

## Poetry and Music in Antiquity



Apollo was often depicted as a beautiful youth with hair tied in a knot on top of his head. [Learn more about this work of art.](#)

In ancient Greece, the center of the universe was said to be located in the innermost sanctuary of the Temple of Apollo, the god of poetry and music. Greek citizens would visit this sanctuary to seek advice from the Oracle of Apollo, who provided guidance in matters of politics and personal affairs. The importance given to Apollo is indicative of the central role of poetry and music in the ancient world.

### Reciting Epic Verse

According to Plato, boys were expected to study lyric poets and sing while playing the lyre in order to become more cultured and better behaved. In fact, telling stories in the form of poetic verse was a big part of life in ancient times. At social gatherings and festivals, poets recited stories of their people's history and tales of their pantheon of gods and goddesses in long, **rhymed** narratives written in **epic verse**. Perhaps the most famous of the epic poems that emerged from Imperial Rome (27 BCE to 476 CE) were those by the poet Ovid, who brought many of the ancient tales together in his masterpiece, *Metamorphoses*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a central character in Ovid's narrative poem is the chief deity of poetry and music—Apollo. His chariot drove the sun, which measured the day, and since the arts of poetry and music rely on time well measured, they came under his control. In one story from *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells the tale of Apollo pursuing the beautiful nymph Daphne, who did not reciprocate his love. In order to escape Apollo, Daphne was transformed into a laurel tree. In this sculpture by Antonio Canova, Apollo is depicted crowning himself with laurel leaves. Traditionally, heroes, athletes, and poets were crowned with laurel leaves, a sacred symbol of Apollo.

Laurel leaves and a lyre are commonly used to represent Apollo in art. The lyre has been described as either an invention by Apollo or an invention by Hermes to appease Apollo. Moreover, the recitation of stories in antiquity would be performed with musical accompaniment. For example, in the Greek poet Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, the hero Achilles plays the lyre while singing of the deeds of other heroic men. To perform epic poems such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, a poet would have to sing the poem in sections over the course of several days.



[Zoom in](#)

Antonio Canova's statue *Apollo Crowning Himself* was inspired by an episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. [Learn more about this work of art.](#)

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[Zoom in](#)

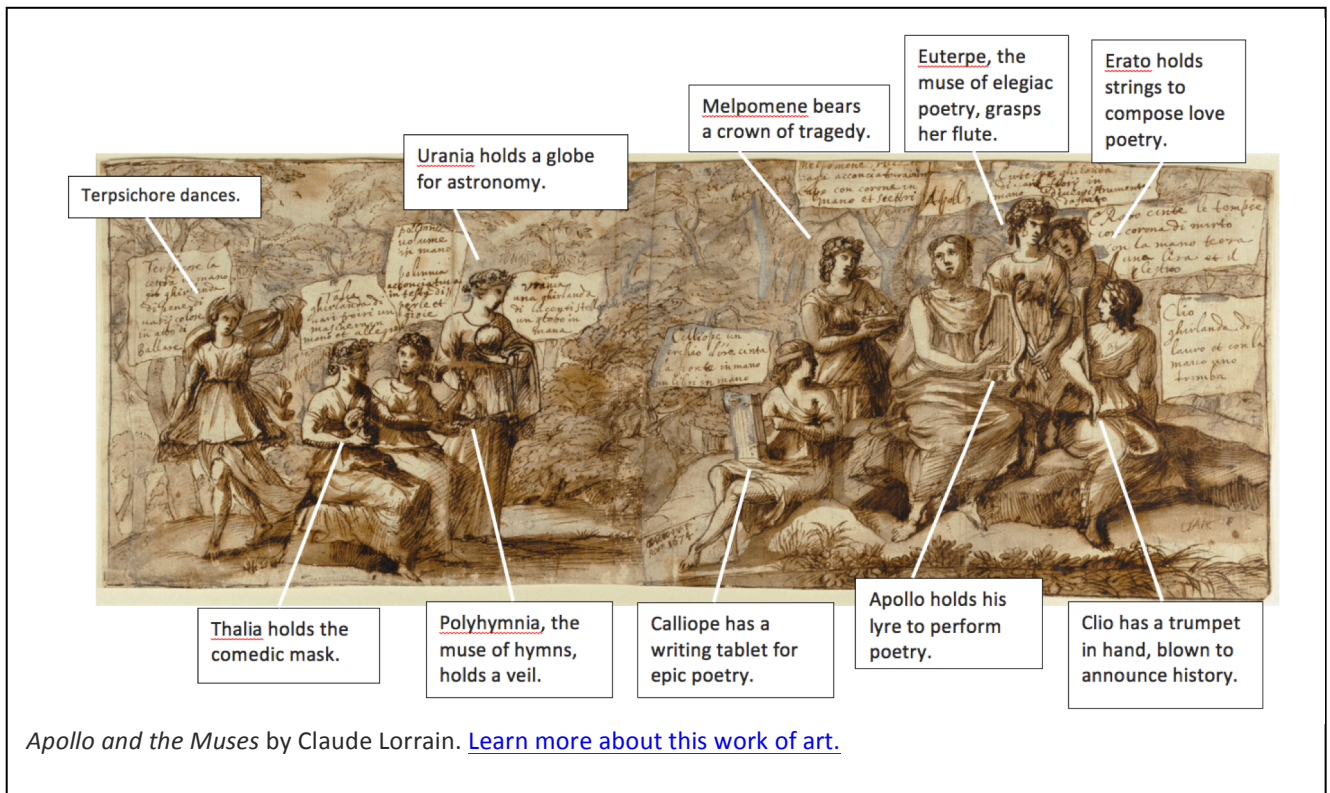
In this detail of a scene on a volute-krater (a large mixing vessel for a drinking party), Apollo is depicted with a type of lyre called a kithara. [Learn more about this work of art.](#)

Apollo and the Muses

The philosopher Aristotle once asserted that a historian’s job is to relate what has happened, while a poet’s job is to relate what may happen or what could have happened. For assistance in this act of creativity, even the god of poetry and music looked for inspiration for his poems. Specifically, he turned to the muses, as depicted in this drawing by Claude Lorrain.

These goddesses, patrons of the arts, were considered the source of knowledge.

In Lorrain’s drawing, the characters gather along the Castalian spring, which was famous in ancient times as a source of inspiration and learning. The word *museum* derives from the word *muse*, because museums are places for inspiration.



*Apollo and the Muses* by Claude Lorrain. [Learn more about this work of art.](#)