



1. Nicolai Abraham Abilgaard, *Catullus and Lesbia, who in his arms seeks solace for the death of her sparrow*, 1809, oil on canvas; Collection of Nivaagaards Museum. Photo from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolai_Abildgaard_-_Catullus_og_Lesbia_-_1809.jpg (access date: 17.04.2022)

Mistress of the poet's heart

On reading Lesbia's iconography

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Without the context, the beauty with her pet sparrow but towards the poetic background, she is a mistress of men's sexual potency. Lesbia is the most recognizable figure from late Republic poems written by Catullus. Researches distinguish a series of texts dedicated to her among all his works. It is appropriate to consider them as one of the center interests of his writing¹.

Lesbia's image is based on the relationship with the poet's lyrical speaker. She has two characteristic features emphasized in poems – beauty and loveliness². Her character representation and meaning in Roman poetry are researched from a classical studies perspective as well as literary studies. The first context she is interpreted in is her connotations with a real living person in Roman republic time i.e. Clodia Metelli. Scholars connect her as being the model for Catullus Lesbia poetic figure³. The second issue that appears in researching Lesbia's character is her representation in poems⁴. That aspect is connected with Catullus relationship analysis. Towards that, she is depicted as the one who is not able to return the feeling and love Catullus deserves⁵. The most discussed problem in Lesbia's theme is the sparrow pet motive. It appears in Carmina 2 and 3. Its function in poems is seen as an animal companion as well as an erotic symbol especially interpreted as poet phallus⁶. Presented ways of researching Lesbia's themes are dominant. This could have contributed to the lack of undertaken analysis of her iconography in art history. Due to the connection between Lesbia and visual representations she appeared for the first time in *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa. However, her character is purely mentioned as one of the examples given in the text under the *venusta* phrase⁷.



¹ See **Katullus**, *Poezje wszystkie*, Transl. G. Franczak, A. Klęczar, Introd. eadem, Metric Indexes K. Woś, Kraków 2013, pp. 44-45.

² See *ibidem*, pp. 486-487, C. 86.

³ In that context issues of Clodia's presence appears in Cicero's letter; see **J. W. Zarker**, *Lesbia's Charms*, "The Classical Journal" 1972, No. 2. Researches about Clodia's literary images was developed in latest analysis. Cf. **J. Dyson Hejduk**, *Clodia: A Sourcebook*, Norman 2008; **Katullus**, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-50; **A. Dziuba**, *Klodia Metelli. Literacki portret patrycjuszki*, Lublin 2016.

⁴ See **N. Holzberg**, *Lesbia, the Poet, and the Two Faces of Sappho: "Womanaufacture" in Catullus*, "Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society" Vol. 46 (2000). Cf. **J. Ward Jones Jr.**, *Catullus' "Passer" as "Passer"*, "Greece & Rome" 1998, No. 2, p. 188; **J. T. Dyson**, *The Lesbia Poems*, [in:] *A Companion to Catullus*, Ed. **M. B. Skinner**, Malden 2007, p. 255.

⁵ See **D. Konstan**, *Two Kinds of Love in Catullus*, "The Classical Journal" 1972, No. 2.

⁶ Interpretation of pet sparrow as Catullus phallus was seen as obscene. Cf. **R. W. Hooper**, *In Defense of Catullus' Dirty Sparrow*, "Greece & Rome" 1985, No. 2; **J. Ward Jones Jr.**, *op. cit.* Current researches opt for parallel interpretations of sparrow pet motive. See also and cf. **J. T. Dyson**, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-257;



A. Green, *Lesbia's Controversial Bird: Testing the Cases for and against "Passer" as Sparrow*, "Antichthon" Vol. 55 (2021).

⁷ While describing *venusta* C. Ripa (*Nova Iconologia*, Padova 1618, p. 545) references to Catullus C.86. In that text poet points Lesbia's loveliness.

⁸ Description of Lesbia's poetic image in C.2-C.3; see J. T. Dyson, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-256.

⁹ The way of including Catullus to British classical canon – see H. Stead, *A Cockney Catullus: The Reception of Catullus on Romantic Britain, 1795-1821*, Oxford 2016.

¹⁰ Katullus, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

Regarding art history researches two poems are important during reading Lesbia's iconography⁸. They are C.2 and C.3. The sparrow pet appears there. The first text is a laudation for the animal. It is full of vigor to play with its mistress. The second poem is an epitaph for a dead one. Lesbia is shown as crying because of the loss of her loved pet. Due to her iconography, a sparrow is understood as an attribute, and the symbol she is recognized.

The increased popularity of Lesbia's motifs as an art history theme was at the end of the 18th century. The reason for that is due to including Catullus in the classical literary canon⁹. However, images of Lesbia in the art are an artistic interpretation of Catullus's character. They refer to his poetry by the theme of the artwork directly emphasizing her figure. Nevertheless, the way artists depict her is enhanced. This paper discusses different ways of reading and interpreting Lesbia's character in European artworks made in the Neoclassicism and Romanticism eras, between the 18th to the end of the 19th century. It also reaches the issue of her image typology. Characterized are two types of her iconography. The first one is the representation with a poet. The second one is a portrait of Lesbia herself and among them, she is depicted at varied ages – as a child, a youth, and an adult woman. The study of art pieces' formal aspects and their comparing analysis with the poetic background are essential to determine and characterize the reception of Lesbia's motive in art. Taken issue is important because of not only the lack of study of Lesbia's iconography. It points to artistic references to ancient culture as well. It concerns the theme and establishes ancient art motives which are included with the artistic trends of the discussed eras – Classicism and Neoclassicism antique stylizations.

Lesbia with Catullus companion

The theme of Lesbia with Catullus companion was taken in painting and graphic artworks. The dominant type of their representation refers to C.3 poem. In the Roman text, Catullus calls on gods of love to weep over the sparrow's death. The animal is described as "*deliciae meae puellae*"¹⁰. Its loss is emphasized as the reason for Lesbia's sadness. However, in the reception of that poem in masterpieces different situation is depicted. Primarily Lesbia is with Catullus's companion. This is the first and the most important variation between Roman text and visual representation. In the poem poet's persona is not present with his beloved one. It is the contrast to the situation shown in artworks. Analyzing C.3 poem the described situation suggests that Lesbia's lament takes place in her home. Important is to mention C.83. The poet describes Lesbia's behavior while she is in the companion with her husband at the same time. There is a similar

issue in C.3 – no place is defined. One more the described situation probably is happening in Lesbia's husband's home. However, it is not mentioned in the text. In the contrast to Lesbia's cycle poems, her physical relations with other men are emphasized¹¹. What's more, not only no specified place of meeting Lesbia and Catullus is problematic but defining their physical relationship as well. Catullus seems to describe imagined situations and his desire for Lesbia. Some examples are confirming their physical contact like the kisses in C.5 and 7. It is interesting to compare it with Catullus's lyrical speaker in C.8 and 51. In the first poem, he describes himself as being under Lesbia's charm and as following her. In the second poem, he is petrified in her presence which is reflected as having no ability to speak. That poem is the next suggestion of Catullus and Lesbia being in the same place as well.

According to described issues in poems essential is different situations 18th and 19th c. artists create in their artwork. In taking the theme of Lesbia with Catullus they refer to poetic background not only by her character but also by combining different poetic motives like Catullus and other male figures surrounding Lesbia. Important is to emphasize that artistic realizations should be seen as varied as Lesbia's poetic universe. In that context, there are different types of relationships between Catullus and her as the roles they are representing. It is seen by comparing graphic print *Catullus and Lesbia* (Collection of British Museum, No. 1917,1208.1166) made after Angelica Kauffman in 1784 and oil painting *Catullus og Lesbia, der i hans arme søger trøst for hendes spurvs død* by Nicolai Abildgaard in 1809 [Fig. 1]. In the first piece of art, Lesbia is depicted as sitting. She rests her head on her left hand. It is on the table with an open empty birdcage. The right one is put on her lap where lies a dead sparrow. Catullus is shown as standing behind her. He looks at the woman and writes on a piece of papyrus. In that graphic Lesbia is depicted as an isolated character with and single motive by itself. From the composition perspective, she is lighted in the contrast to poet's figure being in the shadow. It emphasizes the separation between them. However, tension among those two figures is noticeable in the men's look. He is presented as the one who sees an intimate situation. Furthermore, it is an inspiration for him to write about it. Toward that Lesbia and her sadness are playing the role of the poet's muse. In the contrast to that artwork, Abildgaard depicts Catullus and Lesbia in a close physical relation – in a hug. She is finding comfort in her lover's arms. Important is to point out the way her posture and costume appear. Lesbia is imagined as during experiencing strong emotions – she is encountering loss and death. Her slipped off costume showing naked backs and breast as well as dynamic pose refers to art history tradition of depicting lamenting women during funeral mourning¹². On the right side of Lesbia is showed dead sparrow lying on the table. Beside is a fragmentarily painted birdcage. It is important to compare pet loca-



¹¹ Cf. C.11, 37. Usually males are anonymous but some of her lovers are mentioned – see C.37, 91.

¹² In ancient Greek art theme of lamenting woman was popular motive on reliefs with funeral context. See Metropolitan Museum of Art collection objects No. 27.228 and No. 54.11.5.



¹³ See **Katullus**, *op. cit.*, p. 226: „[...] *Nec sese a gremio illaius mouebat*”.

¹⁴ See **R. J. Barrow**, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, London 2001, pp. 28–41.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*. Barrow notice lack of consistent in Alma-Tadema’s painting. Sculpted woman has Flavian period hairstyle while Catullus poem was written in the end of republican Rome times.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Cicero criticized Clodia Metelli in his letters. That connection explains his presence in the painting. See. **J. W. Zarker**, *op. cit.*

tions among discussed art pieces. Both discussed artworks are connected with C.3 poem. However, including the presence of the poet in a depicted situation is an artistic interpretation of original Latin texts. In the poem, Catullus seems to not be a participant in Lesbia’s sorrow as well as conforming to her. The first graphic strictly refers to the poetic background only by the dead animal which is situated on Lesbia’s lap as it used to play as alive¹³. The artwork is centered on the contrast between the girl’s loveliness and her sadness. The representation of the poet is also similar to poems – he stands in the background and is attracted to Lesbia. The second artwork is focused on limitations emotions as well as juxtapositions of Lesbia’s dynamic pose and Catullus’s static image. That depiction is imagined by the artist and refers to poems by the Lesbia and dead sparrow figures. The other elements of the painting like the relationship between people are artistic creations.

In a discussion over her iconography with the poet companion important is Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s painting cycle. These are two artworks from his Roman–Pompeii series¹⁴. The first one is *Catullus at Lesbia’s* made in 1865 [Fig. 2]. Depicted situation present lying on a bed Lesbia surrounded by three male companions. They are in Pompeii-styled interior. The main figure of the artwork is Catullus himself. He is standing and looking at one of the men sitting in front of him. The poet figure is showing a dead sparrow in his left hand. This is the first line of emotional tension. It imagines the relation between the poet-lover and his rival. Rosemary Julia Barrow connects it with C.51 and the enviousness’s Catullus about his opponents of Lesbia’s attention¹⁵. The second relation line is between the third the oldest man and Lesbia herself. It represents the hidden love feeling of male character. Toward depicted men’s emotions, a woman is imagined as indifferent. Her figure is situated in the back as separated from fighting and adoring a male. References to allusion symbols into lived person as well as a critique of her character are around her. It is a sculpted portrait of a woman with an inscription. Barrow notices here “C” letter what relates with Clodia – the person Lesbia was based on¹⁶. The second motive is wall decoration with an image of a satyr copulating with a goat¹⁷. It represents Lesbia’s erotic temptation. The third element is the oldest man’s image. His facial features are similar to Cicero’s portraits¹⁸. Towards that, he is seen not as an admirer but as an observer of Clodia–Lesbia. That way artist created a scene that is read as a link between the poetic situation with lived Roman portraits. In that painting the compilation of not only different refers to poems but also combining them with the history of Rome is well seen. The Catullus persona with the dead sparrow is more like a symbolic reflection of the poetic background. Comparing it with C.3 poem interesting is indifferent Lesbia and no direct connection with sparrow pet especially no emotions due to its death. Towards that, it is appropriate to consider that painting as imagined



2. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Catullus at Lesbia's*, 1865, oil on wood; private collection. Photo from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catullus-at-Lesbia%27s-large.jpg> (access date: 17.04.2022)

ancient-like creation being an artistic inspiration of Roman poetry and history.

Alma-Tadema includes in Lesbia's iconography also motive from Roman elegy. In the context of male characters, she plays the role of *puella dura*. That type of her representation is continued by an artist in 1870 in the artwork *Catullus reading his poem at Lesbia's house* (private collection). Similar to the previous painting Lesbia is depicted as lying on the bed and surrounded by four male characters. Tadema refers to relation and emotional compositional lines used in 1865 artwork. However, they are more varied in later paintings. The first one is between the poet and Lesbia. He is portrayed in the first plan while reading. Another one is among two background figures. They are looking at the poet. One of them is holding a piece of rolled papyrus. This indicates interpreting his figure as Catullus's rival about Lesbia's attention as well as on the poetic ground. The third relation line repeats the compositional solution from the 1865 painting. The fourth man is depicted as looking at the indifferent woman. Similar to *Catullus at Lesbia's* Alma-Tadema depicts relations between male characters based on their rivalry with Lesbia. He also imagines her character in the same way – as indifferent. However, in artwork from 1870, her figure refers to Jacques-Louis David *Madame Récamier* type by statuary posture and direct to viewer look. The way Lesbia was represented in both Alma-Tadema's paintings refers to another motive from Roman elegy literature. It is *domina rapax*. Artist reverses it by creating a female character separated from admirers with no interest giving them. In a painting from 1865, Lesbia is in the background. However, in the 1870 piece, she is the main figure focused on. She is situated in the center of the artwork's composition and is the most lighted and detailed painting element. Interpreting that artwork in the context of Catullus's poetry one poem needs to be considered. It is C.51. In that text, Catullus admires those males who are near Lesbia because he is not able to speak in her presence. Alma-Tadema reverse relation between Catullus and Lesbia is presented in text origin by depicting him as reading poetry in the presence of his mistress.

Discussing Alma-Tadema Lesbias characters important is to compare their appearance as well. Both of them have curly hairstyles referring to late Julio-Claudian dynasty empress portraits. However, their costumes are varied. In 1865 artwork clothes is aristocratic Roman-styled. In 1870 painting her costume are Greek-styled. She is wearing Ionian chiton with himation. Comparing those two artworks in the context of Lesbia's iconography one more detail is important. It is a lack of sparrow in the *Catullus Reading his Poem at Lesbia's house*. Besides the title, only the interior's detail suggests the love theme of the painting. Near Lesbia's bed is a console table with an Aphrodite statuette in the type of *Venus pudica*.



3. Joshua Reynolds, *Robinetta (Lesbia)*, 1788, oil on canvas; Collection of British Museum. Photo from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joshua_Reynolds_\(1723-1792\)_-_Robinetta_-_N00892_-_National_Gallery.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joshua_Reynolds_(1723-1792)_-_Robinetta_-_N00892_-_National_Gallery.jpg) (access date: 17.04.2022)



¹⁹ That painting is known as *Robinetta*; see **D. Mannings, M. Postle**, *Sir Joshua Reynolds – a Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, New Haven 2000, Cat. No. 2102. Plenty of copies after Reynolds's painting appear on auction houses sales, e.g. Christie's in 2006, Waddington's in 2020.

Presented artworks claims artists used varied ways of Lesbia's image as well as depict her emotional portrait. The first type of discussed paintings represent her as weeping over a dead sparrow and encountering with loss of a loved pet. She is portrayed in two contrasting ways: as a statuary miserable beauty and as seeking to confirm during lament. The second type is her representation as surrounded by men. She is presented as separated from them and indifferent to their courting. All of the discussed paintings represent antique tendencies in classicism and neoclassicism's genre scenes. It is seen in compositional components as elements of interior design, character's clothes, etc. They are read in the way of artistic creation about the antique Roman era and ancient styling. On discussed paintings, one of them is a reception of Catullus's poetry. It is implemented as an influence on artistic creation without being an illustration of poems. Situations created on discussed artworks are Catullus- and Roman- styled. Her image references poetic origins. However, it corresponds with trends of the era paintings were made. Lesbia is imagined as reserved with emotions in the classicism period while expressing them in neoclassicism Romanticism artworks. Nevertheless, Alma-Tadema's Lesbia is imagined in a different type – as an indifferent woman. It is due to depriving her strong sparrow context as it is seen in other discussed paintings.

Lesbia's portraits

On reading Lesbia's portraits, poetic background, as well as the role of the sparrow pet, is more important than in her images with Catullus's companion. Besides C.3 references C.2 is significant as well. As far as that poem is concerned it adds a new context to Lesbia's images. These are erotic and sexual aspects. They are expressed by her relationship with her pet. Comparing her portrait images two iconographical types can distinguish. The first one is representation as playing with sparrow. The second one is as weeping over its death. Among them, Lesbia is presented in three stages – as a child, a young girl, and an adult woman. Towards those her emotional portrait as well as its interpretation change.

1. Child portraits

Lesbia's child portraits were themes taken by Joshua Reynolds and his followers. Discussing that type of her image some problems with Catullus mistress connection as well as interpreting her as Lesbia herself appears. The first of the concerned painting is *Lesbia*¹⁹ made

in 1786 by Reynolds [Fig. 3]. A girl is depicted as sitting and playing with a little bird on her right arm. She is touching its beak or is feeding an animal with her right hand while her left is lying on a birdcage. She is imagined as a joyful girl looking directly at the viewer. The next discussed artwork is a graphic print of *Lesbia*²⁰ (British Museum, No. 1868,0822.2143) after Joshua Reynolds was made in 1788. The depicted girl is representing the second type of Lesbia's image – weeping over a dead sparrow. She is shown as sitting and holding an animal on her laps. On her right side is an open birdcage. Her representation is focused on expressing encounter with loss and death. The artist shows the experience of feelings using the young girl's gaze. She is imagined in the *in-between* moment of realizing the situation and showing mourn. She is represented as thoughtful than reserved from emotions. This is emphasized by the artwork background. She is situated in the interior open on the left side of the landscape. Comparing it with the 1786 painting where the girl is surrounded by nature points to her separation from playful and carelessness *locus amoenus*. Continuing reflections about girls' representations difference some notes about their costumes are important. In the 1786 painting, she has the ancient-like chiton-styled dress. In the 1788 graphic girls is wearing appropriate for 18th c. dress.

Presented descriptions of portrayed girls show them as innocent, playful, and from the other side struggling with the serious situation if the loss of the loved animal. In that context questions about references to Catullus Lesbia origins as well as the role of bird pet appear. To understand the connection with a poetic background of discussed images second issue is needed to be considered firstly. Due to the ancient tradition of housekeeping animals, bird pets were one of the most popular companions for children²¹. It is seen on sculptures e.g. Roman copy of Boethus artwork *Boy with goose* (Louvre Museum, No. Ma 40 MR 168 N 223). It refers to Lesbia's image in the poem as a young girl playing with her pet in C.2 and then weeping over its death in C.3. Towards the understanding of bird in discussed 18th c. artworks has two aspects. The first one is an attribute of Lesbia's character that is recognized in visual arts. The second one is a pet companion child has an emotional bond. However important is to make some notes about the erotic meaning of Lesbia's sparrow and its connotations with portrayed girls. Both of them are represented in a convention of a downsized adult portrait. Nevertheless, a child from the 1786 painting is under puberty while in the 1788 graphic is much younger. Due to representation as flirty looking in earlier painting girl image is read in the way of sexual seduction²². In that context bird she is playing is a symbol of men's sexual potency. In contrast, in the second artwork girl is presented with no as visible erotic aspect as in the first one. Only her adult-like creation and opened birdcage could be read as symbols of lost innocence. More appealing is a connection with reinterpreted Lesbia's relation with a sparrow in C.3 as an allegory of life and death²³.



²⁰ Original painting for that graphic is also known as *Girl with dead bird*. It was sold in 2011 in Sotheby's Auction House. Graphics after Reynolds's are in collection of British Museum.

²¹ See A. Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–15.

²² Cf. V. Mühleis, *Girl with Dead Bird: Intercultural Observations*, Leuven 2018, pp. 30–33; R. R. Lloret, *Infancia y género en la pintura europea, 1750–1850*, [in:] *La Invención de la infancia. XIX Encuentro de la Ilustración al Romanticismo: Cádiz, Europa y América ante la modernidad, 1750–1850*, Ed. F. Durán López, Cádiz 2020, p. 236.

²³ See V. Mühleis, *op. cit.*, p. 33. That way of interpreting that image could be confirmed by comparing inscription under the graphic. See graphic from Collection of British Museum, No. 1868,0822.2143.

4. John Reinhard Weguelin, *Lesbia*, 1878, oil painting; private collection. Photo from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Reinhard_Weguelin_Lesbia.jpg (access date: 17.04.2022)

Towards the reception of Catullus's mistress in child portrait convention, she is readable in two contexts. The first one directly refers to sexual symbol Lesbia and her relation with sparrow pet have. The second one is taking elements of poetic background by choosing some aspects from them. Furthermore on both discussed artworks birdcage appears. It is not include in the poems. Therefore its functions could be read on a two levels. On the one side it is the complementing element of composition appealing to bird as a keeping animal by girl. On the other side birdcage iconographic motive has long interpretation tradition in history of art. Depending on showing it as closed or opened it has connotations with guarded girl's innocence during puberty and lost virginity as well²⁴. In that context it is element added by artist exceeding over motives from Catullus poems. It posts new interpretation value into Lesbia's motive reception. It is connected with artworks's background reading as well. Contrast juxtapositions of interior and nature extend poetic representation of Catullus figure with using iconographic symbols traditions.

2. Youth portraits

Erotic, especially sexual context of Lesbia's iconography is well seen on her youth images. It is emphasized by transparent clothes she is dressed and showed naked body. Her images refer to beauty and liveliness of her figure. Among discussing artworks examples dominant is her representation as playing with pet sparrow. In that context relation with animal and its symbolic meaning are connected with erotic aspect of reading Lesbia's image. Furthermore it directly refers to poetic C.2 background and discussion about interpretation of her character in obscene way²⁵.

The first discussed artwork is painting *Lesbia* made by John Reinhard Weguelin in 1878 [Fig. 4]. Girl is depicted as standing in the opened doorway gate. She touches walls with both hands. Her figure is the center of that art piece's compositions. Youth girl is surrounded by sparrows she is looking at. They are drinking or eating from bowl at her feet. She is represented on the ancient-styled city background. However in that painting is more references to ancient Greek are well seen. Her image, especially way of study costume is related with type of showing textiles used by Callimachus in *Aphrodite from Frejus*. Depicted youth girl is as well appealing to *Venus pudica* iconography. Among Greek origins Aphrodite is hiding lap and breast with hands and textile. However on the concerned image they are covered by costume. Using that motives in the described way is the example of reception Greek formula into 19th c. ancient styled artworks. The next element referring to Greek art is *contrapposto* figure which is also seen in 4th c. BC sculptures of *pudica*. There are



²⁴ See *ibidem*, p. 31–32. Birdcage motive and birds (sparrow and dove) were used by François Boucher artworks as sexual symbol of flirting and erotic playing, e.g. see *La Cage* (Collection of Louvre Museum, No. INV 2724 bis B 421).

²⁵ See footnote 4.





two more appearance details related with ancient origins – hairstyle and costume. The first one is 5th c. BC styled partially poked out hairs from under the veil and ribbon²⁶. Additionally they are decorated with laurel wreath. The next element is clothing. Girl is dressed in transparent light chiton. It is showed in the convention of close-fitting costume to the body exposing its shape. That type in woman's Greek sculpture was popular since the end of classic period.

The next concerned artworks with youth Lesbia images are examples of reception her iconography in sculpture. Discussed artworks is *Le Moineau de Lesbie* made in third quarter of 19th c. by François Joseph Truphème [Fig. 5]. It represents crouching naked girl. She is looking at the sparrow witting on her left shoulder to whom is giving little bowl. It is in the type of kylix vessel. Her image is reception of *Venus pudica* type as well. In that sculpture it is realized by a piece of material covering her right leg and lap. Her posture as well as turning head to right refer to Hellenistic sculpture of *Crouching Aphrodite* by Doidalses. They differ with covered breasts in ancient artwork and exposed in neoclassicism one. Similarly to previous artwork girl is presented with the same hairstyle. There is added element – a bun decorated with pearls. It reminds Roman empress hair style from beginning of the rule of Julio-Claudian dynasty.

Comparing presented artworks towards reception of ancient tradition in 19th c. art, from formal perspective sexualization of woman's figure is well visible. Although all pieces of art refer to iconography types from Greek art they redefine it into new value. It is connected with neoclassical Romanticism and taking Lesbia's theme by artists. They imagined her according to convention of classical art canon from the one side. From the other they emphasized erotic character connected with Lesbia's poetic background²⁷. It is seen on relation she has with sparrow pet. On concerned artworks she is represented as separated from surrounding. She is imagined as focused on the animal. In painting it is also achieved by situated her figure as standing on the piece of cloth. Furthermore situation of her character is meaningful. She stands in the house doorway gate. It is understand as being in *locus amoenus* – separated area she plays with birds. A far as obscene interpretation of her poetic character is concerned, she is represented as lady of sparrows. It is read as her being a mistress of men's sexual potency.

3. Adult portraits

Continuing reflections about Lesbia's portraits the last type of her images is adult woman. Dominant way of presenting her mature character is while she is weeping over dead sparrow. Discussing images are focused on Lesbia's emotions and psychological portrait of

5. François Joseph Truphème, *Le Moineau de Lesbie*, third quarter of 19th c., marble; Collection of Le Musée des Beaux-Arts de Marseille. Photo from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Truph%C3%A8me-Le_moineau_de_Lesbie.jpg (access date: 17.04.2022)



²⁶ See woman's hairstyle from vase fragment stored in Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, No. 2011.604.1.7447.

²⁷ In the context of Roman erotic poetry one more reference is seen. This is opened gate in painting. It is related with reversed type of *paraklausithyron* and read as opened birdcage, see footnote 24.



her more than artworks representing other types. Among adult portraits she is presented as beauty encountering with loss of loved animal companion.

Lesbia figure was taken in sculpture realization by Johann von Dannecker in 1836 (*Mädchen mit dem toten Vogel* or *Lesbia and her sparrow*, private collection)²⁸. He depicts woman sitting on a cube. She is leaning over the dead sparrow holding in right hand. Left one is put on the lap. She is dressed in the chiton similar to costume of *Venus Callipyge*. Her cloth as well as showed naked left arm refer to Hellenistic Aphrodite's sculptures. In that case understanding of that references is similar to previous discussed artwork. Relation between Greek origins and its reception in neoclassicism era is connected with new artistic and symbolic value. In the context of artwork theme uncovered shoulder and partially showed breast are related with the tradition of representing lamenting woman²⁹. While described elements has their origins in Hellenistic art some details are based on Greek classical period artworks. It is hairstyle reminding 4th c. BC late Classical and Hellenistic trends³⁰. Truly 5th c. BC reference is idealistic no emotions face. Comparing it with sparrow death theme of concerned artwork woman's facial expression is read as apprehended at the moment of realizing the situation. However her grief and lament is depicted by leaned posture and head. It is emphasized by her looking at raising in the hand dead pet companion.

Portrait of adult image of Catullus character was taken by Alma-Tadema. It is painting *Lesbia and Sparrow* made in 1866 [Fig. 6]. This artwork is second one from Lesbia's cycle. Artist depicted woman as sitting with dead sparrow lying on her laps. She is full covered by ancient Roman-styled clothes including red palla. Among other ancient stylization in her appearance hairstyle is combination of Greek and Roman elements. Visible are inspirations of Claudian and early Flavian empresses hair especially fringe with little curls. However head partially covered by veil is reference to Greek trends. Woman is situated in the Roman-styled house interior opened to the garden and city landscape. She is separated from sounding. However interior she is sitting in is read as reversed from traditional symbolic. Towards the death of her loved pet companion it is understand as *locus horridus* and the place of her sadness. Alma-Tadema portraits reserved with emotions woman. On her thoughtful face sadness is well seen. However she is imagined as abstaining from expressing feelings. As far as it is concerned her representation is directly connected with role in the community – the Roman matron. Toward that sparrow interpretation is readable on two levels. The first one is sexual. Bird is symbol of lover she cannot be with due to the role she is playing in the community. Second one is connected with rite the passage. In that context sparrow is understand as lost child innocence while becoming an adult woman.

6. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Lesbia and Sparrow*, 1866, oil painting; private collection. Photo from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lawrence_Alma-Tadema_lesbia_and_sparrow.jpg (access date: 17 IV 2022)



²⁸ That artwork was sold in Sotheby's auction house in 2019. Sculpture has No. 117 in *Old Master Sculpture & Works of Art* catalogue.

²⁹ See footnote 12.

³⁰ In Attic art that hairstyle appears on late archaic period. However its popularity is visible on later artifacts. See objects stored in Collection of Metropolitan Museum in New York – No. 56.171.22 and No. 2011.604.2.721.

Discussed adult images of Lesbia depict her in a varied ways. Shared elements is themes of representation focused on C.3 references. However psychological portraits and emotions contrasted with vulnerable appearance made read them as a separate issues. It is seen on formal elements level. Furthermore ancient-like artistic creation is more important from interpretation perspective. According with researching problems as meaning of ancient art and culture reception appears towards comparing it with neoclassical Romanticism trends.

Conclusions

Artworks taking theme of Lesbia are mainly based on two Catullus poems. Poetic origins definite two main types of Lesbia's iconography. They are: girl playing with sparrow pet and while she is weeping over its death. However concerned in this article pieces of art are visual interpretations of them not illustration to poetry. Besides reception of ancient literature into 18th and 19th c. artworks more researching problems with interpretation of Lesbia iconography appears.

The first one is making typology of her images. Her motive was realized in the convention of genre scene. In that context she is represented with Catullus and other male figures. Nevertheless her portraits were also theme of artworks. Art pieces representing that type is the largest regarding to amount as well as medium they were made in. It is also the most varied group with way of imagining her character. Among them Lesbia is presented as a child, youth girl and adult woman.

Second issue is interpretation of both types pieces represent. It is concerned on a few levels. One of them is to find origins of Lesbia's images in ancient Greek-Roman art. It is due to compare inspiration of antiquity with its reception in classicism and neoclassical eras. Discussed artworks claims using that method to prove inspirations and reinterpretation of ancient motives. It is seen especially on Lesbia's youth and adult iconography compared with Aphrodite representations. Its reception was included into sexual context as well as showing vulnerability and fragility of woman's appearance towards experiencing emotions. Other problem appeared during research is Lesbia's poetic background. It is also tradition of interpretation her character and sparrow pet. Toward that this paper is the voice in discourse from art history perspective. As far as reflections about it is concerned not only ancient cultural background was taken into consideration. Important was to compare ancient-like artistic creations with its Greek-Roman origins as well as tendency of the era artworks were made in. Results of taken research point varied ways of pre-

senting ancient reception from formal artworks aspect and symbolic one. However discussed contexts depend on individual artist interpretation of a Lesbia motive they depicted. Comparing it with other artworks taking the themes from ancient culture the antique origins are seen as inspiration. In discussed artworks is seen by referring and combining different elements from poetry and creating new situation in ancient style. It is typical for Classical and Neoclassical art. It is not reconstruction of ancient culture but reflection of it connected with artistic eras trends.

Continuing reflections about further researching more problems about reading and understanding Lesbia's iconography should be developed. One of them are "a girl with a bird" motive and complex connotations it have in art history. It is raised due to possibility of misread Lesbia representation and her iconography type. Second one is issue of her character itself. It is striking that not other famous ancient Roman poets mistresses than Lesbia were popular artwork theme in 18th and 19th centuries. There are elegy authors with their poetic lovers like Propertius and Cynthia, Tibullus and Delia or Ovid and Corinna. There are known artworks representing them like e.g. *Tibullus at Delia's House* (Collection of Museum of Fine Arts Boston, No. 17.3239) made in 1866 by Alma-Tadema. However these are singular examples. Catullus Lesbia has the most varied and complex representations in art among mentioned poet's lovers. Moreover those authors erotic poetry was well known and published in the Europe since 15th c. e.g. Venice edition from 1472 by Wendell von Speyer. Probably her popularity as a theme of artworks in 18th and 19th c. was due to include Catullus poetry to classical canon. On the other side influence of her character to these eras literary works is possible as well. That factors could be primary on her character interest. Comparing with other ancient female lovers she is the most characteristic. She is presented as an individual one with the most developed psychological portrait. It is claimed by C.2 and C.3. Those two texts depict contrasted Lesbia's images with her pet sparrow. Influences of motives from that poems are seen in discussed artworks. Exceptions are Alma-Tadema's genre scenes with Catullus companion. References to Clodia which extend poetic background with elements of Roman culture are included in them. Nevertheless all concerned issues in that paper present Lesbia's character as a mistress of the poet's heart and a poetic muse to classicism and neoclassicism artists.

Słowa kluczowe

Katullus, Lesbia, wróbelek Lesbii, ikonografia Lesbii, recepcja antyku, antyczna poezja w sztuce

Keywords

Catullus, Lesbia, Lesbia's sparrow, Lesbia's iconography, antique reception, ancient poetry in art

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Summary

ROKSANA MARIA LAJKOSZ (University of Wrocław) / Mistress of the poet's heart. On reading Lesbia's iconography

This paper takes an issue of iconography of Catullus character – Lesbia. It discusses examples of artworks from the 18th and 19th centuries. The study of art pieces' formal aspects and their comparing analysis with the poetic background are essential to determine and characterise the reception of Lesbia's motive in art. The discussed theme is also related to the way of her representation. It is seen not only in the context of visual interpretation of poetry but also as referencing to ancient art. The problem with Lesbia's images is considered on two levels. On the one side, it is connected with Catullus's poems, especially *Carmina* 2 and 3. Two types of her images appear – “playing with pet sparrows” and “weeping over sparrow death”. On the other side of the artwork two ways of her depiction are visible. These are with Catullus' companion and as single portrayed. They include her images as a child, young girl, and adult woman. Among them Lesbia is presented as indifferent towards lovers' courting, flirting, or struggling with loss and death. In that context, her iconography is not only a reference to the poetic background but also it is read as an interpretation of her character by Classicism and Neoclassicism artist.