

EXHIBITING THE POETRY OF SAPPHO

Skylar Masuda

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PART I: READING AND IMAGINING

In her analysis of Sappho Fragment 96 Ella Haselswerdt describes Sappho's beholding of a woman she desires:

"She is beautiful not because of the way she attains a certain physical standard; she is beautiful because she is beheld, because of the way her physical embodiment holds space in the world."

Haselswerdt's keen appreciation of Sappho's lyric poetry is informed by an impressive understanding of the space the poet occupies in our modern world. She is one of the earliest historical touchstones for imagining queer identities and discussions of her personal life often overshadow the content and wider context of her poetry. Her memory has been recently co-opted by [monstrous academics](#), [manipulative christian groups](#), and angry TERFs. It seems like it has always been more pressing to talk *about* Sappho than to commune with her.

Because where is Sappho?

Just as she describes the woman in Fragment 96 as a multisensory experience, one that rejects the expected physical description of loveliness, the poet herself leaves a void space. Her surviving poetry, though rich with detail, gives little clue about her social position and daily life. This lack of information has led to harmful speculation about her life, published statements rife with false objectivism. We don't have enough information to say anything truly definitive about these hotly contested life details. What we do have is barebone, a scaffolding for imaging Sappho as a real person.

In her dramatically-personal descriptions of love and loss, Sappho reveals herself from the inside out. In Fragment 31, possibly her most well-known work, she describes the feeling of seeing a woman she loves:

*Truly, all of it makes the heart in my chest flutter
for when I look at you, for a just a moment,
Nothing is left of my voice,
my tongue breaks entirely
At once delicate flame races under my skin
My eyes have no sight
My ears are buzzing
Down, sweat pours down and
Trembling takes all of me
I am greener than grass*

This is what Haselswerdt describes as “somatic abundance,” through which readers are immersed in bodily experience. She challenges through the denial of superficial, gendered, and misogynistic descriptions of love and the nonmale self. Where we expect to find descriptions of corporeal beauty, a physical anchor for her love stories, we are instead offered a wealth of incorporeal details. In the absence of her figure, the reader is asked to supply the physical embodiment of her poetry, we are indirectly asked to hold space *for* her.

PART II: EXPERIENCING

What would a Sappho exhibition be?

We might imagine a gallery space with white walls. While wall text may guide visitors through the background of her poetry and the provenance of the papyri, when faced with our true archeological evidence of Sappho visitors may feel disappointed. Displaying fragmentary papyri may be exciting to scholars and enthusiasts, but even with provided translations, every imagining of this exhibition would be doing a disservice to the vibrant somatic experience of her work.

Instead, I began to imagine an exhibit that could do what Sappho's poetry does: immerse us in physical experience.

Visitors begin by walking into a small classroom. The room is modern and the linoleum flooring and scuffed wooden desks should be familiar to most people, taking them back to learning about ancient Greece in an academic setting. On one wall is a chalkboard with a simplified timeline of ancient Greek civilizations and writing, something a teacher may have quickly drawn. Sappho's name is circled on the timeline in the early 7th century B.C.E. As visitors wander through the classroom they see another white board with ancient Greek writing, a real poem that will be unreadable to most visitors.

οἷον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρῳ ἐπ' ὕσδῳ,
ἄκρον ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ, λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπῃες·
οὐ μὰν ἐκλελάθοντ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεσθαι.

As they approach the poem the wall splits open, cracking the poem in two. It reveals an orchard, more accurately a recreation of an imagined orchard. Through trompe l'oeil wall paintings, fabricated set pieces, and projection techniques, visitors are now *inside* of the poem. Projected on the wall in front of them is the translation of Sappho 105A.

*Just as the sweet fruit reddened on the highest branch,
High on the highest branch forgotten by the apple pickers,
Or not entirely forgotten, rather they were unable to reach.*

Even without the literal translation, visitors are able to gain these details from their surroundings. They smell sweet fruit and they look up to notice the final fruit left on a high tree branch. They maneuver around a small stepladder and maybe a few even venture to step on the ladder and attempt to grasp the fruit themselves.

Following a pathway on the floor they are led into another room where they traverse a river on stepping stones until they reach a meadow. The room is darkened and small twinkling stars dot the sky. Visitors hear the running water and smell sweet flowers and gentle smoke on the light breeze. Sharp eyes may spot horse hoofprints in the soft dirt pathway, signs of life and movement. Tall trees with fluttering leaves obscure their vision. As they move around the tree trunks they find a still-smoking altar. In the smoke they read:

*Here to me from Crete to this holy temple
Where your beautiful sacred grove
Of apple trees, altars smoking
With frankincense
Cold water babbles through branches of
apple trees, Roses covering the whole place
Sleep drips from
the quivering leaves
There in a horse meadow has bloomed
With spring flowers
The winds blow sweetly
There surely you, Aphrodite,
Having raised nectar in golden wine cups
Gracefully mixed with good cheer
You pour out*

As they move into the next room visitors find themselves in a well-lit field. At the far end of the field is a facade of a two-story Greek home. In the field they are invited to participate in a number of hands-on activities including making flower crowns with fresh materials placed on wooden tables and reassembling the text of Sappho 94. This activity can be completed with the original Greek text or with a translated English text to introduce visitors to papyrology.

Visitors may be provided with detailed illustrations and floor plans of ancient Greek houses. The building facade provides textural and material information about the kind of mud brick and wood dwelling that Sappho may have lived in.

As they explore the exterior of the home they will find an entrance into the next room. They enter the cramped and warmly-lit interior of the home. Windows give the illusion of a sunset outside, a crackling fire burns in the hearth. They are faced with an empty stool next to a large replica Greek loom. Projected above the empty stool is the text of Sappho 102:

*Sweet Mother, Indeed I am unable to weave cloth
For I am overcome with desire for a girl by slender Aphrodite.*

Crossing another threshold, visitors enter another darkened room of the home. There, they see the figure of Sappho. She is illuminated on the dark wall in the style of a red-figure vase painting. She moves slightly, looking to her right. Above her reads the first lines of Sappho 31:

*He seems me to be
Equal to the gods,*

As visitors walk across the room they see two more red-figure characters, a man and a woman speaking to each other.

*whoever is across from you
He sits and hears
your sweet speaking
and charming laughing*

Exiting the red figure hallway they enter a darkened room with a large suspended sculpture of an anatomical heart on bird wings. They must cross under the heart to read the next section of the poem.

*Truly, all of it makes the heart in my chest flutter
for when I look at you, for a just a moment,
Nothing is left of my voice,
my tongue breaks entirely*

Turning the next corner, visitors see another suspended sculpture. In the darkness is an illuminated skeleton gently flickering with neon lights. This is inspired by the work of

the multimedia conceptual artist Tavares Strachan. Visitors hear the loud sound of heartbeats and a light buzzing.

*At once delicate flame races under my skin
My eyes have no sight
My ears are buzzing*

Visitors pass through a curtain and enter a small room that is unexpectedly hot.

Down, sweat pours down

Exiting through another curtain they are in another darkened room. This time, the projected text on the wall is slightly shaking.

And trembling takes all of me

After a moment the lights in this room slowly become green and the text changes.

I am greener than grass

PART III: CREATING AND COMMUNING

Entering the next room, visitors see a minimalist funerary scene. On a pedestal in the center of the room is a paper mache sarcophagus illuminated from within. Above the sarcophagus is a suspended wreath of illuminated flowers. The projected text on the far wall reads:

I seem dead (or a little short of it)

Approaching the sarcophagus, visitors will see a small table with rice paper, pens, glue, and paint brushes. With instructions on the table or as instructed by an attendant in the room, visitors will be asked to participate in the art piece by writing on the rice paper and gluing it onto the sarcophagus. Visitors will be asked to respond to the prompt:

"What does love feel like?"

But all is to be ventured.

As they exit the funerary scene they enter the *Potential Dome*, a small LED dome that displays 360 multimedia digital art pieces. The *Potential Dome* will be an ongoing project that displays the art of queer women and gender non-conforming artists. Their work can respond to the prompt of this final line in any manner. This exhibition space continues the legacy of Sappho by uplifting modern queer artists.

The final room is an open exhibition space to display artifacts on loan that may depict Sappho including pottery, sculpture, or fresco fragments or papyri. This space may offer more traditional didactic elements to give more in-depth historical context for the poetry and artifacts. Additionally, this room will have all of the art and translation attributions from the complete exhibition. The goal is to create an open space that can provide more updated information about the exhibit, encouraging the exiting visitors to learn more about the contemporary and ancient artistry.

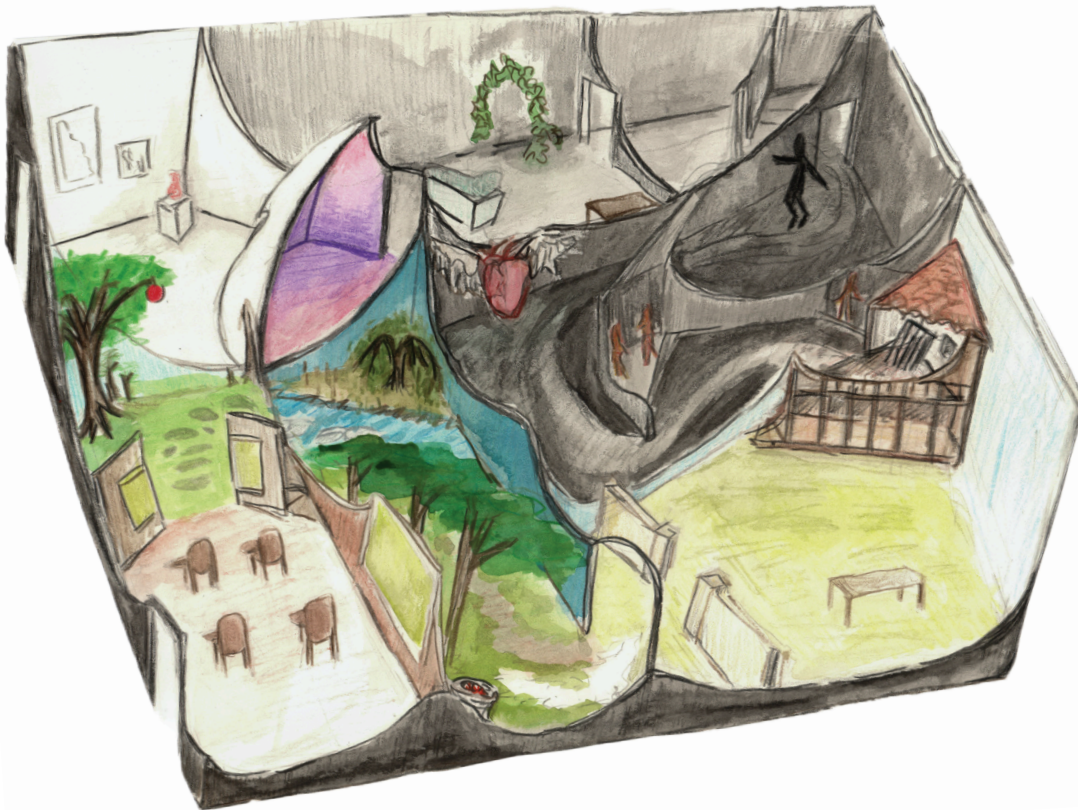
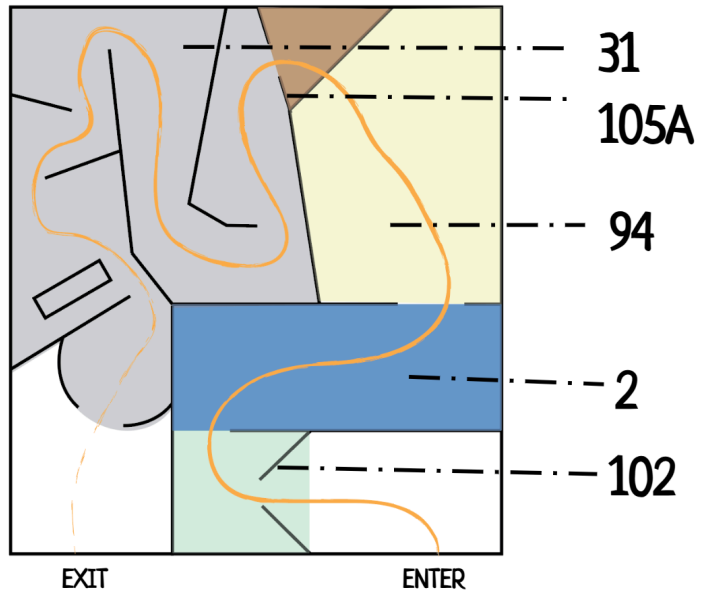
This exhibition was designed to familiarize visitors with the context, themes, and content of Sappho's poetry in a manner exciting and accessible to wider audiences. The task of bringing ancient literary sources to the museum space has long been a concern for antiquities museum curators. The physical evidence of these sources is scarce and unengaging. Even those who have familiarity with Greek and Latin would struggle to read the writing on most fragmentary papyri. An ideal exhibition of ancient literary sources would engage visitors' imagination, excitement, and emotions in the same way the original text does.

Sappho is situated somewhat miraculously at the intersection of exclusive academic study and public cultural consciousness. While her name may not be as ubiquitous as Homer or Socrates, public interest in Sappho's work far outweighs that of her contemporaries. This is in no small part due to her perceived alignment with modern ideas of queer womanhood. When represented truthfully, her memory could serve as an entry point for people from historically underrepresented communities to study Classics.

Currently the study of "Classics" at [nearly all](#) educational institutions includes instruction on the archeological, historical and the written material in ancient Greek and Latin. The accessibility of education in ancient languages, as well as the historic class and race exclusivity of the field in general, may be the reason why the memory of Sappho has been so mishandled. Her writing has been almost exclusively studied by white male academics publishing for other white male academics.

The content of this exhibition therefore incorporates modern expressions of identity in conjunction with Sappho's work. Her work has never been handled neutrally. Visitors will view her expressive and evocative poetry in a modern context. This exhibition aims to embrace those complexities, allowing room for change and growth as needed.

ILLUSTRATIONS



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