

# Sappho

## Lesbian or a lesbian?

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## Notes About This Text

The rainbows you will see in this chapter are links to an appendix which includes additional information. Click on these links to learn more about the topics discussed in the main text.

Teachers, your feedback is crucial to help us understand the impact of the “Queering the Pasts” educational resources. **Please take a few minutes to share your thoughts and experiences via [this survey](#).**

Please refer to the teachers’ guide attached [here](#) for information about teaching this material, additional activities, and other guidance.

If you would like to get in touch with us, please send us an email at [qtpcommittee@gmail.com](mailto:qtpcommittee@gmail.com).

# Key Themes and Questions

## Key Questions

- Was Sappho a 'lesbian' in addition to being a Lesbian?
- How do modern-day understandings of sexuality help us to understand the ancient past? And how do ancient expressions of gender and sexuality inform the present?
- How has Sappho's reputation changed over time? Who has benefited from those different views?



A 2019 zine by Maddy Luddy depicts Sappho's poem fragment 147, which reads 'Someone will remember us, I say, even in another time' (translated by Anne Carson). Many read this fragment as a prophecy about a future in which queer people are loved and celebrated unconditionally. Here, the fragment adorns a Greek vase featuring two women kissing.

Did you ever wonder where we got the word 'lesbian' for women who love other women? It actually comes from an ancient Greek poet, Sappho, who lived on the [Greek island of Lesbos](#), in the Aegean Sea.

Sappho wrote poetry describing her love for other women. Because of this theme in her poetry, the place where Sappho lived, Lesbos, gives us our word 'lesbian'. The term only began to be used in English during late 19th century to refer to queer women who love other women.

Sappho also wrote many other kinds of poems. Some were about love in general, some where the beloved seems to be male, some about her daughter—which we will talk about later. So was she a lesbian (a woman sexually attracted to other women), or not? And is this even a helpful question to ask? You might think of her as lesbian, as queer, or as beyond easy categorization. Any of these ways of thinking about Sappho are thought-provoking, even if people in antiquity would not have used the labels we use today. In this chapter we want to discuss and explore some meaningful parallels and tensions that arise from these ways of thinking about Sappho.



Queer artists in the 19th century also explored Sappho's sexuality. The above painting by Simeon Soloman is one such example. In the painting Sappho embraces the poet Erinna. A lyre sits at her feet and deer and birds play in the garden they are sitting in. Click the rainbow to find out more.



# Sappho the Woman

So who was Sappho? We actually know very little about her. Sappho was born around 630BCE. She was likely an upper-class woman, and was exiled to Sicily for some reason — likely a political one. There were many regional conflicts involving Lesbos at the time. She was a musician and accompanied her music with the lyre (a stringed instrument). Indeed, her songs were meant to be performed, and have been re-performed often by women in later centuries even as recently as the early twentieth century.

A very small percentage of Sappho's work has survived the long journey from antiquity to the present. The question of whether her poems contain any autobiographical content is a subject of fierce debate—some even call the poetry 'confessional'. It is clear, at least, that the importance and intensity of relationships between women were very central to the Lesbian poet.

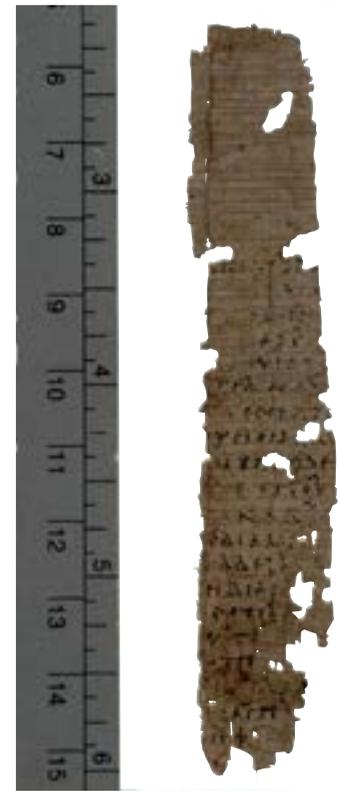


This red-figure vase from around 440 BCE shows Sappho (who is named on the vase) reading to three other women, perhaps members of her group. The image features musical instruments and wreaths on the wall, as well as signs of physical affection between women. If you want to find out more about the potential for queer desire in ancient women's social spaces and performance contexts, click on the rainbow.



Much of the information we have about Sappho's life comes from quotations collected by other ancient writers. She was very famous and was cited often. Other ways we know about Sappho and her writing are from scraps of papyrus (a writing material made from water plants in ancient Egypt).

These papyri, pulled from a garbage heap in Egypt, often consisted of only a few words or phrases—for example, 'in a thin voice', 'Atthis for you'. We call these fragments. Some of the scraps feature longer fragments, but they're riddled with gaps (called *lacunae*) where words, phrases, even whole verses are irretrievably lost. The poem we will look at next, Fragment 31, is one of only a handful of Sappho poems that has made its way to us almost complete.



Pictured above is a fragment of papyrus that was taken from Egypt by British Classicists. On the papyrus you can see the ancient Greek text of Sappho's Fragment 31.

# Reading Sappho's Poetry

Read the poem below, Fragment 31 by Sappho. Then answer the comprehension questions on the following page.

He seems to me equal to the gods that man  
whoever he is who opposite you  
sits and listens close  
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing — oh it  
puts the heart in my chest on wings  
for when I look at you, even a moment, no  
speaking  
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin  
fire is racing under skin  
and in eyes no sight and drumming  
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
grips me all, greener than grass  
I am and dead — or almost  
I seem to me [...]

But all is to be dared, because even a person  
of poverty [...]

Sappho Fragment. 31, adapted from Anne Carson (2003)  
*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*

## Fragment 31 Comprehension & Analysis

- 1) Who are the three different characters in this poem, including the speaker? How does the speaker relate to the other two characters?
- 2) Describe the message Sappho conveys about desire in this poem.
- 3) Point out three instances of figurative language in the poem. How does this language affect the poem's overall meaning?
- 4) The poem ends mysteriously and abruptly, since it is fragmentary. Write what you think the next and final lines could be.



In the video above, which you can watch [here](#), Susanna Dye and Farrell Cox respond to Fragment 31 with dance. SJ Brady voices the poem. Does the sound of the speaker's voice affect your experience of their dance? How does the dance change your experience of the poem? What do you think the dancers emphasise with their movements?

Back to 'Women  
and Song'

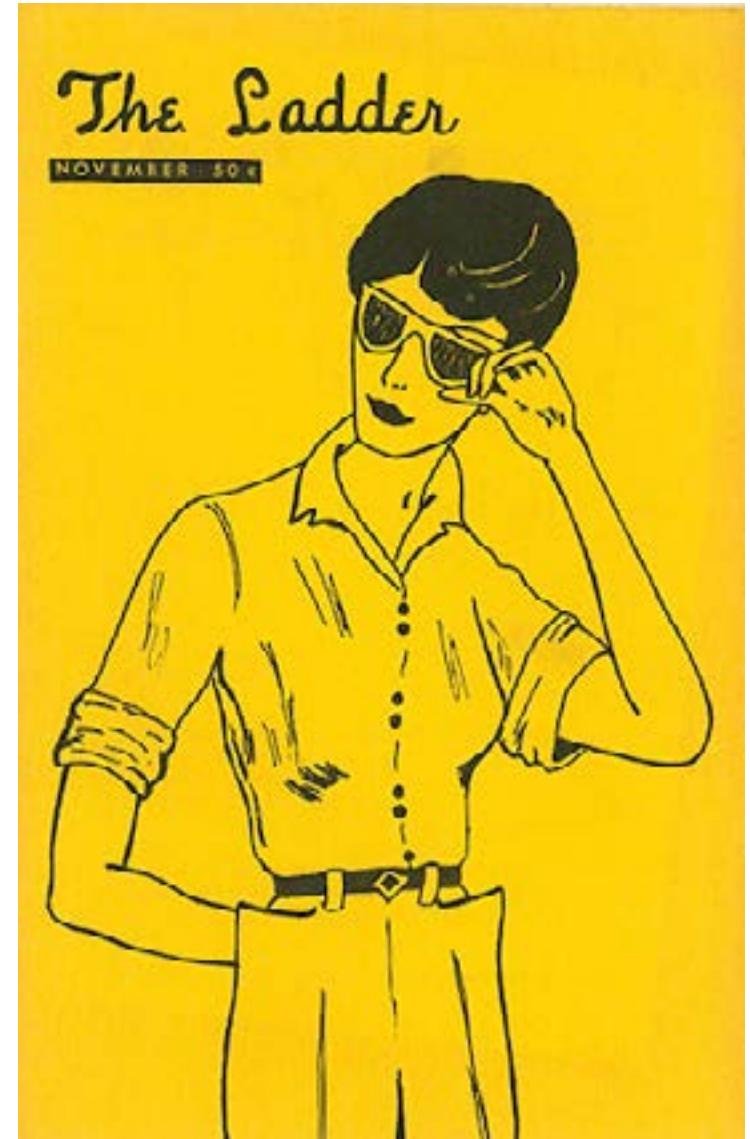


# Lesbian/Sapphic Women in the Modern World

By the end of the 19th century, an excavation in Egypt led to the re-discovery of the poetry fragment we just looked at. This discovery led to an explosion of interest in Sappho. Prior to this point, when it was first used to describe women who desired other women, the English word lesbian had a negative connotation. But as often happens, the women labeled by the term began to reclaim it, along with other words associated with Sappho, such as 'sapphist' (another word for lesbian).

In the early 20th century, Virginia Woolf wrote that her lover, Vita Sackville West, was 'a pronounced sapphist'. One American woman, Natalie Barney, alongside her partner Renée Vivien, gathered a group of women around her in Paris, and they set up a salon in Paris to recreate Lesbos. These women, who were romantic and sexual partners, learned Greek so that they could read Sappho without having to refer to translations, and they also wrote imitating her style. During the 1950's, an underground North American organisation of lesbians slyly called themselves the 'Daughters of Bilitis', named after an imaginary lover of Sappho's.

Why do you think queer women wanted to setup these groups? Why do you think they reclaimed Sappho?

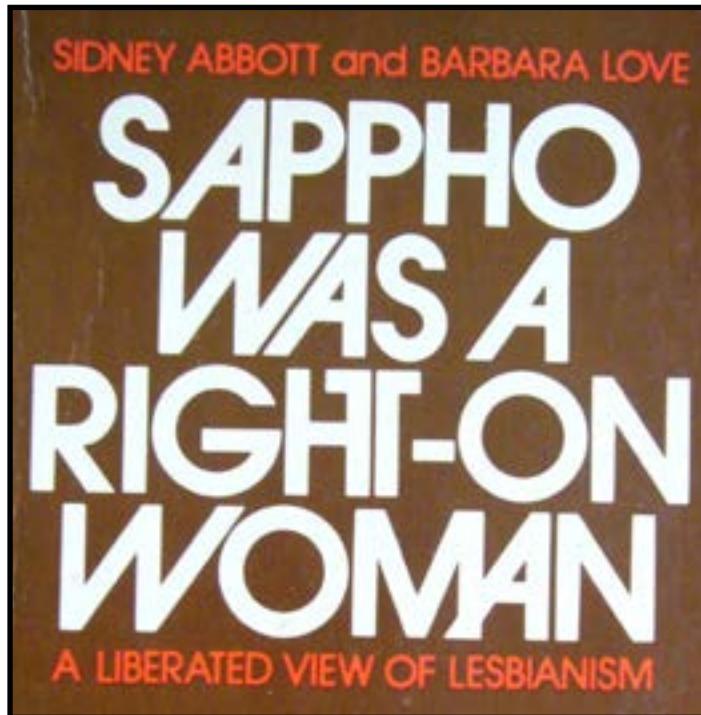


The Daughter of Bilitis also had an official publication, a magazine named 'The Ladder' (1956-1972). The image which is one of their covers (black line over a yellow background) shows a woman in a shirt and pants, with a short haircut, putting on sunglasses.

## Contemporary Sapphic Women

The coded or not so coded equation of Sappho with lesbianism or women's queer desire continues to the present. In 1977, Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love entitled their radical feminist text *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman*, even though it had little to do with Sappho beyond the title and epigraph.

Many feminists go to Lesbos as on a pilgrimage, and today, tags like #sapphic, together with other similar hashtags such as #wlw (women who love women), are commonly used all over social media. They help create thriving queer-affirming communities across different virtual spaces.



Both of the above images show how Sappho was used in the context of queer protest and liberation writing. Click on one of the images to find out more about them. Click the rainbow to find out more about a Lesbian history of Sappho.



Visual artists, theatre practitioners, live artists, and filmmakers have all engaged with Sappho's poems and her queerness. The fragmentary remains of her work have encouraged artists to be experimental in their approach. For an example of this practice, take a look at the short film below.

[Click here to watch it.](#)



girl, sweetvoiced

The short film is called *GIRL, SWEETVOICED* it was written and directed by Rebecca Shoptaw and stars Georgie Henley & Antoinette Belle. The film is made up of a number of fragments and uses translations of Sappho's poems by Anne Carson.

The word Lesbian is now an integral component of the ever-expanding umbrella of queer identities, often abbreviated to LGBTQ+. Like all words, its meaning is not handed down from on high, or eternally fixed. It is a term that is dynamic, constantly evolving to suit the needs of those who use it. When women were creating communities in solidarity, they sought words to confirm their identity. The terms Sapphic and lesbian were ready to hand.

What are the terms you use to define yourselves?



Today, there is no limit. Online dictionaries run by many LGBTQ+ individuals are constantly updated and in movement, allowing people to explore their own gender and sexuality for as long as they desire. [Queer Undefined](#) is one of these online spaces, where vocabulary related to the queer community can be continuously added and modified, as 'an attempt to decrease barriers to conversation and understanding by opening a space of learning and knowledge-sharing'. Similarly, [Pronouns.page](#) also updates their website, in different languages, by listing the most common pronouns people want to be addressed with. No list is final: there is always time for change, if something does not fit!

# Hidden Histories Of Lesbian Women

Because it is so difficult to recover the voices of women in antiquity, we know almost nothing about ancient romantic and sexual relationships between women. By contrast, we know a lot about romantic and sexual relationships between men, as discussed in later chapters, and heterosexual marriage.

Furthermore, remember that it is possible to interpret a few of Sappho's poems as being about a male love-object. Additionally, there are other poems where the beloved's gender is ambiguous or unstated. There are no Ancient Greek translations for modern English words like (lower-case) 'lesbian,' 'gay,' 'straight,' 'bisexual,' 'heterosexual,' 'queer,' or 'pansexual', though many of these words have ancient Greek etymologies.

While Sappho offers us categories that are useful and valid for us today, like the label lesbian, she herself tends to resist simple categorization. Is our inability to know for sure a good or bad thing? Is the truth of her life and relationships lost to history? Arguably, the gaps in Sappho's history also invite an opportunity to imagine.



The [Lesbian Herstory Archives](#) works to record the voices and images of queer women so that there are fewer silences and gaps in queer history. Click the rainbow to find out more.



The blank spaces enchant the fragments that remain, giving her words a sense of mystery. Consider:

as the sweetapple reddens on a high branch  
high on the highest branch and the applepick high on the  
highest branch and the applepick ers forgot-  
no, not forgot: were unable to reach

(Sappho, Fragment 105a)

This fragment offers us half of a simile. We will likely never know what Sappho was comparing to a sweetapple, a ripe and unattainable thing. But you are free to fill in the blank. To what would you liken it? Or the following fragment, briefer still: 'as long as you want' (Sappho, Fragment 95).

So, what is it that you want? And how long do you want it for?



## Concluding Activity:

Sappho speaks of many 'unattainable things' in her poems and fragments, as in Fragment 105a above. What do they remind you of in your own life? Try writing a creative piece — a poem, a fragment, or something else — that reflects your feelings. You might consider why different people have such different desires, and what makes them feel or be unattainable. If you are willing to share, your teacher may collect your response for a display or class poetry collection.



Artist Judy Chicago has made work that responds to some of these 'unattainable things' via her dinner plate series. Click the rainbow to find out more.



# Further Resources

[Sappho](#) (Poetry Foundation)

[Sappho: The Poetess](#) (Making Queer History)

[Sappho 1, performed by Stephen G. Daitz](#) (SoundCloud)

[Sappho | Panoply Vase Animation Project](#) (Panoply)

[Guide to the classics: Sappho, a poet in fragments by Marguerite Johnson](#) (The Conversation)

[Re-Queering Sappho by Ella Haselswerdt](#) (Eidolon)

# Image Index

Illustration of Sappho fragment 147 by Megan Luddy (2019) ink on paper. Private collection.

*Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* by Simeon Solomon (1864) watercolour on paper. Tate Museum London, T03036. (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mytilene-t03063>)

Hydria (water-jar) (Attica, Greece) depicting Sappho, who is named, reading to three students or friends. Attributed to the Group of Polygnotos (ca. 440–430 BCE) red-figure pottery. National Archaeological Museum in Athens, 1260. (<https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/klasiki-periodos/>)

P. Oxy. XXI 2288 (ca. 200 CE) containing part of Sappho fragment 31. Oxyrhynchus Papyri Online.

Cover page for *The Ladder*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (November 1960). From the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California.

*Sappho was a right-on woman*. Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, Stein and Day, 1972.

Photo by Morgan Gwenwald, taken at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Madeline Davis (L), Frances Dowdy next to her, Gayle Rubin third from left, Pat Califia on the right. Sabrina Williams is pictured sitting on the floor. (<https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/about/a-brief-history/>)

*The Kiss* by Mayticks, linocut print.

‘Sappho Place Setting’, *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago (1974-1979), fabric, cotton, horsehair, wool, linen, silk, porcelain. Brooklyn Museum in New York, 2002.10. (<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/5167>)

Hydria (water-jar) (Attica, Greece), depicting a woman — potentially Sappho — reading to three other women (ca. 450 BCE), red-figure pottery. The British Museum in London, 1885,1213.18. ([https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G\\_1885-1213-18](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1885-1213-18))

# Women and Song

Greek women inhabited a world of women, largely separate from the public world of men. Music was an important part of this world of women together, as we see in Sappho's poetry which was written to be [performed](#). Moreover, girls participated in initiation rituals with other girls and women, as well as choruses before marriage.

These were potentially homoerotic spaces. In Sappho's lyrics, we hear of the poet's desire for other women. And in the *Partheneia* (Maidens' Songs) of the Spartan poet Alcman, the choruses sing of their attraction for the leader of the group. Were they in love with one another, or is this just performance? Vases like the image on p. 3 featuring Sappho, musical instruments and texts often show signs of physical affection between the participants, such as one leaning on another or gazing at one another.

Would viewers have read these images as erotic, or even queer, in antiquity? Are we free to do so in the present?



This vase comes from Attica in Greece, from around 450 BCE and portrays a woman reading, surrounded by three others; the central figure is often called Sappho. The standing women hold (from left) a purse, a wicker box, and a flower. Are these gifts perhaps?



# Lesbos

Lesbos (also spelled as Lesvos) was known for many different things in antiquity. It was home not only to Sappho, but also to another lyric poet, Alcaeus, and for this reason is sometimes called 'the island of the poets'. Thanks to Sappho's influence, it was also known for the beauty of its women, a specific musical form, a poetic form called Sapphics, and a specific dialect. The island also has a famous history of wine-making, mentioned even in Homer's *Odyssey*.

While wine production is still significant for Lesvos, space changes along with time, and the island is now renowned for different reasons. Lesvos is now an island at the forefront of Europe's migrant crisis. Since the Syrian civil war officially began in 2011, thousands of migrants and refugees have arrived in Lesvos, as the part of Europe most accessible from Turkey. The politics of the island and of Greece more generally are now informed by the refugee crisis and the economic conditions it leaves behind.

While central Europe and the 'West' are now happy to claim Sappho as a European author and singer, her then motherland is left behind when most in need. What do you think is lost if we study only the past of an island, without thinking about its present?

To hear more about modern perspectives on Sappho, [listen to this dialogue between Elena Isayev and Aref Hussein](#). Elena is Professor of Ancient History and Place at the University of Exeter, and Aref is a photographer, poet and amateur philosopher living in the UK.



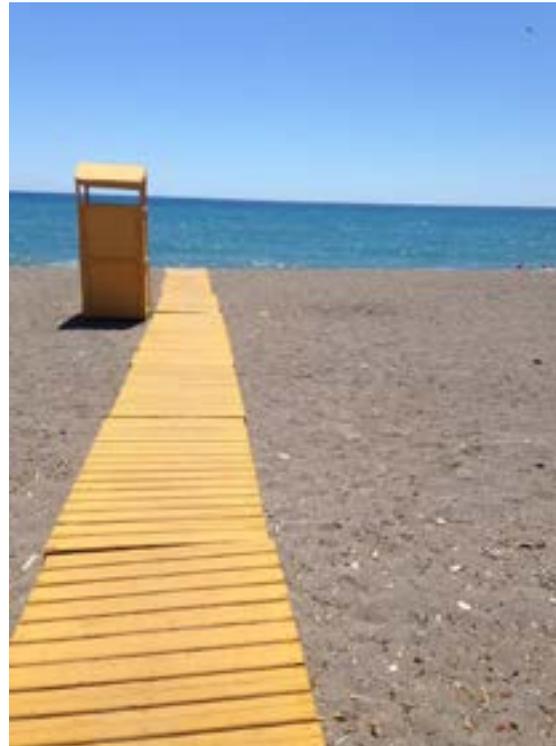
Click [here](#) to see more of Lesbos from Aref's photography.



# 'Three images from the North of Lesbos' by Aref Husseini



View of the sea from a room. The table in front of the window shows plants and various craft objects.



A wooden runway at the beach leading to the sea.



The sun setting over the sea at Lesbos, coloring the water in red hues.

Back to Lesbos



Back to p2



# Simeon Solomon

In the 19th century, Sappho was very often romanticised and objectified. Male painters tended to focus not on the relationships with other women that she presented in her own words in her poetry, but rather on the later (heterosexual) tradition that she had entered into a tragic love affair with a ferryman named Phaon.

The painter Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) took a very different approach. His *Sappho*, dressed in yellow and with dark hair, is shown in an intimate embrace with another woman, Erinna. Erinna was also a poet, also wrote about relationships between women, and was possibly a contemporary of Sappho; her poem 'The Distaff' laments the death of her best friend Baucis. Sappho drapes her arms around Erinna, who leans into her. The two doves painted above their heads suggest Solomon intended the two women to be understood as in love.

It's possible that Solomon saw something of himself in his Sappho. He was no stranger to same-sex desire, often raising eyebrows with his depictions of men loving men. In 1872, Solomon was arrested for having sex with another man in public toilets in London, and again in Paris the next year. The scandal ended his painting career, and he died in a workhouse in 1905 – but not before becoming something of a cult icon in gay circles.



Simeon Solomon (1864) *Sappho and Erinna in the Garden at Mytilene*,



Morna McMurtry worked to produce this [timeline](#) (exerpted below) from a collection of Sappho Magazines during a placement at Glasgow Women's Library between April and July 2016.

# A DECADE OF SAPPHO IN LESBIAN HERSTORY



## 1968: The Killing of Sister George

Mentioned frequently throughout Sappho it was the first film to show the interior of a lesbian nightclub and thought of as the first British mainstream presentation of British lesbian women. Although the women are negatively typecast it was undoubtedly the first of its kind and an important move for lesbian visibility in British media.

CHE (Campaign for Homosexual Equality) is formed, 1969

CHE was the first British gay action group and they were politically active for many years. Sappho was very involved in early years but it this wasn't without speculation. Since CHE was heavily male oriented questions were often raised about how positive this was for gay women. In the first edition, Jackie Forster cites: "Are some gays more equal than others?" It is a topic that pervades the magazine.



Sappho Magazines, cc Glasgow Womens Library 2016

## Oct 1970: GFL (Gay Liberation Front)

A group established at London School of Economics on 13th of October to rally activism against the oppression of LGBT people. In 1971, GLF (aided by Sappho) protested against The Nationwide Festival of Light. The festival was run by Christian organisations that were concerned about the growth of homosexuality in the U.K. and popular celebrities such as Cliff Richard performed.

## 1971: The Nulility of Marriage Act

This act was passed in parliament explicitly banning same sex marriages in England and Wales.

## 1972: Sappho

After the closure of Arena Three editor Jackie Forster creates Sappho in 1972 and she remains with the magazine vehemently until it's closure in 1981. In the first editorial she cites their aim to: "Disperse the isolation of Gay Ghettos... It will be subversively questioning our conformist tenets. Sappho will be a radical role."

Sappho reports (Vol. 1, No. 1):

The Jewish Homosexual Society of GLF held their first symposium at University of London: "many gay brothers and sisters spoke strongly against the way we are condemned by our own people."

### MILITANT MADAMS

"Homosexuals are not oppressed: they are victims, as are many groups, of capitalist society."

HAPPY FAMILIES by Mac (Vol. 1, No. 2):

"I'm frightened by the vast army of stick in the mud's, smug in that narrow world believing life is a tight rope of convention and anyone who slips off it is doomed to eternal domination."

HETERACETERA (Vol. 1, No. 4)

"Having a baby is either a self indulgent luxury or an accidental curse exclusively the responsibility of the female."

1968





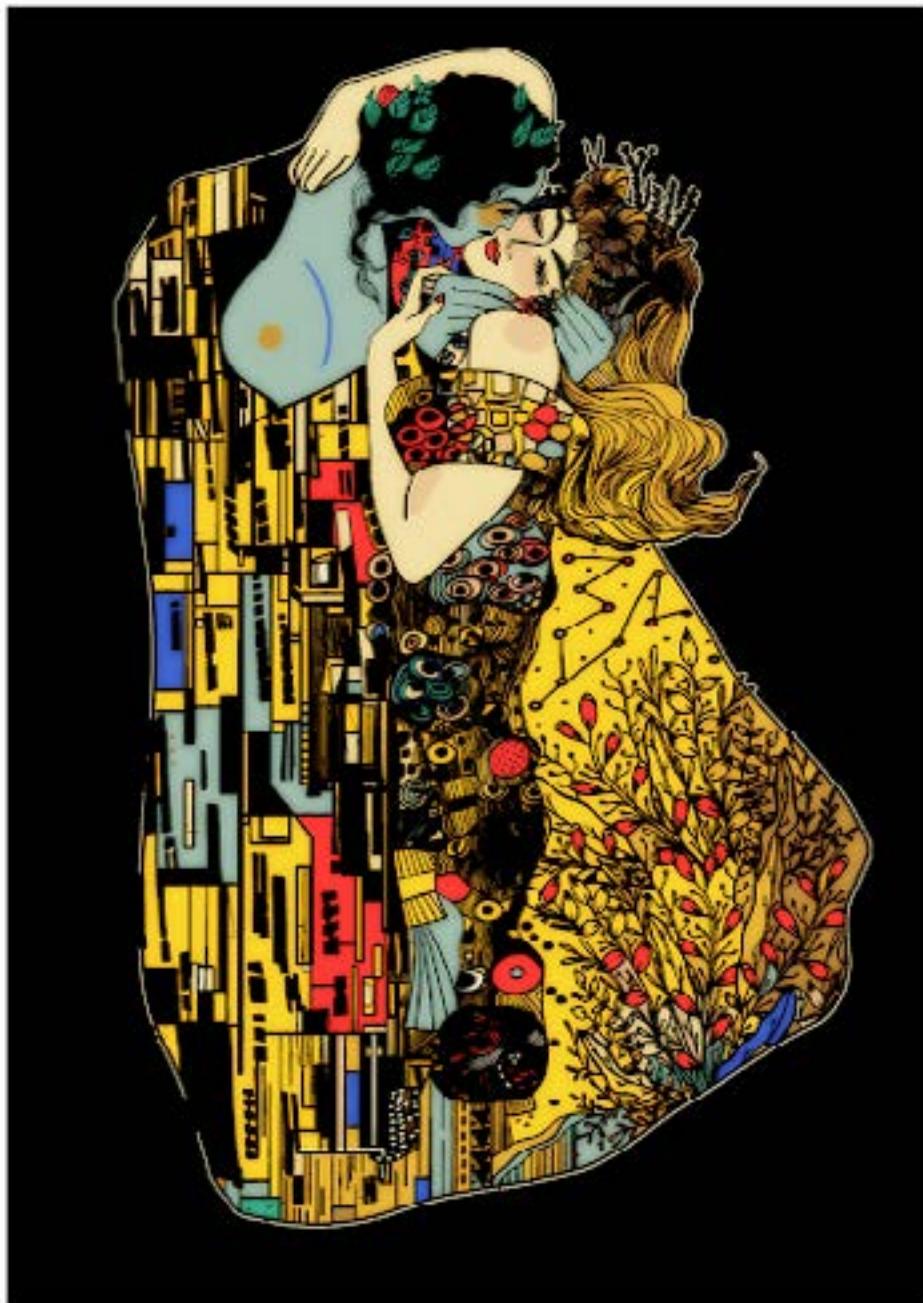
The Lesbian Herstory Archives works to record and preserve the voices of lesbian women. It was founded in the 1970s when a group of women involved in the Gay Academic Union made the decision to not just make but also preserve lesbian history and lives, so that future generations might have access to their history. This picture by Morgan Gwenwald shows a gathering at the Archives. Pictured (from the left) are: Madeline Davis, Frances Dowdy, Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia. Sabrina Williams is sitting on the floor.



Judy Chicago is a prominent feminist artist, who has been active since the 1970s. She is perhaps best known for her 'Dinner Party', a multi-media work completed with the help of hundreds of volunteers. It is a representation of women's history via a series of dinner place settings. Her later work includes the 'Holocaust Project': 'From Darkness into Light', 'Birth Project', and 'Atmospheres', a response to existing land art, which was mostly made by male artists.

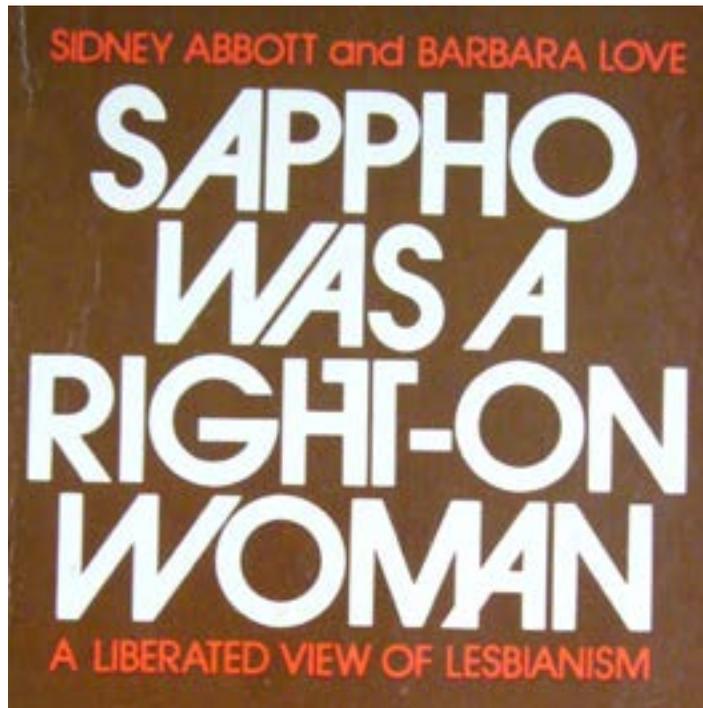
We show here the Sappho plate from the Dinner Party.





Our emotions colour how we feel about Sappho today and the same was true for artists all throughout history. Today, Sappho remains a popular subject for queer artists. Websites like Tumblr are filled with independent creators sharing their own take on Sappho, as shown by this artwork by Maiticks, which is a sapphic reinterpretation of Gustav Klimt's 'Kiss'. In the image two figures embrace they emerge from and are being held by a gold, red, and blue crash of colour and pattern.





This is the cover of "Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View Of Lesbianism," a book by Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love. The authors are the founders of the National Task Force on Sexuality and Lesbianism in the National Organization for Women, and together they wrote a manifesto on lesbianism, published in 1972.



Here, Gay Liberation Front members Judy Cartisano and Stephanie Myers are showing holding a poster saying "Sappho is a Right-On Woman" at a gay pride demonstration.



