



# On the reception of Sappho as a personal experience to be expressed in pictures: examples from two vase paintings produced in classical Athens, fifth century BCE

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# On the reception of Sappho as a personal experience to be expressed in pictures: examples from two vase paintings produced in classical Athens, fifth century BCE

By Gregory Nagy

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§0. The two images that I mention in the title of this essay are line drawings of close-ups taken from two separate vase paintings created by an artist known to art historians as the Meidias Painter, whose career as a vase painter in Athens can be dated to the late fifth century BCE. In these close-ups, shown below at the end of my introductory paragraph here, I focus on a single figure who is represented in both paintings. She is a beautiful lady who is given the name Pannychis by way of the lettering next to her painted figure in each of the two pictures (this lettering is barely visible even in the best photographs). As I argued in a previous essay ([Nagy 2020.10.30](#)), the meaning of this name Pannychis, ‘all-night-long’, tells the story: she is a goddess who personifies the experience of a girl who is enjoying the beauty and the pleasure of an all-night party in the company of other girls. Such beauty and pleasure, as I also argued, is represented in the songs of Sappho, and it is to such songs that the painter refers. So, the painting of the painter becomes part of what I would call the reception of Sappho in the ancient world. But now I take the argument further. In this essay, I hope to show that such reception, which is ordinarily viewed as a collectivized experience, can be, at the same time, also an individual experience—something that is deeply personal. And one way to express such personal experience in visual art is to personify what is being experienced. That personification is the goddess Pannychis.



On the left: close-up of the goddess Pannychis. Line drawing by Jill Robbins. Red-figure hydria. Florence, Museo Archeologico 81948. For the original image, see the Beazley Archive, which also provides a commentary [here](#).

On the right: close-up of the same goddess Pannychis. Line drawing by Jill Robbins. Red-figure hydria. Florence, Museo Archeologico 81947. For the original image, see the Beazley Archive, which also provides a commentary, [here](#).

§1. As Alan Shapiro points out in his annotation for §1 of my previous essay ([Nagy 2020.10.30](#)), the two separate vase paintings that I was studying in that essay can be viewed as an inseparable pair. That is because the two vases on which the Meidias Painter painted these separate paintings were found together inside a tomb at Populonia in Etruria, and, to this day, they stay together on display as inventory items 81947 and 81948 in the Museo Archeologico of Florence. And, just as the vases themselves are an inseparable pair, so too are the overall pictures that are painted on them. In those pictures, as I showed in my previous essay, the focus is on two mythological figures, the pretty lover-boy Phaon at 81947 and the pretty lover-boy Adonis at 81948, each one of whom is directly linked to Aphrodite, goddess of love, in each one of the two separate paintings.

§2. And here is where I took my argument further in my previous essay (again, [Nagy 2020.10.30](#)). These two pretty lover-boys are not only linked pictorially to the goddess of love. In myth, we can see that there is more to it, since both boys are passionately loved by Aphrodite herself. Even further, both boys are passionately loved by a poetic surrogate of this goddess, who is none other than the persona of Sappho as self-represented in the songs of Sappho.

§3. In both of the two paintings by the Meidias Painter that are studied here, we can find a parallel to the poetic role of Sappho as a poetic surrogate for Aphrodite in her love for Phaon and Adonis. In both pictures, Aphrodite is attended by a bevy of beautiful ladies who are evidently her pictorial surrogates-in-love, just as Sappho is Aphrodite's poetic surrogate-in-love. In terms of my argument, then, the symmetrical positioning of Phaon and Adonis in the two pictures painted by the Meidias Painter seem to be modeled on their comparably symmetrical positioning in the poetics of Sappho.

§4. In earlier work (starting with [Nagy 1973](#)), I have argued that Phaon and Adonis as mythological personae are symmetrical love-objects of Sappho as a poetic persona in her songs, just as these two pretty boys are symmetrical love-objects of Aphrodite as a mythological persona in her own right. But

there is a difference between Phaon and Adonis in their roles as love-objects: the love of Aphrodite for Phaon, unlike her love for Adonis, is a myth that can be traced back directly to the native poetic traditions of Sappho's land of Lesbos. In the case of Adonis, by contrast, his links with Aphrodite are far more general—and not at all restricted to myths originating in Lesbos. Thus, the only certain piece of direct evidence for the reception of Sappho's songs in these paintings comes from the specific linking of a boy named Phaon with the goddess Aphrodite in one of the two paintings under consideration.

§5. If Sappho's Phaon is the only piece of direct evidence for the reception of Sappho in these two paintings of the Meidias Painter, the question remains: what has happened to Sappho herself in these paintings? My answer is: even if there is no Sappho, there can be personal memories of having heard Sappho's songs, whether oftentimes or rarely, and the feelings that such memories bring back with them can best be expressed by idealizing these feelings, which can be deeply personal. And such idealized personal feelings can inspire divine personifications attached to images of beautiful and sensual ladies who attend Aphrodite in the pictures painted by the Meidias Painter. In this regard, I recommend a most relevant book by Alan Shapiro (1993), who offers a wide-ranging analysis of such visual personifications.

§6. The personifications, then, that take shape in the picturing of the beautiful ladies in the paintings of the Meidias Painter can be understood as pictorial surrogates of Aphrodite in her humanized role as goddess-in-love, corresponding to the persona of Sappho as the poetic surrogate of the same goddess in the same role.

§7. To say it more generally, these ladies correspond, as personifications, to the personal feelings of love and sensuality expressed in the songs of Sappho. A most beautiful example is the persona of Pannychis, who personifies the personal experience of a girl who is enjoying the beauty and the pleasure of an all-night party in the company of other girls, as expressed for example in Epigram 55 of Posidippus, where girls take turns in singing, all night long, the love songs of Sappho (Nagy 2015.12.03). The lady called Pannychis, whose name means 'all-night-long', is figured as a goddess precisely because her personification idealizes a personal experience that proves to be worthy of the goddess Aphrodite herself.

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Meidias Painter, Pannychis, Sappho