossed back, they are emblems of frenzied, orgiastic abandon. Later artists were able to use this pathos formula, Mr. Spivey suggests, "without necessary regard to its original intention or effect."

The same tossed-back heads could, for instance, later be imported to show the frenzied distress of Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross.



Mr. Spivey calls the Laocoön a pathos formula for pain. The Laocoön is "delineated by four

features of physiognomic strain," Mr. Spivey notes. The head is tilted sideways or thrown back. One arm is raised, the other reaches downward. (When the sculpture was originally pieced together, one arm was raised high. In 1960, it was put together again with the arm lower.) The muscled torso is twisted and convulsed. One leg is stretched out, the other is raised a bit. This is the pose that became the model for pain.

In 1506 Laocoön was found and dug up near Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Four years later, Donato Bramante set up a contest to see "who could fashion the best wax replica of that marvelous ancient statue." Raphael was the judge, Jacopo Sansovino the winner.

Michelangelo, who was supposed to have been there when Laocoön was dug up, copied it for his painting of Haman on the Sistine ceiling. At the foot of Laocoön, Peter Paul Rubens learned the art of painting pain with "orgiastic gusto," Mr. Spivey writes. Titian may have used it as a model for his "banner-waving Christ" and for his "writhing St. Sebastian."

The 18th century German art historian J. J. Winckelmann said that Laocoön's "misery cuts us to the quick." He was right in one sense. The Laocoön was in pain. But was his misery really intended originally to cut us to the quick? Mr. Spivey writes, "Such is the lingering power of Winckelmann's influence that no one has ever asked if indeed this statue seeks a piteous response."

In ancient Greece, the Laocoön did not evoke pity. The story of Laocoön, as told in Pliny the Elder's "Natural History," is the story of a man who deserved punishment. Laocoön offended the gods by attacking the Trojan horse, which was presented as a gift to Athena, with his javelin. Never mind that Laocoön was right, that the Trojan Horse was filled with soldiers who then sacked Troy. He offended the gods, and for that he deserved punishment. And got it. Laocoön "was the sculpture of tough justice," Mr. Spivey writes.

So how did this one work become the sculpture that launched a thousand piteous cries? Well, **the sculpture didn't change, but the idea of pain and justice did**. While the Roman Empire declined and Laocoön was buried, early Christianity was beginning to celebrate pain, to transform the punishment of Christians under Roman law into the martyrdom of saints.

The cult of pain was on. But not yet the cult of painful art. In the fourth century, Christian imagery existed, Mr. Spivey writes, but there was still an "aversion to witness Christ crucified." By the sixth century, Christ was shown crucified but not really in pain. "Only nails through the palms of the hands" convey a crucifixion in the portals of the basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome, he says. Christ is shown next to two thieves, and they all "raise their hands like flippers -- more the posture of benediction than attenuated pain."

The preoccupation with pain came in the late Middle Ages. In "Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence" (Cornell University Press, 2001), Peter Burke, a professor of cultural history at the University of Cambridge, writes: "This was the period when the cult of

instruments of the Passion, the nails, the lance and so on, reached its height. It was also the time when the suffering Christ, twisted and pathetic, replaced the traditional scene of Christ the King on crucifixes, 'reigning from the tree.' "

After 1506, when Laocoön was dug up, artists like Michelangelo, Titian and Rubens were more than ready to use it as a **pathos formula for pain**. And after the Council of Trent of 1545-63, which set the terms of Counter-Reformation art, the blood simply gushed from the progeny of Laocoön. But why relish the very depiction of suffering? Why are Laocoön and its artistic offspring a delight to look at?

Ms. Scarry might say it is because these images are substitute bodies that first define and then mitigate pain. She suggests that every impulse to make things -- whether a painting, a chair, a poem, a vaccine or a building -- is an attempt to ease the burden of sentience by shifting some of it onto the object.

She writes, "A chair as though it were itself put in pain, as though it knew from the inside the problem of body weight, will only then accommodate and eliminate the problem."

from National Gallery, U.K. (Anna Purves addition)

If you can imagine a chair in pain -- think of van Gogh's painting of an empty chair -- then why not a building?The notion of an inanimate object suffering pain might make somewhat more sense this week as people repeatedly watch the televised images of two airliners banking and entering the World Trade Center towers. After seeing the airplanes pierce the buildings, turning them red and black, until they collapse, the idea that they are suffering pain doesn't seem quite so far-fetched.

For those who have looked into the ways that pain is rendered and described, the repetitive

film may be a pathos formula for our time, a model destined to be imagined and reimagined, the newest Laocoön.