Sappho

by Ed Higgins

"Someone, I tell you/will remember us./We are oppressed by/fears of oblivion."

—a Sappho fragment

Two Roman busts have come down to us, both copies of supposed earlier Greek originals, from the 4th. century BC. One has two long stylized hair locks flowing down the bust's front to where her breasts would be if the modest marble had presented us with such. Her locks flow as multiple stylized curls, crescent-like across her forehead. The second Roman bust, from another lost Hellenistic original, shows Sappho with shorter hair tucked under some kind of band around her forehead—while slipping beneath the band short, slightly curly hair runs along the sides, revealing her ears. Her lips are fuller here and the nose prominently Roman, which has suffered some kind of desecration or damage. Her eyes and slightly tilted head seem pleading, or perhaps only in pondering thought.

An early depiction of Sappho also survives on an Attic red-figure kalathos, a kind of ceramic vase in the shape of a household basket.Here she is holding a plectrum and lyre while turning to listen to her contemporary poet-friend Alcaeus, also holding a lyre.

Another Greek pottery vessel, used for carrying water, a two-handled kalpis, depicts Sappho on a more common black-figure Greek vase. In both red and the black figure depictions she has long hair either in a bun or cascading double twists of breast-length curls.

Little is known about her for certain--although her now mostly lost poetry was well known and much praised through antiquity.

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Sappho's poet-friend Alcaeus remembers her thus: "Violet-haired, pure, honey-smiling Sappho.”