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Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene
and the Art History of Classical Lesbian Love

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Abstract

This research examines the works of Victorian artist Simeon Solomon, focusing on his representations of the ancient poetess *Sappho*—the earliest documented lesbian figure in Greco-Roman history. The research explores Solomon's personal life and analyzes his artwork through an iconographic lens, incorporating feminist and queer theory. His depictions of *Sappho* are also compared to other portrayals of classical lesbian figures, particularly those that are overly sexualized. By doing so, this research aims to open a conversation about the complex history of lesbian love in art history.

...and among all animals, not one female is attacked by lust for a female – Ovid, Metamorphoses

Introduction

The field of art history has undoubtedly undergone needed modification over the course of the last several decades. Though the view of the straight, white man continues to reign supreme, broader narratives have surfaced and earned respect. Studies in race, gender, and sexuality have proved their importance to the expansion of the field. Yet, there is still much to be said about the representation of certain minority groups. For instance, queer women have been exceptionally underrepresented throughout the history of art. Although we cannot go back in time and cure the world of both misogyny and homophobia, and therefore grant access to the artist to freely paint such themes as queerness between women, what we *can* do now is look back at the handful of artistic depictions of queer women and strengthen their importance to the understanding of lesbianism's history. A good place to begin analysis is Simeon Solomon's *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene*. By examining Solomon's personal life, looking at the piece through an iconographical lens, applying feminist and queer theories, and comparing it to other paintings that portray overly sexualized classical lesbian figures, we can begin to prioritize a conversation surrounding the complex history of ancient lesbian love as depicted in art.

Simeon Solomon and the Art of Victorian England

Simeon Solomon was born on October 9th, 1840, in London, England, to a large middle class Jewish family. He was the youngest of Michael and Kate Levy Solomon's eight children. His interest in the arts was evident from a young age, having been heavily influenced by his mother, an amateur miniatures artist, his brother Abraham, and his sister Rebecca, both of whom were successful working artists. In April of 1856, at the age of sixteen, he began to attend the Royal Academy of Art in London, where his main artistic influences showed to be from both Shakespearean and Judaic texts. Another obvious influence on his early works was art from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.[1] The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in 1848 by a group of young artists reacting against the stricter academic styles coming out of their training institution, the Royal Academy

[1] Roberto C. Ferrari, "Solomon's Life Before 1873," Simeon Solomon Research Archive, accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.simeonsolomon.com/

of Art, which had long dominated the art scene in London. The art of Raphael (born Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino) of the Italian High Renaissance was the primary influence for the students of the Academy, whose artistic approaches were concluded to be mundane and formulaic by the Brotherhood. The Pre-Raphaelites favored the simplicity of line, the use of bright coloring, a meticulous attention to detail, and the use of medieval subject matter as seen in art before the ascendancy of Raphael.[2] Although students of the Academy, young artists like Solomon were evidently very impacted by the rebellious styles of the Pre-Raphaelites. Solomon most likely met Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the founders of the Brotherhood (along with William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais), around 1858. It was during this same year that his first Royal Academy work was exhibited, *Isaac Offered*, along with two drawings at the Ernest Gambart's Winter Exhibition.[3] He soon became well known amongst the Pre-Raphaelite circle and formed notable colleagueship with Rossetti, Everett Millais, Holman Hunt, and Edward Burne-Jones. Through either Rossetti or Burne-Jones, Solomon was introduced to poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose written work notoriously favored classical themes.[4]

The classical world has long been one of the artist's greatest muses (perhaps second to the biblical world). Victorians sought to create art (whether that be painting, literature, or any other artistic expression) that would be celebrated for generations to come; they wanted to be remembered for their greatness, or else their art was utterly insignificant. So, they looked to the greatest period of art thus far: the Italian Renaissance. In Italy, during the Quattrocento (the fifteenth century), the resuscitated knowledge of classical antiquity, recovery of its lost culture, and the renewed dispersion of a formally dormant liberal spirit came to be what we know as the Renaissance.[5]The idea of Humanism was re-birthed, which revived the pagan views of the ancient Greeks and Romans, who maintained that "man was made, not only to toil and suffer, but to enjoy."[6] Artists during the Victorian age looked back to the Renaissance for inspiration, and therefore the ancient world. With the rise of first-hand observation of antique artworks and widespread reproductions, the classicism of the Renaissance

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[2] Rebecca Jeffrey Easby, "A beginner's guide to the Pre-Raphaelites," Smarthistory, last modified August 9, 2015, https://smarthistory.org/a-beginners-guide-to-the-pre-raphaelites/

[3] Ferrari, "Solomon's Life Before 1873."

[4] Ibid

[5] A.W. Ward, G.W Prothero and Stanley Leathes, "The Classical Renaissance," The Cambridge Modern History 1, Cambridge University Press (1907), 532.

[6] Ibid, 533

had a revision.[7] Neoclassicism was the new wave of the Renaissance's classicism; another renewal of the styles and spirit of the classical world.

Soon after befriending Swinburne, Solomon began to incorporate Greco-Roman themes into his art, as well as homoerotic. Both Solomon and Swinburne had what was deemed unconventional sexualities for the time period (meaning they were outwardly homosexual), and they expressed their resulting internal turmoil artistically. Though there is no evidence to confirm any sort of romantic relationship between the two men, the influence that Swinburne had on Solomon's art suggests a close friendship between the two, or at the very least a profound professional interest in one another.

Solomon's new classical style was tied to the emerging Aestheticism movement in the arts, which was promoted by Swinburne. The Aesthetic Movement, which can be seen as both an extension of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and a renewal of some of their concepts, was characterized by the expression 'art for art's sake.' Artists following this movement prioritized the importance of beauty in their artworks, forgoing the idea that art must have a legible narrative or moral message.[8] Art was simply, for lack of better words, art; something to be looked upon and admired. Which is why, when face to face with artworks of this era, one would meet many beautiful women looking back at them. The male gaze, which is defined as the "sexually objectifying attitude that a representation takes toward its feminine subject matter, presenting her as a primarily passive object for heterosexual-male erotic gratification," was at a crux during the Aesthetic Movement, as the epitome of natural beauty was regarded as an idealized, youthful woman.[9] Within his early biblically-themed works, it is evident that Solomon began to explore his sexuality artistically. There are several sketches showing the figures of David and Jonathan embracing and kissing. Many of these works eroticize the male body, counteracting the works coming out of the Pre-Raphaelites that eroticized women. Solomon was considered unique among those following Aestheticism, due to his use of "effete" and "languorous" male figures.[10] Unlike his heterosexual counterparts, Solomon's art did not overly sexualize the female body, making his

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7 Ibid

8 Rebecca Jeffrey Easby, "The Aesthetic Movement," Smarthistory, last modified June 3, 2016, https:// smarthistory.org/the-aesthetic-movement/

9 A.W Eaton, "Feminist Philosophy of Art," Philosophy Compass 3, no. 5 (September 2008): 878.

10 Ferrari, "Solomon's Life Before 1873."

portfolio stand out against others from the time. He strayed from the classical subjects that his contemporaries favored, like Venus. Instead, he often used androgynous male deities as subjects, such as Bacchus and Cupid.[11] It may, then, initially seem odd that he completed a piece depicting two women engaged in a seemingly homosexual act. Throughout the 1860s, Swinburne wrote and published several poems regarding Sappho. I propose that this influence, paired with the time period's artistic emphasis on ideally beautiful female subjects, prompted Solomon to use Sappho as an outlet for his own expression. The Sappho in which both Solomon and Swinburne depict in their artistic narratives became the starting point of "the emergence of the modern image of Sappho as a Lesbian."[12] In search of a Muse, an outlet, both Swinburne and Solomon found Sappho.

Sappho of Lesbos

The modern terms "Sapphic" and "Lesbian" both describe homosexual relationships between women, and they are both in clear reference to the existence of Sappho and her documented romances with other women. "Sapphic" is a clear alteration of the woman's name, and "Lesbian" derives from the fact that Sappho was born on the island of Lesbos, where the inhabitants were often called "Lesbians". The modern definition was popularized in the late nineteenth century as the label used by sexologists to describe "love between women as an abnormal condition, a pathology."

Although today's culture sees Sappho as an icon for female homosexuals, before the nineteenth century this was not so. In a classical Athenian comedic play, Sappho was portrayed as a promiscuous heterosexual woman who had tumultuous relationships with several ancient men, some of whom were not even alive during her lifetime. It is assumed that, within the two centuries between her death and the start of her "literary after-life" in Athens, "there was an attempt to make up for long lost knowledge about her," which unfortunately included "obscene comic invention rushed to fill in the vacuum of accurate historical knowledge."[13] The earliest sources to describe her as homosexual were written during the Hellenistic period, with a recovered papyrus scroll from the late third or early second century

[11] Ibid

[12] Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho," Victorian Review 34, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 103.

[13] Glenn W. Most, "Reflecting Sappho," Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, vol. 40, Oxford University Press (1995): 17.

B.C. accusing her of "being irregular in her ways and a woman-lover."[14] Even so, Early Modern translations heterosexualized her poems, or worked on the assumption that she had only male lovers. For instance, in his 1711 translation of the "Ode to Aphrodite", Ambrose Philips described Sappho's beloved as male, which set a basis for preceding translators until the 1900s.[15] Additionally, in 1781, Alessandro Verri interpreted fragment 31 as being about Sappho's love for a man, and Karl Otfried Müller wrote that the poem described "nothing but a friendly affection" between the women.[16]

Today, countless translators and scholars agree that many fragments of Sappho's surviving poetry "clearly" describe and celebrate "eros between women."[17] Mellissa Mueller even muses that the fragments can be read as queer even if the "question of her lesbianism is undecidable."[18]

Sappho by Solomon

Solomon created a graphite sketch of Sappho, dated April 14th, 1862 (**Figure 1**), which is one of his first classical depictions (if not his first). She is in profile, with a long, Roman-esque nose and a deep brow. She is rendered from the neck up, with a slight outline of her shoulder. Her hair is dark, bushy, and down. Here, Sappho is represented "unequivocally as a poet".[19]Her eyes are closed in contemplation, her lips slightly parted, and a laurel wreath, a symbol of the classical poet, sits atop her head. Colin Cruise, a scholar of Solomon, suggests two possibilities for the model of this sketch. Keomi Gray, a woman of Romany origin and frequent model for the PRB circle, is one possibility. Another is Jamaican model Fanny Eaton, also a commonly used muse of the Brotherhood. Both of these women had dark complexions, similarly to how Sappho's tradition characterizes her.[20]

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[14] D.A. Campbell, "Greek Lyric 1: Sappho and Alcaeus," Loeb Classical Library no. 142, Harvard University Press (1982)

[15] Joan DeJean, Fictions of Sappho: 1546–1937," Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1989): 318.

[16] Most, "Reflecting Sappho," 26-28.

[17] Sandra Boehringer, "Female Homoeroticism," in A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell (2014): 151.

[18] Melissa Mueller, "Sappho and Sexuality," In The Cambridge Companion to Sappho, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2021): 47.

[19] Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho," 107.

[20] Ibid, 108

Figure 1.
Solomon, Simeon, *Study of Sappho*, Pencil on Paper, 1862,
Tate, London, Simeon Solomon Research Archive

Two years later, Solomon created *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (**Figure 2**). Unlike the previously mentioned sketch, this piece was completed in beautifully bright watercolors. The figure of Sappho is centered, wearing a long, flowing pale mustard-yellow chiton, with bare feet. One knee is bent towards the other figure, the other leg stretches to the other side, as though mid-motion. Identical to the sketch, atop her raven head sits a green laurel wreath, a customary token of an ancient poet/poetess, or more broadly a master of the arts. Her face appears strikingly similar to the Sappho sketch: she is turned to her right, with an androgynous profile, long nose, deep brow, pouting lips, and round chin. There is no doubt that Solomon either used the same model or referenced his previous sketch. However, contrary to the sketch, the Sappho of the watercolor painting's emotions are clearer. While in pencil she appears thoughtfully soft, as if internally putting together her next poem, in watercolor she is anguished, with a deeply furrowed brow. Her face leans on the woman the title identifies as Erinna's cheek, her right arm wrapped around the other

Figure 2.
Solomon, Simeon, *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene*,
Watercolor, 1864, Tate, London, Simeon Solomon Research Archive

woman's back, long fingers resting on her waist, while her left crosses Erinna's front. Sappho clutches Erinna's shoulder, while the latter rests her hand on top of the former's. Erinna wears a chiton in a similar style to Sappho's, though in magenta. Her ginger hair contrasts Sappho's dark locks. Her eyes are large and looking directly at the viewer, inviting us in, and her features are softer and more feminine than the other woman's. Her breast is partially exposed, concealed by Sappho's upper arm. One knee rests against Sappho's in a sense of familiarity, and her other hand rests limply in her lap. Although her displeasure is not as evident as Sappho's, I argue that it is still clearly present. Her downturned doe eyes, her slightly pursed lips, her slumped shoulders, and the consoling hand atop Sappho's are all indications of a shared sense of a haunting grief.

Through the influence of the budding ideas in London, such as Neo-classicism, Swinburne became aware of the surviving fragments of the 6th Century BCE Greek poetess. In the 1860s, he wrote and released "Sapphics," which included the following:

While the tenth sang wonderful things they knew not.
Ah the tenth, the Lesbian! the nine were silent,
None endured the sound of her song for weeping;
Laurel by laurel,

Faded all their crowns; but about her forehead,
Round her woven tresses and ashen temples
White as dead snow, paler than grass in summer,
Ravaged with kisses,

Shone a light of fire as a crown for ever.

Yea, almost the implacable Aphrodite
Paused, and almost wept; such a song was that song.
Yea, by her name too

Called her, saying, "Turn to me, O my Sappho;"
Yet she turned her face from the Loves, she saw not
Tears for laughter darken immortal eyelids,
Heard not about her

Fearful fitful wings of the doves departing,
Saw not how the bosom of Aphrodite
Shook with weeping, saw not her shaken raiment,
Saw not her hands wrung;

Saw the Lesbians kissing across their smitten
Lutes with lips more sweet than the sound of lute-strings,
Mouth to mouth and hand upon hand, her chosen,
Fairer than all men;

Only saw the beautiful lips and fingers,
Full of songs and kisses and little whispers,
Full of music; only beheld among them
Soar, as a bird soars[21]

[21] Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Sapphics by Algernon Charles Swinburne," Poetry Foundation, accessed May 3, 2024. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45302/sapphics56d224c13e1d5.

Swinburne reinterprets Sappho's "Ode to Aphrodite" in this poem, where he not only solidifies her homosexual relationships but also worships her as a poet. Solomon may have been inspired by this explicit worship, which may additionally explain his choice of another poetess as a subject to pair with Sappho. There is a clear reference to Sappho as the tenth muse, as Plato called her.[22] Laurel crowns, Aphrodite, doves, and instruments, which all make appearances in *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene*, are all mentioned in Swinburne's text. Additionally, Swinburne writes "mouth to mouth and hand upon hand" to describe the couple's actions, which correlates to how Sappho and Erinna are posed.

In Swinburne's poetry regarding Sappho, there is no mention of Erinna. Even in Sappho's own surviving poetry, the name Erinna does not come up. So why does Solomon pair them together? Erinna was an ancient poetess, perhaps the most well known after Sappho. A 10th century encyclopedia lists her as a companion of Sappho, but scholars now generally agree that she actually lived hundreds of years after her.[23] Perhaps Solomon operated on the assumption that they were companions, or perhaps by using the name Erinna, instead of a name of one of Sappho's many documented female lovers, he further makes this piece of art akin to a piece of poetry by pairing together two celebrated poetesses in such a loving way.

I propose that Solomon's inspiration came from not only Swinburne's poetry, but also directly from the poetess herself. Two fragments of Sappho's poetry are believed to be discussing her desire for another woman, Anactoria. In fragment 16, Sappho reminisces on her lover's beauty, and compares her departure to Helen of Troy's from Paris:

> Some say it's a force of cavalry, others of foot,
> others of ships, but I say that the most beautiful
> thing upon the black earth is whatever it is you
> desire.
>
> It's easy enough to make this plain to all:
> for she who was far more beautiful than any woman of mortal
> race,
> Helen, abandoned her husband - the best of men -

[22] Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho," 103.

[23] Donald Norman Levin, "Quaestiones Erinneanae," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, Department of the Classics, Harvard University, 1962: 193.

and went sailing off to Troy; she remembered neither her
child nor her much-loved parents, but Aphrodite(?) led her
astray . . .

[This] has made me think of Anactoria, who isn't here.

Her step, which stirs desire, and the bright sparkle of her
face,
are dearer sights to me than the chariots of Lydia,
and armed men fighting on foot.
[24]

The grief that Sappho feels after her lover's departure can be read similarly to her dismay expressed in *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene*. Sappho clutches at Erinna's shoulder, wraps her arm around her waist, and is posed in a way that makes her legs appear as if they are either in motion or were just in motion. Contrarily, Erinna's limbs are idle. She looks at us, while Sappho looks at her. In my understanding, this piece could very well be directly inspired by fragment 16. The watercolor's title suggests nothing for the context of the aura of grief and desperation, but the fragment does. Sappho's lover is leaving her, and she is immensely disheartened. Sappho appears as the one being *left*, with her desperate clutch and sorrowful expression, while her lover is the one *leaving*, with her defeated pose and sad, perceptive eyes gazing at us. Although the name Erinna is in the title and not Anactoria, there seems to be direct influence on the piece from this fragment.

Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene can also be read as referencing fragment 1, known as "Ode to Aphrodite", in which the poetess calls upon the goddess of love and beauty for romantic help.[25] Although the scenes do not directly match (neither does fragment 31, but the allusion is apparent), there are several references to Aphrodite in this piece. To the far mid-upper right there is a statuette, presumably of Aphrodite (due to her hair style, nude upper half, and hand covering her vaginal area resembling the classic pudica pose). The statuette reaches one hand out towards the couple. At her feet is a papyrus scroll, with illegible writing, and a myrtle branch laying in the roll of the paper. Myrtles, along with roses, are sacred to Aphrodite. Perhaps, then, the illegible writing depicts

[24] Sappho, "Fragment 16", trans. Gillian Spraggs, Love Shook My Senses. Lesbian Love Poems, The Women's Press, London (1998)

[25] Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho," 116.

fragment 1.[26] Roses appear throughout the painting, another direct attribute. The deer could be either a reference to Artemis (or Diana), whose sacred animal was a deer. Artemis led an all-female group, similarly to how Sappho led a group of poetesses.

The deer could also be in reference to Apollo, master of the Muses, as he shares the sacred animal with his twin sister. This would be alluding to Sappho's honorary title of the tenth muse. Two doves, the love goddess's sacred animal, sit directly above the two women, mirroring their pose. The left doves' body is partially turned towards the viewer, as is Erinna's, and the right dove is turned to the side, as is Sappho. The doves also sit directly above the women, clearly indicating a symbolic theme of love. A black crow sits beside the pair of doves, mouth open in a squawk. This could be referencing fragment 31, one of Sappho's most famous poems, where she expresses intense, physical jealousy upon seeing her lover Anactoria with her betrothed. The bothersome crow could be alluding to the unwanted presence of the male. The fragment goes as follows:

He seems to me the peer of gods, that
man who sits and faces you, close by you
hearing your sweet voice speaking,

and your sexy laugh, which just this moment
makes the heart quake in my breast: for every time
I briefly glance towards you, then I lose all power
of further speech.

My tongue is smashed; at once a film of fire
runs underneath my skin; no image shapes
before my eyes;
my ears are whining like a whirling top;

cold sweat pours down me, and in every part

shuddering grips me; I am paler than

[26] Ibid, 117-117

summer grass, and seem to myself to need

little to make me die.[27]

In 1865, Solomon produced *Erinna Taken from Sappho* (**Figure 3**), another sketch seemingly unfinished, which must be directly inspired by fragment 31. We can see references to Solomon's previous piece; a column with a statuette, a scroll, a myrtle branch, and a lyre – all symbols for both poetry and love. There is an obvious contrast between the figures of Erinna and her betrothed and Erinna and Sappho in the watercolor. While Sappho's Erinna is unexposed and seems to share her lover's grief, the Erinna of this sketch seems irritated by the man's grasp and looks down in sadness, her breast exposed. The earlier depiction of Erinna rests her hand atop Sappho's, while this Erinna appears as though she is in the act of pushing the man's hand away from her body. The two doves and blackbird as painted in *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* seem to mirror

Figure 3.
Solomon, Simeon, *Erinna Taken from Sappho*, Pencil on Paper, 1865, Private Collection, Simeon Solomon Research Archive.

[27] Sappho, "Fragment 31", trans. Gillian Spraggs, Love Shook My Senses. Lesbian Love Poems, The Women's Press, London (1998)

the figures in the sketch. However, in the case of *Erinna Taken from Sappho*, Sappho becomes the squawking crow, perhaps symbolizing her agony over her lost lover.

Together, these three works of art are perhaps the most accurately rendered and breathtakingly alluring art pieces that show the ancient poetess how her direct word tells us she was. Solomon, being a homosexual, could create works of art with female subjects without the glaring presence of the male gaze, unlike many artists before him as well as his contemporaries. The feeling of queer longing and understanding is so apparent that it almost takes on physical presence within these works.

Classical Lesbians as Portrayed in Painting

There are two instances of what can be described as lesbian (appearing) love affairs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's work has been an inspiration to artists for centuries, yet both of these stories have a small amount of artworks dedicated to them. Ovid expresses why this may be in book nine of *Metamorphoses*:

> Mares do not burn with love for mares or heifers for heifers: the ram inflames the ewe: its hind follows the stag. So, birds mate, and among all animals, not one female is attacked by lust for a female.[28]

As we can see, romantic relationships between two women were deemed impossible to men like Ovid. Sexual relationships between men, however, were normal and accepted – this fact alone shows us how ancient the patriarchy is.

This quote is derived from Ovid's story of Iphis and Ianthe, in which a man informs his pregnant wife that if she gives birth to a girl, they must kill the child. She does end up giving birth to a baby girl, Iphis, but raises the child as a boy in order to save her life. When Iphis is thirteen, her marriage is arranged to Ianthe, who is extremely happy about the arrangement. Iphis is also already in love with Ianthe, but is nervous about the marriage because she knows she can't perform her "husbandly" duty of mating with his wife. Iphis and her mother go to the temple of Isis, where they pray to the goddess for help. The aid comes in the form of a transformation—Iphis

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[28] Jody Valentine, "Ovid: The Metamorphoses : Book IX: Lines 666 – 797," Gender and Sexuality in Ancient Rome, accessed April 2nd, 2024, https://pressbooks.claremont.edu/clas112pomonavalentine/chapter/ovid-themetamorphoses-book-ix-lines-666-797-the-english-translated-by-a-s-kline-

is transformed into a boy.[29] This Ovidian story is historically a less-popular source of inspiration for artists, but there are a handful of artworks done in mediums like etchings and prints. However, these artworks all depict the moment in which Iphis and her mother are begging for help, emphasizing the importance of the gender transformation.

Ovid's story regarding Diana and Callisto goes as follows: Jupiter (or Zeus, in Greek mythology), becomes infatuated with a young nymph, Callisto, who is a follower of Diana (or Artemis, for the Greeks). He wishes to have sex with her, and in order to do so while hiding from his famously jealous wife, he transforms into Diana. While in Diana's form, Jupiter seduces Callisto.[30] There are many renditions of this scene, as well as the events that follow in Ovid's story, depicted in Early Modern art. Specifically in the case of Jean Baptiste Marie Pierre's *Diana and Callisto*, François Boucher's *Jupiter*, *In the Guise of Diana*, and *Callisto*, and Nicolas-René Jollain's *Diana et Callisto*, there is an obvious sexualization of these females figures – because what's better than one overly-sexualized female body than two entangled together. But something else lies within. As the story goes, two *women* did not actually have sexual intimacy – instead yet another woman tricked into having sex with Jupiter.

Both these stories had one thing in common – intimacy between a man and a woman never actually took place. The relationships between women were never genuine. And although it is implied that Callisto was infatuated with Diana, and more than implied that Iphis, as a woman, was in love with Ianthe, these realities are dismissed. Instead, artists either emphasized that a man was in the relationship all along, or overly sexualized the two female bodies.

We can thank Solomon for doing neither; for not following in the footsteps of the only artwork depicting classical lesbian relationships he had to reference. Through his *Study of Sappho*, *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene*, and *Erinna Taken from Sappho*, Solomon showed the art world that genuine classical sapphic relationships deserved recognition.

Legacy

On February 11th, 1873, at thirty-two years old, Simeon Solomon was arrested after being found engaged in sexual acts with another man in a public urinal. After a six week imprisonment, he was released to a family

[29] Christine Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques 20, no. 2, Special Issue: Lesbian Histories (Summer 1994): 170.

[30] Ovid, Metamorphoses, Book II (A. S. Kline's Version): lines 401-465.

member on a £100 bail. After his time in jail, he was admitted into two separate lunatic asylums, most likely by family members.[31] The following year in Paris, he was once again arrested for a similar act in a public urinal and served three months imprisoned. He was ostracized from the public art world after these events and unfortunately fell into alcoholism. Many of his colleagues left him behind, not wanting to be publicly associated with a now known "sodomite."[32]

It is devastating that he passed away ostracized by the art world in which he held so dear. Fortunately, through the increasing popularity of queer studies, Solomon is now regarded as a queer icon, and rightfully so. He made choices in his career that some are still afraid to make today and never backed away from his queer identity. We can thank him for creating these pieces of art that are so different from previous artworks that attempt to show instances of classical lesbian love. His understanding of queer identity is clear in these artworks, and with the absence of the male gaze, he gave us beautiful depictions of the oldest documented lesbian woman and helped to give her the legacy she deserves.

[31] Carolyn Conroy, "Solomon's Life After 1873," Simeon Solomon Research Archive, accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.simeonsolomon.com/.

[32] Ibid.

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