

**Athens Institute for Education and Research
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
MDT2016-1940**

**Portraits of Ancient Greek Poets in the 19th
Century European Art**

**Sibel Almelek İşman
Assistant Professor
Buca Faculty of Education
Dokuz Eylul University - Izmir
Turkey**

An Introduction to
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. This paper has been peer reviewed by at least two academic members of ATINER.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Almelek İşman, S. (2016). "Portraits of Ancient Greek Poets in the 19th Century European Art", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: MDT2016-1940.

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm
Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.
ISSN: 2241-2891
23/08/2016

Portraits of Ancient Greek Poets in the 19th Century European Art

Sibel Almelek İşman
Assistant Professor
Buca Faculty of Education
Dokuz Eylul University - Izmir
Turkey

Abstract

Many European artists of the 19th century depicted ancient Greek culture in their works. Mythological subjects as well as the daily life of the Ancient Greece inspired painters and sculptors. This article will explore the portrayals of Ancient Greek poets. Homer, the first and the greatest of the epic poets, had been depicted by the French artists Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Camille Corot, William Adolphe Bouguereau and the Dutch-born English artist Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema. Hesiod had been presented with a Muse or a group of Muses by the French artists Eugene Delacroix and Gustave Moreau. The lyric poets Alcaeus, Anacreon and Pindar and the lyric poetess Sappho had been the subject of many paintings and sculptures in the 19th century.

Keywords: European art, 19th century, ancient Greek poets, Homer, Hesiod, Sappho, Alcaeus, Anacreon, Pindar

Introduction

European art presented diversity of styles and movements in the 19th century. Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Academicism and Symbolism can be counted among the various ways of approaching life and art. It can be seen that Ancient Greece had been an important source of inspiration for artists who worked in these different styles. Mythological subjects as well as the daily life of the Ancient Greek had been depicted often by European artists. This article will explore the portrayals of Ancient Greek poets.

Homer

Homer is the great Greek epic poet who was regarded in antiquity as the author of the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey”. There is doubt as to both his date and place of birth, and many authorities in modern times have rejected the original unity of each poem and questioned his very existence as an individual poet (Harvey, 1937, p. 212).

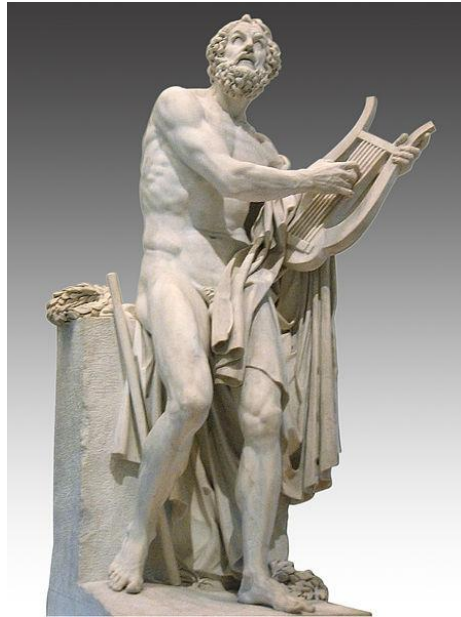
French Neoclassical artist Guillaume Lethiere (1760-1832) in *Homer Singing His Iliad at the Gate of Athens* (1811) (Figure 1) depicted the blind poet surrounded by a group of people from Athens listening admiringly to him.

Figure 1. *Guillaume Lethiere, Homer Singing His Iliad at the Gate of Athens, 1811, oil on canvas, 198 x 246 cm, Nottingham City Museum, Nottingham*



French sculptor Laurent Roland (1746-1816) created a white marble statue of Homer in 1812 (Figure 2). The almost naked Homer is playing his lyre. His blindness is again mentioned by the sculptor.

Figure 2. *Philippe Laurent Roland, Homer, 1812, white marble, 212 cm, Musee du Louvre, Paris*



French Neoclassical painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), created a monumental canvas entitled *Apotheosis of Homer* in 1827 (Figure 3). Ingres was commissioned to paint this composition in the Louvre. The work, inspired by Raphael's Parnassus, shows the deification of Homer surrounded by the great artists of antiquity and modern times. Two allegorical figures at his feet, display Homer's two epic poems the Iliad and the Odyssey. The woman holding a sword symbolizes the Iliad, while the woman with the oar represents the Odyssey (www.louvre.fr).

Homer, crowned by Victory with laurels, is sitting in front of a temple bearing his name on the pediment. Forty-six great figures of antiquity and modern times are paying homage to the ancient poet. On the left side of the picture, there is Aeschylus holding a roll of parchment and the artist Apelles with his brushes and palette. And on the right the poet Pindar stands with a lyre and the sculptor Phidias is depicted with a hammer. The great men of modern times, such as the writers Racine, Boileau, Molière, Corneille and La Fontaine, who are shown in the lower part of the painting, are representatives of the classical period (www.louvre.fr).

Figure 3. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Apotheosis of Homer*, 1827, oil on canvas, 386 x 515 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris



The structural composition of the painting is inspired by two frescoes of Raphael in the Vatican Palace. *The School of Athens* (1509), shows Plato and Aristotle surrounded by the great philosophers of the antiquity and *Parnassus* (1509-1510) depicts Apollo as the central figure surrounded by poets ranging from Homer and Sappho to Dante. Both Raphael's *Parnassus* and Ingres's *Apotheosis of Homer* propose an unbroken continuum from archaic Greece to the present day, while at the same time declare the importance of the classical models (Foley, 2005, p. 407).

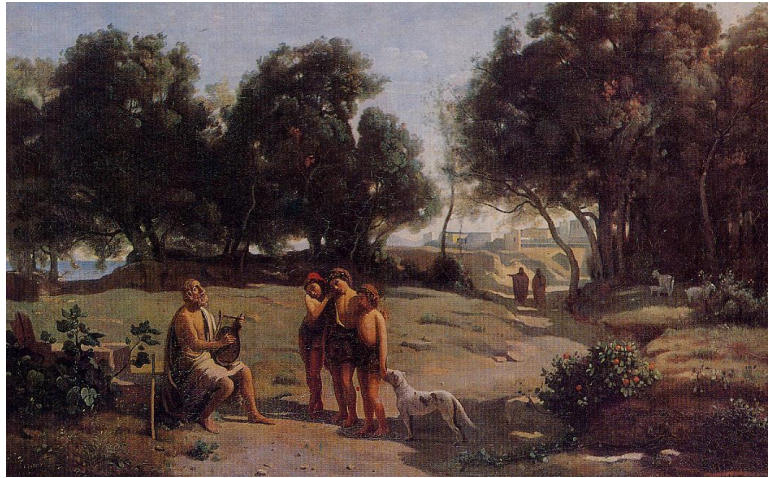
French artist Jean Baptiste Auguste Leloir (1809-1892), fourteen years after Ingres' work, created *Homer, Homage to Apotheosis of Homer* (1841). This painting shows a small group of people listening to Homer in front of a Greek temple.

The French Romantic painter Andre Chenier's (1762-1794) poem entitled "Blind" describing shepherds offering their service after hearing the blind Greek poet Homer praying for a guide inspired artists with a special theme for their paintings. Chenier found his inspiration in ancient classical models as did the Neoclassical painters (www.mam.org).

In the "Blind", perhaps Chenier's most widely read poem, a wandering Homer is received as a god by three simple shepherds. Chenier's Homer is the emblematic figure of poetry from the first source: original, primitive and natural (Gumpert, 2001, p. 200).

French Realist Camille Corot (1796-1875) *Homer and the Shepherds in a Landscape* (1845) (Figure 4) presented the accompaniment of the shepherds to the great poet. Three young shepherds and a dog are about to help Homer in a peaceful natural landscape.

Figure 4. Camille Corot, *Homer and the Shepherds in a Landscape*, 1845, oil on canvas, 80 x 130 cm, Musee des Beaux Arts, Saint-Lo



French Academic William Adoplhe Bouguereau (1825-1905) is another artist whose imagination was fired by Chenier's poem. Bouguereau showed the old and blind poet with a shepherd boy at a closer look in *Homer and his Guide* dated 1874 (Figure 5). The other two shepherds are following them from behind.

Figure 5. William Adoplhe Bouguereau, *Homer and his Guide*, 1874, oil on canvas, 143 x 209 cm, Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin



French Symbolist Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) depicted Homer as the central figure of epic poetry in 1895 (Figure 6). Puvis de Chavannes was commissioned by the American architectural firm McKim, Meade and White to paint murals for the Boston Public Library in 1891. Chavannes chose four

branches of knowledge as his theme. He created compositions to present history, philosophy, poetry and science. He chose Homer to express epic poetry. He is seated beside figures reminding his works: the Illiad holding a spear and the Odyssey carrying an oar. The present painting is a scaled-down repetition of his original work which still hangs in the Boston Public Library (www.mfa.org).

Figure 6. *Puvis de Chavannes, Homer: Epic Poetry, 1895, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*



Hesiod

Hesiod was an early Greek poet. Little is known with certainty about the poet himself beyond what may be gathered from the “Works and Days”. He appears to have written after the composition of the Homeric poems, but not much later, perhaps in the 8th century BC. The originality of Hesiod lies in the fact that he was the first among Greek poets to seek his subject else where than in the field of myth and fancy. Instead, he embodies in the “Works and Days” ethical maxims and practical instructions derived from his own experience and adapted to the life of a peasant. Incidentally he gives a realistic picture of primitive rustic life and reveals his own interesting character (Harvey, 1937, p. 207-208).

Artists depict Hesiod with the Muses in their pictures or frescoes because he started his poem “Theogony” with thanks to the Muses for their blessings.

With the Heliconian Muses let us start
Our song: they hold the great and godly mount
Of Helicon, and on their delicate feet
They dance round the altar of the mighty Zeus.

(Theogony 1-4)

The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing
Sweet songs, while he was shepherding his lambs
On holy Helicon;
(Theogony 22-23)

And breathed a sacred voice into my mouth
With which to celebrate the things to come
And things which were before. They ordered me
To sing the race of blessed ones who live
Forever, and to hymn the Muses first
And at the end. No more delays; begin:
(Theogony 31-34)

French Romantic artist Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) depicted Hesiod among many other Greek and Roman intellectual figures of the ancient times like Herodotus, Socrates, Archimedes, Seneca and Ovidius on the walls of the Library of Bourbon Palace. Delacroix presented the moment of the inspiration given by the Muses just like Hesiod described in his lines (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Eugene Delacroix, Hesiod and the Muse, Bibliothec Palais Bourbon, Paris*



French Symbolist Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), pictured Hesiod and the Muses many times. *Hesiodos and the Muse* dated 1891 (Figure 8), is one of the examples. Moreau must have been inspired by the Muses, the goddesses of inspiration of literature, science and the arts, just like the ancient poet. The

artist depicted the soft but strong touch of the beautiful Muse when young Hesiod is composing with his lyre.

Figure 8. *Gustave Moreau, Hesiod and the Muse, 1891, oil on wood, Musée d'Orsay, Paris*



Sappho

Sappho was a Lesbian poetess, born at Mitylene probably about the middle of the 7th B.C, of a good family. Like Alcaeus, she appears to have left Lesbos in consequence of political troubles in the island; she is said to have gone to Sicily and perhaps died there. The principal subject of her poems was love, expressed always with natural simplicity, sometimes with tenderness, sometimes with passionate fire. Her poetry was much admired in antiquity (Harvey, 1937, p. 381-382).

Lesbos was the center of the lyric song. The Lesbian women were not confined to domestic duties, but were allowed to take part in public affairs. And Lesbos was the very clime for poetry to ripen in. The greatest of these poetesses of Lesbos was Sappho whom Alcaeus fondly described her as “The Lesbian Nightingale”. She was deprived of her mother’s care at the age of six. In early womanhood, a new calamity befell her in the loss of her husband, and thenceforth she devoted her genius to letters, making the elevation of her countrywomen the great object of her life. Greece accorded her a place by Homer’s side, then raised her to the level of its goddesses as “the Tenth Muse”. Ancient story made Sappho the victim of disappointed love. Overcome with passion for Phaon and finding him indifferent to her advances, she is said to have thrown herself from Leucadian promontory. (Quackenbos, 1888, p. 164-66).

Since antiquity, the name of Sappho and her island have become synonymous with love between women. According to the testimony of

Anacreon, Sappho had intense sexual relationships with the young women to whom she taught poetry, song and dance (Zuffi, 2010, p. 338-339).

Sappho was a subject that Moreau frequently represented. The watercolor dated 1871 (Figure 9) is part one of his three scenes surrounding the suicide of the Greek poetess. Sappho is depicted on the top of a cliff mourning over her unrequited love for Phaon. The lyre on her shoulder is the traditional attribute of poets as well as poetesses. Moreau, as a precursor to Symbolism, sought inspiration from mythological, literary, and biblical references (www.vam.ac.uk).

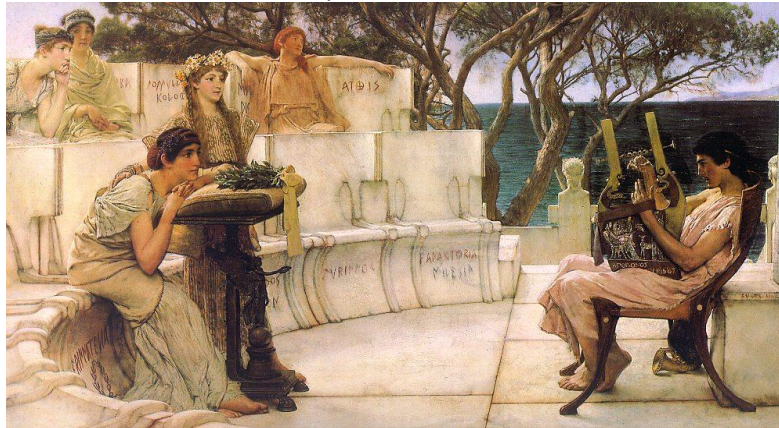
Figure 9. *Gustave Moreau, Sappho, 1871, watercolor on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum, Londra*



Dutch born English Classicist Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912) who was greatly interested in ancient Greek and Roman culture depicted Sappho with her contemporary poet Alcaeus in *Sappho and Alcaeus* (1881) (Figure 10).

Alma Tadema illustrated a passage by the ancient Greek poet Hermesianax (active circa 330 BC) preserved in *Deipnosophistae* by Greek rhetorician and grammarian Atheneaus. The artist depicted “Banquet of the Learned, Book 2, line 598” by the Hellenistic poet Hermesianax on his canvas. Alcaeus plays a kithara while Sappho and her companions listen on the island of Lesbos, in the late 7th century BC. Alma Tadema picturized the marble seating of the Theater of Dionysos in Athens, but he put the names of the members of Sappho’s sorority instead of the officials incised on the Athenian original (www.the-walters.org).

Figure 10. *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Sappho and Alcaeus, 1881, oil on canvas, Walters Art Museum, Maryland*

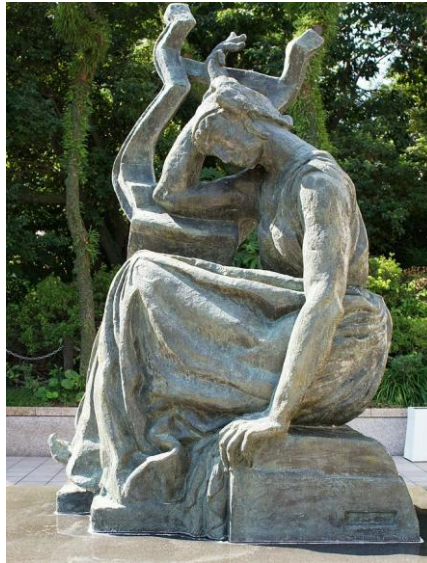


Alcaeus was a lyric poet of the 7th-6th century B.C, born at Mytilene in Lesbos, a contemporary of Sappho. He took an active part in the war with Athens. When Pittacus was given dictatorial power, he went into exile. His poems, of which only fragments remain, dealt vividly with political as well as personal themes, wine, love, his sufferings and hatreds. One of his odes, of which the opening survives, was addressed to Sappho. We also possess a fragment of what may be her reply. He also wrote hymns to various gods (Harvey, 1937, p. 17).

Alcaeus flourished in the latter part of the 7th century B.C. The ancients were loud in their praises of Alcaeus. His poems were polished, full of passion, sublime in their denunciations of tyranny and commendations of freedom. Among his most remembered compositions were the odes to Sappho, whose love he once sought, but whose genius soared to greater heights than his (Quackenbos, 1888, p. 164).

French Expressionist Emile Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929) created a majestic bronze sculpture of Sappho in 1887 (Figure 11). A strong figure of the poetess is leaning on a grand lyre. Her eyes are closed as if she is meditating or composing new lines.

Figure 11. *Antoine Bourdelle, Sappho, 1887, bronze, 207 cm, Kunsthaus, Zürich*



Anacreon

Anacreon was a lyric poet born in the 6th century B.C. at Teos in Ionia. He spent most of his life elsewhere, first at the court of Polycrates of Samos and later at Athens under Hipparchus. There are grounds for thinking that he ended his days in Thessaly, but the date and place of his death are unknown. His poems, of which we have only short fragments, were chiefly light and playful songs of love and wine, without depth of passion; some of them were mocking and satirical. They are written with perfect clearness of expression and rhythm. Anacreon also wrote iambics, elegies and epigrams (Harvey, 1937, p. 26).

“The Muse, good humor, love and vine” Anacreon tells us, were his themes; accordingly his songs, brimming with sensuality, became popular as Greece degenerated in public morality. A statue of a drunken old man on the Athenian acropolis kept alive in the minds of the people the graceful odes of Anacreon as well as his prevailing weakness (Quackenbos, 1888, p. 172-73).

Danish Neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1768-1844) depicted the cupid received by Anacreon on a marble relief in 1823 (Figure 12). The cupid can be recognized from his wings and arrow. There is a lyre with a tortoise shell body standing next to a wine jug on the floor which remind the spectator that Anacreon is a poet composing joyful wine songs.

Figure 12. Bertel Thorvaldsen, *Cupid Received by Anacreon*, 1823, marble, 48,5 x 70 cm, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen



Anacreon describes in a poem how he lets in a freezing boy on a cold night. The boy is Cupid and shoots an arrow into the heart of the old man. The poem and the relief give the message that old people also know love and can fall in love (www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk).

At dead of night, when stars appear,
And strong Bootes turns the Bear,
When mortals sleep their cares away,
Fatigued with the labours of the day,
Cupid was knocking at my gate;
Who's there?, says I, who knocks so late,
Disturbs my dreams, and breaks my rest?
O fear not me, a harmless guest,
He said; but open, open pray;
A foolish child, I've lost my way,
And wander here this moonlight night,
All wet and cold, and wanting light.
With due regard his voice I heard,
Then rose, a ready lamp prepared,
And saw a naked boy below,
With wings, a quiver, and a bow:
In haste I ran, unlock'd my gate,
Secure and thoughtless of my fate;
I set the child an easy chair
Against the fire, and dried his hair;
Brought friendly cups of cheerful wine,
And warm'd his little hands with mine.
All this did I with kind intent;

Said, dearest Friend, this bow ye see,
This pretty bow, belongs to me:
Observe, I pray, if all be right,
I fear the rain has spoil'd it quite:
He drew it then, and straight I found
Within my breast a secret wound.
'Tis done, the rogue no longer staid,
But leapt away, and laughing said,
Kind host adieu, we now must part,
Safe is my bow, but sick thy heart.

French Academic artist Jean Leon Gerome (1824-1904) who is both a painter and sculptor represented Anacreon on canvas as well as in bronze. *Anacreon Bacchus and Cupid* dated 1848 (Figure 13) is a painting depicting an old Anacreon with a large lyre accompanied by the infants Bacchus and Cupid as symbols of wine and love he talks about in his poems. An exhilarated and merry group of people are following the trio under the blue sky. A nude girl blowing aulos, an ancient Greek wind instrument, sitting next to a basket of flowers collected for her may be associated with love put into words so lively in his poems.

Figure 13. Jean Leon Gerome, *Anacreon Bacchus and Cupid*, 1848, tuval üzerine yağlıboya, Musée des Augustines, Toulouse



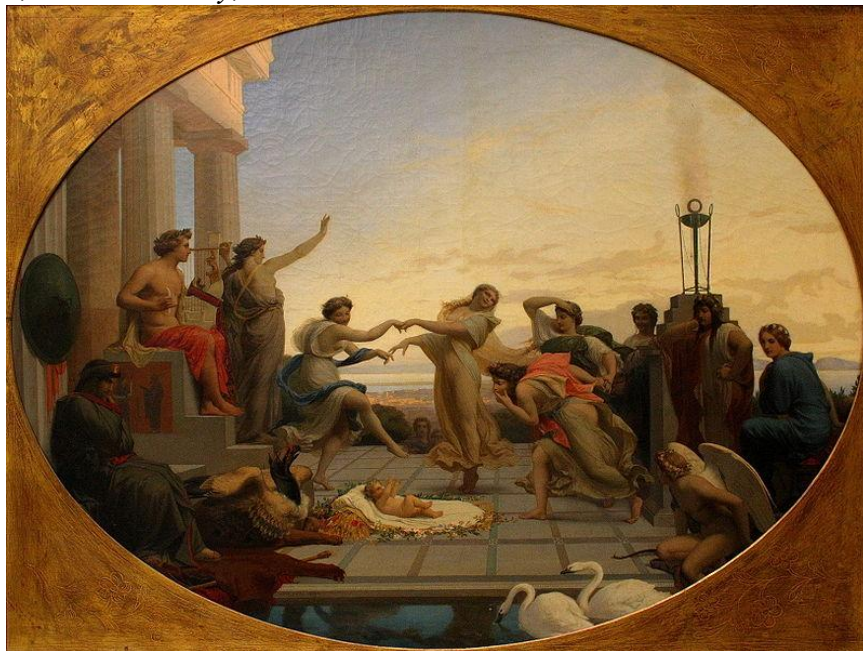
Pindar

Pindar was a great lyric poet born in 522 or 518 B.C. at a village near Thebes. He belonged, according to his own statement, to the noble Spartan family of the Aegeidae, and his poems reveal an aristocratic and pro-Dorian temper. Legend relates that he received instruction from the Boeotian poetess Corinna. He is said to have been eighty when he died at Argos. He attained great fame in his lifetime and was soon quoted as a classic. In the destruction

of Thebes, Alexander the Great ordered Pindar's house to be spared (Harvey, 1937, p. 328).

French Academic painter Henri Pierre Picou (1824-1895) depicted the first happy moments of the poet on his canvas *The Birth of Pindar* in 1848 (Figure 14). The dancing circle of Muses around the young Pindar highlight the celebration mood of the painting. Apollo honours the newborn baby for his literary genius. Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, raises her right arm, to announce the good news to the people. Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, depicted alone and unhappy on the left, is probably offended by this birth (www.musee-orsay.fr).

Figure 14. *Henri Pierre Picou, The Birth of Pindar, 1848, oil on canvas, 113 x 147 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris*



Conclusion

Two epic poets from the 8th century BC, Homer and Hesiod, and four lyric poets from the 7th and 6th centuries BC, Sappho, Alcaeus, Anacreon and Pindar, can be seen in the artworks of the 19th century. Since there are nine lyric poets, it can be concluded that some of them did not attract the attention of the artists. Portrayals of the remaining lyric poets Alcman, Ibycus, Simonides, Bacchylides and Stesichorus are not encountered in this research.

Homer is the most frequently depicted ancient Greek poet. His portrayals can be seen before the 19th century as well. The Dutch Baroque painter Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669) depicted Aristotle with a bust of Homer in 1653. The painting is known as *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*. It is interesting to see that the image of Homer inspired the Spanish Surrealist artist Salvador Dali (1904-1989) in the 20th century. The 1945 dated

painting entitled *The Apotheosis of Homer*, reminds the great canvas of Ingres which has the same name. But the paintings do not have anything in common other than their titles. Dali combined figures related to Greek mythology with a broken bust of Homer in his magical and enigmatic style.

Most of the artists depicting ancient Greek poets are from French origin. They might be under the influence of various artistic styles such as academic, symbolic, neo classical or romantic but their common point is their nationality. Two exceptions are the Dutch born English painter Alma Tadema and the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen.

Painters and sculptors enriched their creations with details about the lives of the poets and hints from their poems. Lyre, the traditional symbol of the poets, plays an important role in the depictions. Hesiod was presented with the Muses on the basis of his Theogony. Sappho was sometimes shown with young girls she educated and sometimes on the Leucadian cliff as she was about to throw herself because of an unreturned love affair with Phaon.

References

- Foley, J. M. (ed.) (2005) *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gumpert, M. (2001) *Grafting Helen: The Abduction of the Classical Past*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Harvey, P. (ed.) (1937) *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hesiod (1973) *Theogony and Works and Days*. London: Penguin Books. (Original date: 8th century BC)
- Musée du Louvre*. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/ETk2EN>. [Accessed: 10 February 2016]
- Milwaukee Art Museum*. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/P3ymTL>. [Accessed: 26 February 2016]
- Museum of Fine Arts Boston*. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/8kA2oU>. [Accessed: 10 February 2016]
- Musée d'Orsay*. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/FyucM2>. [Accessed: 18 March 2016]
- Quackenbos, J. D. (1888) *Illustrated History of Ancient Literature: Oriental and Classical*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing.
- The Walters Art Museum*. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/IIgnoy>. [Accessed: 11 March 2016]
- Thorvaldsens Museum*. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/N7FUEB>. [Accessed: 26 February 2016]
- Victoria and Albert Museum. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/z6DRx6>. [Accessed: 8 March 2016]
- Zuffi, S. (2010) *Love and the Erotic in Art*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications.