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## PORTRAITS OF WISDOM: ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS IN EUROPEAN PAINTING\*

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### Abstract

The cultural heritage of Ancient Greece had left significant marks on the art of European painting. This admiration for the ancient culture can be seen starting from the Renaissance era which was inspired by the classical world and humanism. Baroque art in the 17th century and Neoclassical style of the 18th and 19th centuries also presented the traces of the ancient Greek civilization. Greek mythological figures and prominent people from the cultural life had been the subject of pictures. The focus of this study is the portraits of the thinkers. The pictorial presentations of the life stories and anecdotes of Ancient Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Democritus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Diogenes are explored. The richness of the collection of philosopher portraits between the 16th and 19th centuries in European art confirm that it was important for the artists to visualise these wise ancient man to give moral messages and cultural insight to their viewers.

**Keywords:** *Ancient greek philosophers, European painting, Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassicism.*

## BİLGELİĞİN PORTELERİ: AVRUPA RESMİNDE ANTİK YUNAN FİLOZOFLARI

### Özet

Antik Yunan mirası, Avrupa resim sanatında önemli izler bırakmıştır. Klasik sanat ve hümanizmden beslenen Rönesans döneminde başlayan bu ilgi, 17. yüzyıl Barok ve 18. ve 19.yüzyıl Yeniklasikçi üsluplarda da varlığını hissettirmiştir. Yunan mitolojik figürleri ve kültür hayatının önde gelen isimleri resimlere konu olmuştur. Bu araştırma, düşünürlerin portreleri üzerinde durmaktadır. Antik Yunan filozofları arasında yer alan Pisagor, Heraklitos, Demokritos, Sokrates, Platon, Aristoteles ve Diyojen gibi isimlerin yaşam öyküleri ve anekdotlarının resimsel sunumları incelenmiştir. 16. ve 19. yüzyıllar arasında Avrupa sanatındaki filozof portrelerinin oluşturduğu koleksiyonun zenginliği, sanatçılar için izleyicilerine ahlak mesajları ve kültürel anlayış vermek adına bu bilge adamları görselliğe kavuşturmanın önemli olduğunu doğrulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Antik yunan filozofları, Avrupa resmi, Rönesans, Barok, Yeni Klasikçilik.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

“Philosophy” is a word invented by the Ancient Greeks, most likely by Pythagoras in the 6th century B.C. Ancient Greek philosophy is part of a much larger history, a history of human thought about the most fundamental and intractable questions that people attempt to resolve. Diogenes Laertius, author of “Lives of the Philosophers” in the 3rd century, attempted to trace the history of Greek philosophy by identifying teacher-student relationships (Preus, 2015: 1-2).

Ancient philosophy is traditionally held to begin in the 6th century BC, in the Greek cities of coastal Asia Minor. A large number of philosophers are generally grouped as “Presocratics”; their activities cover the 6th and 5th centuries BC. Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes are early cosmologists, giving ambitious accounts of the world as a whole. Pythagoras began a tradition emphasizing mysticism and authority. Heraclitus produced notoriously obscure aphorisms. In the second half of the fifth century, intellectuals called sophists developed some philosophical skills, particularly in argument, philosophical interests and ethical thought. Socrates is generally held to mark a turning point in ancient philosophy. He wrote nothing, but greatly influenced a number of followers including Antisthenes, a founder of Cynicism. His most famous follower is Plato, founded the first philosophical school. Plato’s most famous pupil Aristotle dominate the philosophy of the 4th century BC (Annas, 2000: x-xi).

Greeks coined the word “philosophia”, which means “love of wisdom”, and Greek philosophy was transmitted to the Middle Ages and thence to modern times. Philosophy is a historical phenomenon which arose at a particular point in time and has evolved up to the present (Hadot, 2002: 3).

Greek philosophy shows the influence of ideas current in early Greek culture. Myths, religious beliefs and beliefs about the nature of the world, were not the same in all parts of the Greek civilization, however. The ideas that had the most profound influence on the development of philosophy are associated with the mainland of Greece and with Ionia (Marietta, 1998: 3).

European art had been influenced and inspired greatly by the ancient Greek civilization. The gods and goddesses of the ancient Greek world had been the subject of mythological paintings, its daily life had been visualised on the canvases and the prominent ancient Greek people who made significant contributions to the Western civilization had been depicted. Political and military leaders, poets and playwrights, scientists and philosophers had been immortalised in visual artworks. Pictures depicting intriguing scenes from the lives of ancient Greek philosophers constitute an interesting chapter of the Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassical portraiture.

This study aims to explore the connection between art and philosophy, artists and philosophers by looking at the pictures inspired by the world of thinkers and schools of thoughts. Although it is more common to see the traces of ancient world in mythological art works, art historical research focusing on ancient inspiration of the artists between Renaissance and the 19th century reveals that scientific and philosophical aspects of the ancient Greeks had also been significant. Foreign internet archives and museums’ official websites have been investigated to come across portraits of philosophers. The paintings encountered in this pictorial journey have been studied with a descriptive approach. Since these wise men and their thoughts are timeless and invaluable for humanity, the search for their portraits will hopefully contribute to the field of art history as well as philosophy.

## **2. ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS**

### **2.1. Pythagoras (570-495 B.C.)**

Pythagoras, the most famous of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, emigrated from the island of Samos (Asia Minor) to Croton (southern Italy) in 530. There he founded societies based on a strict way of life. They had great political impact in southern Italy and aroused opposition that resulted in the burning of their meeting houses. He was well known for introducing the doctrine of metempsychosis, according to which the soul is immortal and is reborn in both human and animal incarnations. Rules were established to purify the soul including the prohibition

against eating beans and the emphasis on training of the memory (Audi, 1999: 760-761). The philosopher was an advocate of vegetarianism and later on he was even against consuming legumes.

Flemish Baroque painters Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Frans Snyders (1579-1657) worked together on the canvas entitled *Pythagoras Advocating Vegetarianism* (1618-20) (Figure 1). This painting has a unique and surprising subject. It served as an excuse to present a still-life of fruit and vegetables. It is also important on a more profound philosophical level. The painting was inspired by the Roman poet Ovid's "Metamorphoses" where he tells the story of the founding of Rome and describes an encounter between Rome's founding King Numa Pompilius and Pythagoras. Pythagoras reprimands mankind for its savagery in eating flesh<sup>1</sup>. He speaks of the Golden Age when the fruits of the earth were enjoyed without labour, bloodshed or oppression. Fauns and nymphs fill so much of the painting in their happy and carefree harvesting. Noble and thoughtful men are contrasted with greedy and bestial fauns, but the fauns are the gentle vegetarians. This subject presents interesting contrasts and parallels (www.rct.uk).



**Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *Pythagoras Advocating Vegetarianism*, 1618-20, oil on canvas, 262 x 378 cm, Royal Collection, London.**

Italian Baroque artist Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) depicted Pythagoras' journey to the underworld in *Pythagoras Emerging from the Underworld* (1662) (Figure 2). Although Rosa was primarily a landscape artist, he preferred to be regarded as a history painter. He also chose esoteric and philosophical subjects, which he added to his landscapes. According to ancient sources, Pythagoras convinced his followers that he had descended to Hades and encountered the tormented souls of poets (Homer and Hesiod among them) persecuted for betraying the secrets of the gods (www.kimbellart.org).



**Figure 2. Salvator Rosa, *Pythagoras Emerging from the Underworld*, 1662, oil on canvas, 131 x 189 cm, Kimbell Art Museum, Texas.**

<sup>1</sup> "Mortals, do not defile your bodies with sinful eating. You have the crops to sustain you, the fruit which forces the branches to bend down under its weight, the grapes that swell on the vine, scented herbs and vegetables that fire can soften; milk's sweet flow cannot fail you, nor honey fragrant with thyme. The earth supplies her riches and nourishing food in lavish abundance; she offers you feasts that demand no slaughter or bloodshed." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book XV, 75-82).

## **2.2.Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.) and Democritus (460-370 B.C.)**

Both the life and work of Heraclitus are shadowy. The one book he is known to have produced is lost. The guiding idea of his philosophy was of the logos governing all things. He is principally remembered for the doctrine of the flux of all things, and the famous statement that you cannot step into the same river twice. The contrast between the unstable world of appearance and the order behind it exercised tremendous influence on Plato (Blackburn, 1996: 171)

A transition figure between the Milesian philosophers and the later pluralists. Heraclitus stressed unity in the world of change. He observed that natural transformations necessarily involve contraries such as hot and cold. In the conflict of opposites there is a hidden harmony that sustains the world (Audi, 1999: 376).

Along with Leucippus, Democritus is the founder of classical atomism. He was known as very widely travelled and was called the laughing philosopher. The arrangements and conglomerations of atoms produce the world we experience. This world is however, only one of the infinite number of worlds that different arrangements of atoms produce (Blackburn,1996: 98).

In the fine arts, Heraclitus and Democritus have been represented as a pair of philosophers. Heraclitus has been shown as the “weeping philosopher” and Democritus as the “laughing philosopher”. They together portray the two tragic personae expressing conflict between pessimistic and optimistic attitudes in life (Stamatellos, 2012: 130).

Dutch Baroque painter Johannes Moreelse (1603-1630) depicted portraits of Heraclitus and Democritus (Figure 3 and 4) as a complementary pair circa 1630. Both of these figures are looking at the globe, but one is in sorrow while the other is joyful.



**Figure 3. Johannes Moreelse, *Heraclitus*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 59 x 68 cm, Centraal Museum, Utrecht.**



**Figure 4. Johannes Moreelse, *Democritus*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, Centraal Museum, Utrecht.**

### 2.3.Socrates (470-399 B.C.)

The engaging and infuriating figure of the early dialogues of Plato, Socrates represented the turning point in Greek philosophy, at which the self-critical reflection on the nature of our concerns on the nature of our concepts and our reasoning emerged as a major concern. He served as a soldier in the Peloponnesian War and was married to Xanthippe by whom he had three male children. He remains the model of a great teacher. In the Socratic method of teaching, the master imparts no information but asks a sequence of questions (Blackburn, 1996: 355-356).

According to an anecdote handed down from antiquity, when Socrates was asked which kind of men had the greatest regrets, he retorted, “*Those who get married*”. The figure of Xanthippe, Socrates’ wife, became legendary. Indifferent to intellectual pursuits, attentive only to practical matters, she has been called “the philosopher’s dramaturgical double par excellence”. Dutch Baroque artist Reyer van Blommendael (1625-1675), depicted Socrates and his wife in *Xanthippe Dousing Socrates* (Figure 5) dated circa 1655. The artist slightly softened Socrates’ traditional features. Ever since the days of ancient Greece, he had been depicted with an almost satyr-like appearance and shabby clothes. Xanthippe empties a chamber pot onto the head of her absorbed husband, as if to shake him out of his intellectual meditation. She evidently feels he should attend more to practical matters (Zuffi, 2010: 340-341).



**Figure 5. Reyer van Blommendael, *Xanthippe Dousing Socrates*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 198 x 210 cm, Musée des Beaux Arts, Strasbourg.**

Socrates was executed by the Athenian court for the crime in refusing to recognise gods and corrupting the young people. Socrates refused to negate his beliefs and willingly died by drinking from the cup of poisonous hemlock. Jacques Louis David (1748-1825) depicted the last moments of the moral philosopher’s life (Figure 6) while he was discoursing on the immortality of the soul before he accepted the verdict of death. Shortly before the commencement of the French Revolution, the painting gave statement to the principle of resisting unrighteous authority. This canvas can be considered as David’s most perfect expression of the Neoclassical style ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)).

David was passionately involved in the issues of his age, artistic as well as political. David took an active part in the French Revolution. Refusing to compromise his disciples, Socrates was sentenced to death. He is shown about to drink poison from the cup. Thus he becomes not only an example of ancient virtue but also the founder of the “religion of Reason”. Here he is a Christlike figure among his twelve disciples, although fewer people were actually present at his death and his wife is omitted from the scene (Janson, 2001: 642).



**Figure 6. Jacques Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, oil on canvas, 130 x 196 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.**

#### **2.4. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)**

Along with Plato, the most influential philosopher of the western tradition, he was born at Stagira in Macedonia. At the age of 17, he entered Plato's Academy in Athens, and remained there until Plato's death. Between 343 and 340, he acted as a tutor to the young Alexander the Great, at the invitation of his father Philip of Macedon. In 335 he returned to Athens and on the outskirts of the city in a grove sacred to Apollo he founded a school, the Lyceum. Here he conducted and organized research on many subjects and built the first great library of antiquity (Blackburn, 24). What remains is an enormous body of writing on virtually every topic of philosophical significance. Much of it consists of lecture notes, working drafts and accounts of his lectures written by others (Audi, 1999: 45).

The love lives of antiquity's great philosophers have given rise to some curious anecdotes. Like Socrates, whose married life with Xanthippe was supposed to have been turbulent, Aristotle was put to a difficult test by a strong woman. As tutor to Alexander the Great, Aristotle warned his young pupil of the dangers presented by the female sex. Vexed by his words, Phyllis plotted her revenge. Using the arts of seduction, Phyllis succeeds in awakening a great passion in Aristotle. In hopes of conquering her, the philosopher declares himself ready to do anything. From the Middle Ages up to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, images caricaturing Aristotle spread all across Europe (Zuffi, 2010: 261).

Aristotle and Phyllis was one of the several stories exemplifying the power of woman over men that were very popular in medieval art and literature. These narratives include, to name but three, David and Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah, and Hercules and Omphale. In northern European visual art, the subject has been treated on several occasions before Cranach. Cranach was the first and commonly the only artist to take such erotic and moral themes which had beforehand only been used in graphic or decorative arts, and use them in the 'higher' form of panel painting ([www.sothebys.com](http://www.sothebys.com)).



**Figure 7. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Phyllis and Aristotle*, 1530, oil on panel, 35 x 55 cm, Private Collection.**

Dutch Baroque artist Harmenszoon van Rijn Rembrandt (1606-1669) depicted Aristotle richly dressed and wearing a gold medallion with the portrait of his patron, Alexander the Great (Figure 8). Aristotle rests his hand absently on a bust of Homer, the ancient Greek poet who had achieved literary eternity centuries before with his epic poems “Iliad” and the “Odyssey” ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)).

This imaginary portrait was painted for a wealthy Sicilian nobleman who had asked Rembrandt for a portrait of a philosopher. Rather than choosing a single figure, the inventive artist found a way to present three of the great men of antiquity: Aristotle, Homer and Alexander the Great. Aristotle is shown in his library dressed in the robes of a Renaissance humanist. He rests his hand on a bust of Homer and wears a splendid chain bearing a medallion of Alexander the Great, who had at one time been Aristotle’s pupil. The figure of Homer was certainly based on one of several Hellenistic busts owned by Rembrandt (Burn, 2006: 148).



**Figure 8. Harmenszoon van Rijn Rembrandt, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, 1653, oil on canvas, 137 x 144 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.**

## 2.5. Diogenes (c.400-c.325 B.C.)

The Cynics were strongly influenced by Socrates and were themselves an important influence on Stoic ethics. It was a classical Greek philosophical school characterized by asceticism and emphasis on the sufficiency of virtue for happiness, boldness in speech and shamelessness in action. One story reports that he carried a lighted lamp in broad daylight looking for an honest man, probably intending to suggest that the people he did see were so corrupt that they were no longer really people (Audi, 1999: 200).

The “dog philosophers” probably called after the nickname of Diogenes of Sinope, their most prominent member and founder. In the ancient world, dogs were symbols of lack of shame. For Cynics the virtuous life consisted in an independence achieved by mastery over one’s desires and needs. Happiness demands that one desires nothing and hence lacks nothing (Blackburn, 1996: 91).

Diogenes lived in Athens and perhaps Corinth. He may have been taught by Antisthenes, but it was his life and influence that gave the Cynics their importance. He taught that the right way of life was to have the simplest possible needs and to satisfy them in the most direct way (Blackburn, 106).

Italian Baroque painter Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) painted several versions of the episode illustrating Diogenes casting away his cup on witnessing a young boy drinking water using only his hands (Figure 9).



**Figure 9. Salvator Rosa, *Diogenes Casting Away His Cup*, 1650's, oil on canvas, 148 x 219 cm, Private Collection.**

Dutch Baroque painter Caesar van Everdingen (1617-1678) depicted Diogenes standing in the middle of a crowd and holding up a lantern. Dutch art widely represented this anecdote of the classical times. Asked what he was doing, Diogenes said that he was looking for a man. Bystanders remarked but there are people around, he replied: “*I see not one, for there is no reason in your hearts. You may be men in name, but your brutish lives betray you as animals in reality*”. Everdingen staged the classical story (Figure 10) as a contemporary scene on a typical Dutch town square with portraits of contemporaries (www.wga.hu).



**Figure 10. Caesar van Everdingen, *Diogenes Seeks a True Man*, 1652, oil on canvas, 76 x 104 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague.**

French Neoclassical artist Nicolas-Andre Monsiau (1754-1837) depicted the encounter of Diogenes and Alexander the Great, the king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon (Figure 11). Alexander met Diogenes on the Street, where the philosopher spent his days. Standing over the poet, Alexander inquired what he might do for Diogenes. The answer came back: “*Move a little bit. You are blocking the sunlight.*” As they left Diogenes where they had found him, Alexander’s courtiers abused the old man, pointing out his folly. Alexander said quietly: “*As for me, if I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes.*” (Crompton, 2003: 25).



**Figure 11. Nicolas-Andre Monsiau, *Alexander and Diogenes*, 1818, oil on canvas, 140 x 180 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen.**

## **2.6.School of Athens**

Italian High Renaissance artist Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483-1520) presented the fruitful minds of the ancient world together in his fresco entitled *School of Athens* dated 1511 (Figure 12). This fresco has long been acknowledged as Raffaello’s masterpiece and the perfect embodiment of the classical spirit of the High Renaissance. A group of famous Greek philosophers gathered around Plato and Aristotle (Janson, 2001: 451).

The groups appear to move easily and clearly, with eloquent poses and gestures that symbolize their doctrines. Their natural dignity convey the very nature of calm reason, the Renaissance minds so admired as the heart of philosophy. From the center, where Plato and Aristotle stand, Raffaello arranged the groups of figures in an ellipse with a wide opening in the foreground. In the Stanza della Segnatura, Raffaello reconciled and harmonized not only the Platonists and Aristotelians but also paganism and Christianity (Kleiner, 2010: 465).



**Figure 12. Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, *School of Athens*, 1509-1511, fresco, 500 x 770 cm, Apostolic Palace, Vatican.**

### 3. CONCLUSION

Ancient Greek philosophy created a precious world of thoughts in 6th and 5th centuries B.C. in the Greek cities of west coast Asia Minor. Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Democritus, were among the Presocratic figures depicted frequently on the canvases especially in the Baroque period. Pictures declaring Pythagoras' call for vegetarianism may be seen as a message for a physically and spiritually healthier life. Heraclitus and Democritus, usually shown side by side, present two ways of looking at life: optimistic or pessimistic.

The famous triad in the world of philosophy, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had been the center of attraction for artists. Especially French Neoclassical painters depicted "The Death of Socrates" scene with maturity and also with hope for that wisdom to be an example for their own time. Other than aforementioned picture of David (**Figure 6**), many artists such as Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy, Jacques-Philip-Joseph de Saint-Quentin and Jean Jacques Augustin Raymond Aubert depicted the last moments of the virtuous thinker.

Diogenes of Sinope who founded the Cynic School and purified his life by living in a barrel had also served as an appealing subject for paintings. His longing for a real men in the crowds and denial of everyday luxury had been visualised by the artists to present moral messages.

European art of painting offered ironic and witty examples showing the personal lives of Socrates and Aristotle. Anecdotes relating Socrates with Xanthippe and Aristotle with Phyllis, show the viewers the seductive or humiliating power of women over these learned philosophers.

"School of Athens", the fresco realised by Raffaello is a tribute to the thinkers and scientists of the ancient world. This fresco which offers the chance to see the important names who set the principals of civilisation, philosophy and science all together and many other paintings that visualise the philosophers one by one in their own life stories, carry the ancient world to our day.

The weeping philosopher Heraclitus, the laughing philosopher Democritus, Pythagoras adopting a vegetarian diet, Socrates chosing death rather than sacrificing his ideals... Artists carried fertile messages on how to live a decent life to their audience by picturing precious moments of the philosophers. Aristotle conquered by a strong woman and Diogenes carrying a lamp in broad daylight looking for an honest man, all find a new life on the canvases of their European admirers.

It can be seen that there are many things to be learned not only from these thinkers' writings and teachings but also from their decisions and choices and even frailties in life. Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassical painters enriched the social, moral and existential values of their contemporary viewers by depicting anecdotes of ancient Greek philosophers. This study intends contributing to the field of art history by finding a parallel between art and philosophy and looking at the ancient world through the imagination and sensitivity of artists.

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**Figure 3:** Johannes Moreelse, *Heraclitus*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 59 x 68 cm, Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

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**Figure 4:** Johannes Moreelse, *Democritus*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

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**Figure 5:** Reyer van Blommendael, *Xantippe Dousing Socrates*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 198 x 210 cm, Musée des Beaux Arts, Strasbourg.

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**Figure 6:** Jacques Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787, oil on canvas, 130 x 196 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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**Figure 11:** Nicolas-Andre Monsiau, *Alexander and Diogenes*, 1818, oil on canvas, 140 x 180 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen, Rouen.

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**Figure 12:** Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, *School of Athens*, 1509-1511, fresco, 500 x 770 cm, Apostolic Palace, Vatican.

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