



Summary :

Painter from Ephesus or Kos who flourished in the second half of the 4th c. BC. He studied under Pamphilus of Amphipolis and later travelled to Macedonia, where he met Alexander the Great and followed him to Asia. According to the sources, he was the best painter of Antiquity and had the exclusive privilege of painting the Macedonian king.

Date and Place of Birth

first half of 4th c. BC – Ephesus or Kos

Main Role

painter

1. Biography

Apelles was the son of Pytheas. [Pliny](#) reports that he flourished in the 112th Olympiad (332-329 BC).¹ According to the sources, he was either from [Kos](#) or [Ephesus](#), where he studied under [Ephorus of Ephesus](#).² When he went to Sicyon, he studied by Pamphilus of Amphipolis, who founded the famous Sicyonian School of Painting in the first half of the 4th c. BC. He then travelled to Macedonia, where he met [Alexander the Great](#) and followed him to Asia. According to Pliny, Apelles had the exclusive privilege of painting the Macedonian king, as it happened with Lysippus in sculpture.³ Even if this is not the case, he made several portraits of Alexander and Philip, while in later years he worked in the court of [Ptolemy I](#).⁴ The fact is that Apelles remained in the Macedonian court for a long time and was very close to Alexander.⁵

2. Style and Works

In his writings, which he surrendered to his student Perseus, Apelles presented personal rules of his art as well as appraisals of contemporary and earlier painters.⁶ Apelles was distinguished for his modesty and his non-competitive spirit. This became evident in the incident with [Protogenes](#) of [Caunus](#), whom he had helped in his early career.⁷ Moreover, Apelles admitted that he was inferior to Melantheus regarding *dispositio*, namely the positioning of figures in a painting and to Asclepiodorus regarding *mensurae* (measures).⁸

Pliny stresses the fact that Apelles employed four pigments for his works: white Melian earth, yellow ochre of Attica, the red of [Sinope](#) and atramentum, the black colour, which Apelles prepared by burning ivory.⁹ The dark pigment which he applied to his works made flowery colours look austere. The vibrant colours must have been particularly bright and vivid, unlike the austere ones, which were deeper and darker.¹⁰ Another feature of his art was his genius and inherent grace (*ingenium et gratia*).¹¹

Apelles painted the most renowned picture of Alexander the Great representing him as [Zeus](#) holding the thunderbolt, placed in the [temple of Artemis](#) in Ephesus.¹² Pliny says that the fingers seemed to be projecting and the thunderbolt looked like it was coming out of the painting. Alexander was depicted possibly seated, while the archetype must have been the Phidian statue of Zeus in Olympia. A 1st c. AD wall-painting in the house of the Vettii in Pompei probably resounds the painting of Apelles.¹³ Another two paintings, one with the Dioscuri, Nike and Alexander the Great and the other representing War with his hands tied behind his back and Alexander riding a triumphal chariot, were dedicated by [Augustus](#) to Augustus' forum in Rome.¹⁴ Later on, [Claudius](#) replaced the face of Alexander in both paintings with that of Augustus.¹⁵ The painter may have been inspired by an earlier work of Melantheus, in which he had worked as an assistant; the painting showed Aristratus of Sicyon standing next to a victorious chariot.¹⁶ It has also been suggested that some hollow spaces on a wall in the forum were adorned with Apelles' works.¹⁷



His most renowned painting was Aphrodite Anadyomene (“Aphrodite Rising from the Sea”) intended for [Asclepius](#)’ temple in Kos.¹⁸ Augustus dedicated the painting to [Caesar](#)’s sanctuary.¹⁹ The technique of that painting was so unique that when the lower part was destroyed no one could restore it. [Nero](#) replaced it in the Caesareum with another painting made by Dorotheos. Suetonius reports that [Vespasian](#) offered rich recompensation for the restoration of the statue of [Aphrodite](#) of Kos.²⁰ Apelles started to paint a second Aphrodite, which was left unfinished due to his death.²¹ According to Pliny’s description, the goddess was represented naked emerging from the sea and drying her hair. The painter was inspired by either Pagaspe²² or Phryne, who had come out of the sea in the same way during the Eleusinian mysteries.²³

Pliny reports an adventure of Apelles in the court of Ptolemy, where he was calumniated by another painter, Antiphilus. The incident inspired the painter to create the famous “Calumny”, an allegorical picture described by Lucian.²⁴ The text reports only names, all of them personifications of abstract concepts: Calumny, Ignorance, Reputation, Envy, Scheming, Deceit, Remorse, and Truth. Lucian’s description inspired several Renaissance painters, such as Botticelli, Mantegna and Dürer.²⁵

According to Pliny, Apelles elevated painting to its highest artistic expression.²⁶ His work combined Ionic fineness and grace with the austerity and scientific precision of the Sicyonian School of Painting.²⁷

1. Plin., *HN* 35.79.

2. Ephesus is mentioned in the *Suda* (“Apelles”), Strabo (XIV.642), Lucian (*Μη Πιστ. Α.* 2) and Tzetzes (VIII.392), while Kos is reported only by Pliny (*HN* 35.79). The version involving Kos is probably explained by the reputation of Apelles’ works in the island.

3. Plin., *HN* 35.85. It is certain that other artists, such as Protogenes and Aetion, must have worked on commission for Alexander the Great. Nikias, Philoxenos and Aristeides painted him, if not while he was alive, certainly after his death. See Pliny the Elder, *Περί της αρχαίας Ελληνικής Ζωγραφικής*, 35ο βιβλίο της «Φυσικής Ιστορίας», transl. Λεβίδης, Α. – Ρούσσος, Τ. (Athens 1994), p. 350.

4. Bieber, H.M., *Alexander the Great in Greek and Roman Art* (Chicago 1964), p. 49, supports that Apelles worked for Alexander in a later phase of his career, when the idea of his divine nature was increasing in political importance.

5. Plin., *HN* 7.125; Plut., *Alex.* 4 and *On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander* 2.2.3; Overbeck, J.A., *Die antiken Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen* (Leipzig 1868 – Hildesheim 1959), nos. 1446, 1876-1877. The personal relationship between the painter and Alexander the Great is evidenced by numerous anecdotes, see Plin., *HN* 35.85-86.

6. Plin., *HN* 35.111.

7. Plin., *HN* 35.87-88.

8. Plin., *HN* 35.80.

9. Plin., *HN* 35.92, 35.42. Atramentum was an artificial colour made either from the smut produced after burning resin or tar, or from pine.

10. Lepik-Kopaczynska, W., “Colores floridi und austeri in der antiken Malerei”, *Jdl* 73 (1958), p. 79ff. and *Apelles. Der berühmteste Maler der Antike* (Berlin 1962), p. 24 ff. See Scheibler, I., “Die ‘vier Farben’ der griechischen Malerei”, *AntK* 17 (1974), p. 95, n. 18.

11. Plin., *HN* 35.79-80; Plut., *Demetr.* 22; Quint., *Inst.* 12.10.6.

12. Plin., *HN* 35.92; Plut., *On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander* 2.2.



13. Mingazzini, P., "Una Copia dell'Alexandros Kaeraunophoros di Apelle" *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 3 (1961), pp. 7-17, fig. 1.
14. Plin., *HN* 35.27.
15. Plin., *HN* 35.94.
16. Plut., *Arat.* XIII.2.3.
17. Scheibler, I., *Griechische Malerei der Antike* (1994), pp. 28-29, fig. 5.
18. A series of epigrams of *Anthologiae Graecae* provide a description of the work. See Overbeck, J.A., *Die antiken Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen* (Leipzig 1868 – Hildesheim 1959), nos 1849-1864.
19. Plin., *HN* 35.91; Strabo, XIV.657; Overbeck, J.A., *Die antiken Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen* (Leipzig 1868 – Hildesheim 1959), nos 1847-1848.
20. Suet., *Vespasian* 18.
21. Plin., *HN* 35.92; Cic., *Fam.* I.9.15 and *Off.* III.2.10; Overbeck, J.A., *Die antiken Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen* (Leipzig 1868 – Hildesheim 1959), nos 1864-1866. The type of the rising Aphrodite, probably due to the influence of Apelles' painting, has also been traced in a statue from the Vatican and the body of a statue exhibited in the Louvre. See Swindler, M.H., *Ancient Painting* (1929), p. 270, n. 13. The descriptions of the work must have inspired some Renaissance painters, who painted the same theme, such as Tiziano and Botticelli.
22. It is also found as Campaspe, Pancaste or Pakate: Σταματάκος, I., *Λεξικόν της Αρχαίας Ελληνικής Γλώσσης* (Athens 1994), "Πακάτη", p. 1197.
23. Plin., *HN* 35.89; Lucian, *Cal. D.* 2-5; Overbeck, J.A., *Die antiken Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen* (Leipzig 1868 – Hildesheim 1959), no. 1874.
24. Plin., *HN* 35.89; Lucian, *Cal. D.* 2-5; Overbeck, J.A., *Die antiken Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen* (Leipzig 1868 – Hildesheim 1959), no. 1874.
25. Swindler, M.H., *Ancient Painting* (1929), p. 271, pic. 443; Robertson, M., *A History of Greek Art* (Cambridge 1975), p. 494, note 126; Scheibler, I., *Griechische Malerei der Antike* (München 1994), pp. 43-45, pic. 9, 10.
26. Plin., *HN* 35.79.
27. Swindler, M.H., *Ancient Painting* (1929), p. 270.

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Glossary :

	forum
	The roman agora. Public market-place, open square or place of assembly for judicial and other public business in a Roman town or city.

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