Sappho, the poet who founded love
Sappho, the tenth muse

- Sappho was the first major poet in the Greek world, from which women were excluded. She placed the theme of love at the centre of her compositions, making them timeless. In an epigram of the Palatine Anthology, attributed to the philosopher Plato, we read: Nine, according to some: Summary judgment! Here is Sappho of Lesbos who is the tenth muse.
Sappho was born in Ereso or Mytilene in 630 BC, a town on the island of Lesbos, to an aristocratic family but lived in Mytilene. Sappho was certainly of noble origin. She married a rich man, Cercila, with whom she had a daughter named Cleide to whom she dedicated tender verses. At Ereso she was director and teacher of a tiaso. Legend has it that she threw herself off the cliff of Lefkada for unrequited love for the young boatman Faone, who is actually a mythological character. This version is taken from the poet Giacomo Leopardi, last song of Sappho.
The tiaso was a women’s association aimed at educating young aristocratic women in adult life and marriage. The figure of Sappho is connected to the tiaso, as a teacher and companion of the students. The tiaso had a triple function: RELIGIOUS FUNCTION: devotion and worship of Aphrodite THE CULTURAL FUNCTION: Artistic education and training THE PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTION: preparation of young aristocratic women for adult life and marriage. The educational path followed by young people aimed at the transmission and acquisition of the values of aristocratic civilization, such as eros, grace, elegance, singing, dancing. Particular attention was paid to the cult of beauty.
Sapphic Eros

- In these women’s communities it was not uncommon for young women to bond in homoerotic relationships, with each other and with Sappho herself.
- The ancient literature is full of these references, then homosexuality was not a real sexual orientation, but a practice for the purpose of a complete training. In Ancient Greece, it was customary to initiate love and marriage through same-sex relationships.
The Three Facets of Love

LOVE AS NOSTALGIA

In Sappho’s poems, the theme of nostalgia is frequent as relations with the girls of the tiaso are intense and fleeting. The theme of the 94 Voigt fragment focuses on the memory of friendship between two women who have shared many experiences. The time of the wedding comes, one of the maidens must leave the tiaso; The pain unites the maiden and the poet. The declaration of a death wish, announced by Sappho, is followed by the discomfort of the young girl forced to leave. The poet finds, however, the strength to console the girl inviting her to seek relief in memory.

I want to die.
She left me crying, and many things she said to me and then this: "Ah, how terribly we suffer, Sappho I leave you against my will".
LOVE AS A CHOICE

In love and poetry, Sappho grasped the reason and meaning of her existence. No ode, better than the 16 Voigt fragment, can express Sappho’s conception of life and the things she loved most. For some, the most beautiful thing is a troop of foot soldiers, for others of horsemen, for others of ships. For Sappho the most beautiful thing is "what one loves", thus

οἱ μὲν ἵππῳν στρότον οἱ δὲ πέσδων Some a host of knights,
oἱ δὲ νάων φαῖ' ἐπ[ι] γὰν μέλαιν[ν] ὑπὸ others of foot soldiers, others of ships
ἔμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγιο δὲ κῆλ' ὅτ- say that on the black earth is the most
tο τις ἔραται· beautiful thing. I say what one loves.
Of the love that Sappho called bittersweet passion, the poet experienced the distressing effects. She experienced the violence of love in her soul and described it as a whirling wind, as a mysterious and irresistible force that "melts the limbs" and leaves the soul naked and defenseless.

"Ερως δ' ἐτίναξέ μοι φρένας, ὡς ἄνεμος κάτ οὔρος δρύσιν ἐμπέτων.

Eros has melted my heart like a wind that blows down the mountain on the oaks.

"Ερος δηύτε μ' ὁ λυσιμέλης δόνει, γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὀρπετόν.

Again Eros, who melts the limbs, shakes me. Invincible animal with sweet bitterness.
Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θέοισιν ἐμμεναι
Introduction to fragment 31 Voigt

Fragment 31 Voigt is undoubtedly the most famous of the Greek lyric. It has reached us only fragmentary, composed in sapphic stanzas and in wind dialect. An unidentified man sits in front of a girl, who is most likely a student of Sappho’s. By virtue of this position he appears blessed to Sappho, who looks aside and receives a deep disturbance, expressed with a list of physical sensations.
«Φαίνεται μοι κήνος ἱσος θέοισιν ἐμμεν’ ὄνηρ, ὅτις ἐνάντιος τοι ἱσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεῖσας ὑπακούει
καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέρον, τό μ’ ἡ ὑμᾶν καρδιὰν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν, ὑς γάρ ἔς σ’ ἰδω βρόχε’ ὑς με φώνῃ-
σ’ οὐδ’ ἐν ἐτ’ ἐἰκει,
ἐκαδε μ’ ἰδρως ψυχρος κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ’ ὀλίγω ‘πιδεύης φαίνομ’ ἔμ’ αὔτᾳ·
ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ κ[†]»

“That man seems to me to be equal to gods who is sitting opposite you and can hear you nearby speaking lovely
and laughing delightfully, which indeed makes my heart flutter in my breast; for when I look at you, even for a short time, it is no longer possible for me to speak
but it is as if my tongue is broken and immediately a subtle fire ran over my skin, I cannot see anything with my eyes, and my ears are buzzing
a cold sweat comes over me, trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and I almost died.
but everything must be dared.
Comment

The ode has been intended by critics as an epithalamium, or a song of jealousy. The interpretation that it is a love song is more likely. After the description of the scene, in which the maiden smiles at her lover, an enumeration describes the feelings Sappho experiences, the so-called symptomatology of love. The fragment has not reached us intact, the last verse, in fact, is corrupted: 'but everything can be endured, since...'. The aim of the composition would have been to make the girls accept the farewell as they left the thiasos. The lack of lucidity and Sappho's distress at that moment should be emphasised, since the paratactic style, i.e. a period based on coordinated propositions, is present. These symptoms, according to medicine, correspond to a panic attack. The fragment was then taken up by Catullus, a Roman poet of the 1st century BC, in Carme 51. Catullus, however, adds a verse to the composition: 'Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est...'. This stanza deals with a typically Roman subject, otium, unknown to the Greeks.
The Symptomatology of love

1. καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τὸ μ᾽ ἦ μᾶν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόασεν
Palpitations

2. ὡς γὰρ ἐξ σ᾽ ἴδω βρόχες ὡς με φώνη-
σ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἐν ἐτ᾽ εἶχει,
ἀλλὰ κάδ μὲν γλώσσα ἔχε
Aphasia

3. λέπτον δ᾽ αὐτικα χρῷ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν
Sudden hot flushes

4. ὀπάτεσσι δ᾽ οὐδὲν ὀφημι
Obtained vision
The Symptomatology of love

5. ἐπιβρόμεις δ᾽ ἁκουαὶ
Hum to the ears

6. [†] ἐκαδει ἡδόνας ψυχρος[†] κακχέεται
Sweat

7. τρόμος δὲ παῖσαν ἄγρει
Tremor

8. χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
έμμι, τεθνάκην δ᾽ ὀλίγω ’πιδεύης φαινομ’ ἐμ᾽ αὕτα·
Deadly pallor
The conception of colours in the Greek world

After reading and studying Sappho’s pean 31, we reflected together on the relationship between EMOTIONS and COLORS. The classical Greek world had a different way from ours to appreciate and call color. Colors were perceived and named according to their brilliance and purity. The main colors, presents also in the paintings, sculptures and polychrome architectures were WHITE, BLACK, YELLOW AND RED.

So, we read the opening scene of the pean, when Sappho sees a young couple, with a blinding WHITE.

The manifestation of desire, of Eros, of the signs of passion and jealousy with RED

The distressing state of dismay that almost leads to the loss of consciousness with BLACK. Poetry is always and forever an exercise in creativity. For those who write it and for those who interpret it.

In Greece there were as many names as the various shades of love:

Φιλία: mutual love
ἀγάπη: momentum towards each other
ἐρως: overwhelming passion
ἵμερος: physical desire
Στοργή: conjugal love
Θέλημα: desire for love
Πόθος: intentionality