



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Sappho

by Tamsin Wilton

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Despite Sappho's status as most ancient lesbian foremother, her image is almost entirely absent from modern and contemporary lesbian art. The great esteem in which she was held in the classical era was certainly reflected in visual art of the period; statues of her were erected in public places and coins were struck bearing her portrait. Some of these were later collected by Renée Vivien during a "pilgrimage" to Lesbos.



Top: A Pompeian fresco believed to depict Sappho (ca 300-400 C. E.).



Above: *Sappho and Alcaeus* (1881) by Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema.

Sappho was an occasional subject for the "historical" painters of Victorian England, particularly Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema. Sappho was probably chosen as the subject of these paintings because in painting the historical figure, "accuracy" could justify otherwise scandalous images of scantily-clad young women.

Alma Tadema depicted Sappho for the same reason that he painted the frenzy of the Maenads or girlish frolics in Roman bath-houses: these subjects provided maximum opportunity for titillation. Alma Tadema's Sappho is, moreover, pointedly heterosexual.

Another Victorian, Simeon Solomon, also painted Sappho in the "classical" style. But Simeon's own homosexuality lends this work a darker eroticism. In his famous painting *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (1864, displayed in the Tate Gallery, London), Erinna swoons with desire in Sappho's embrace.

Feminist artists, of whatever sexuality, have largely ignored her. The "women of the Left Bank," expatriate lesbians from England and the United States who gathered in Paris between the world wars, certainly took inspiration from Sappho, but they did not paint or draw her.

Later in the twentieth century, heterosexual artist Judy Chicago included Sappho in her *Dinner Party* project (1974-1979), in which famous women from history are each represented by an embroidered place-setting and a sculpted ceramic plate, but this is one of only a handful of images.

Given that feminist and lesbian artists commonly make use of other female figures from classical times, the paucity of representations of Sappho is puzzling.

Bibliography

Chicago, Judy. *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework*. New York: Doubleday, 1980.

Morgan, Thais. "Perverse Male Bodies: Simeon Solomon and Algernon Charles Swinburne." *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*. Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, eds. London: Routledge, 1996. 61-85.

Weiss, Andrea. *Paris Was a Woman: Portraits from the Left Bank*. London: Pandora, 1995.

Wilton, Tamsin. *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*. London: Routledge, 1995.

About the Author

Tamsin Wilton was Reader in Sociology at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She published widely on lesbian and gay issues since 1988, and visited many countries to lecture on lesbian studies and on the sociology of HIV/AIDS. Her books include *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*; *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*; and *Sexualities in Health and Social Care*.