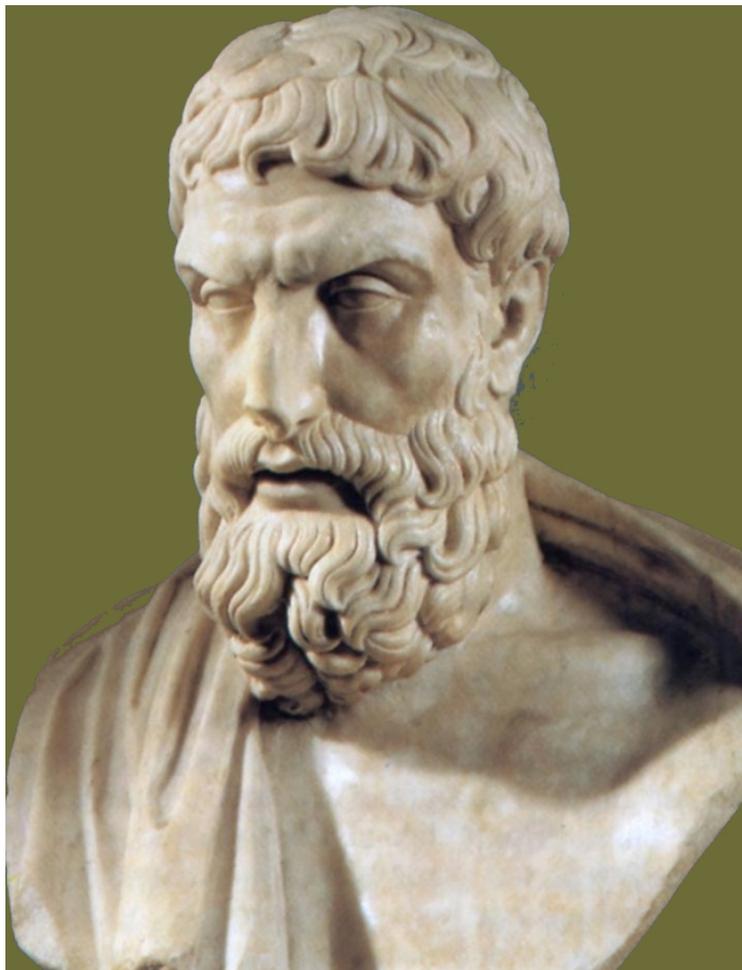


# How became known to us the portrait of the Athenian philosopher Epicurus

Takis Panagiotopoulos<sup>1</sup>



*The Athenian philosopher Epicurus*  
*Bust from pentelic marble - Museum Capitoline Rome*

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<sup>1</sup> First publishing in “Anthology of Epicurean Philosophy” in Greek language. Many thanks to Dimitri Lostromo for the translation help.

The Athenian philosopher Epicurus, lived from 341 to 270 BC. His Philosophy quickly spread to many places even in his epoch. The biographer of philosophers Diogenes Laertius<sup>2</sup> says about Epicurus: “..his own country who honored him with bronze statues, his friends who are so numerous that they could not be counted in whole cities”.

In the following centuries Epicurean philosophy continued to spread throughout the civilized world. The portrait of Epicurus was always a point of reference and was particularly prevalent. Cicero in his work «De finibus» puts the Roman Epicurean Atticus<sup>3</sup> saying: "Even we wanted to we can not forget how Epicurus looks like, and this because the Epicureans have his image not only in paintings but also in cups and rings".<sup>4</sup>

In the years that followed, the decline of the Roman Empire and the advent of Christianity marked the beginning of the era that led to the collapse of Greek culture and the advent of the era called the Dark Ages or Middle Ages. Epicurean philosophy was swept by the whirlwind of these dark times and almost disappeared. The texts of Epicurus and other Epicureans Philosophers destroyed. The same happened to the busts and statues of Epicurus and other Epicureans that were crumbled or buried, or incorporated as building material.

Until the 12th century we don't have any reference about Epicurus except than an offensive reference in «Suda» a middle ages dictionary.<sup>5</sup> From the 12th to the 14th century there are a few references to Epicurean philosophy, and what there was relied on sources like Cicero, Seneca, Augustine and others non epicureans. Purely epicurean sources known nowadays were not even accessible to thinkers of that whole era. Argues Leonidas A. Alexandridis (2014 p.133): "Only a millennium after the beginning of the destruction of the Epicureans, their written works and monuments, it only became possible to reconstruct the thought of the philosopher after finding in 1417, the amazing poem by Lucretius «De Rerum Natura», dated to the first century BC, and the composition that the 3rd AD century Diogenes Laertius made about the major philosophical schools of antiquity." For many centuries after the end of civilization, the authentic Philosophy of Epicurus was unknown also and his portrait.

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<sup>2</sup> Diogenes Laertius, Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, Book 10

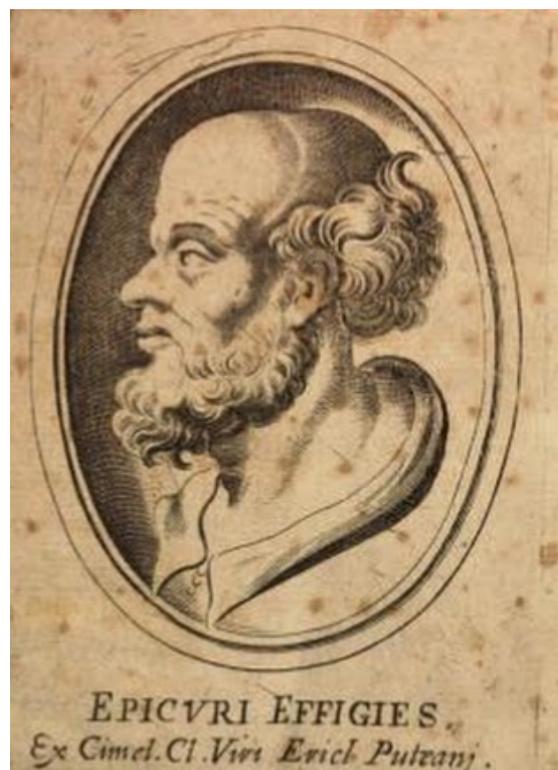
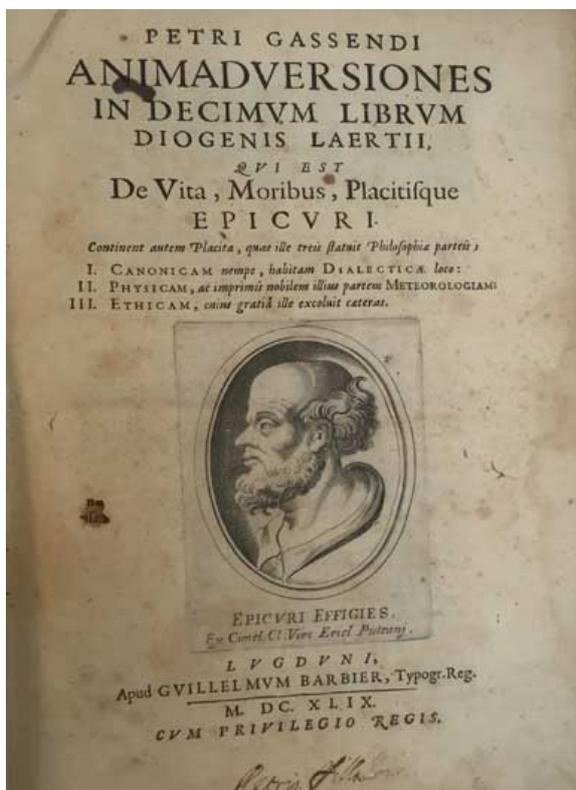
<sup>3</sup> Titus Pomponius Atticus, Rome 110-32 BC

<sup>4</sup> “...nec tamen Epicuri licet oblivisci, si cupiam, cuius imaginem non modo in tabulis nostri familiares, sed etiam in poculis et in anulis habent”. - Cicero, De finibus 5.3.

<sup>5</sup> Suda lexikon 10<sup>o</sup> c. AC.

## The attempts to recover the portrait of Epicurus

In the process of recovering the Epicurean writings that were rescued within the above works, scholars of the Renaissance were impressed by Epicurus. They wanted to restore, not only the text, but also the substance of his philosophy, and to find his portrait. In this, their research was initially unsuccessful. Early archaeology had brought to light many portraits of philosophers, but unfortunately they were anonymous and one could only conjecture about which version was a true depiction of the philosopher Epicurus.



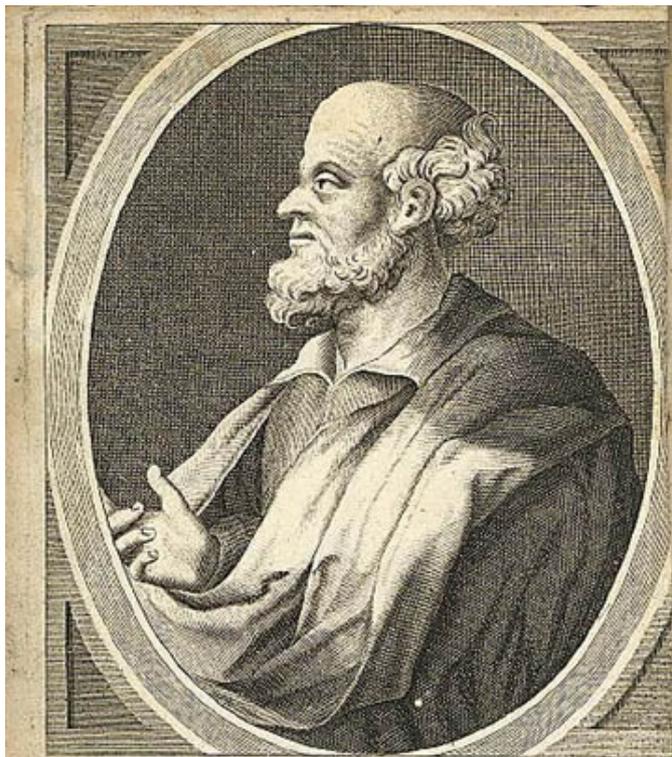
*Epicurus Gassendi, a sketch by Puteanus*

According Bernard Fischer<sup>6</sup>, (1981, p.130) Gassendi in his famous work «Animadversiones in librum X Diogenis Laertii» in 1647, had included a picture of Epicurus, as was imagined by Puteanus who had first published a letter to Maximilianus Plovverius several years before, in 1612.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Bernard Frischer is a leading virtual archaeologist and the author of seven printed books, three e-books, and dozens of articles on virtual heritage, Classics, and the survival of the Classical world. <http://frischer.org/>

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Jean-Marie Guyau<sup>7</sup>, says in his work «Le morale d 'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines», 1878: "He had (Gassed) in the hands of two replicas of his portrait. One that his friend Naude had sent him. The other, made according to a relief given by Henri Dupuy, scholar from Louvain. Gassendi mentions himself the laudatory inscription with which Henri Dupuy had accompanied the portrait by this words: '*admire, my friend, the soul of the great man still breathes through his characteristics. It is Epicurus, with his eyes and his face. Admire this picture, it justifiably draws all eyes*' ".<sup>8</sup>



*Epicurus Howenius*



*Epicurus Ludovisi*

In 1667 Gabriel Naude published his «Epistolae». In this work there are a letter to Gassendi which including an incorrect sketch of Epicurus had been produced from a statue found at Villa Ludovisi in Rome with the help of the painter Henricus Howenius.<sup>9</sup> In a later edition (1656) of «Animadversiones in librum X Diogenis Laertii» Gassendi preferred to use the sketch by Henricus Howenius.

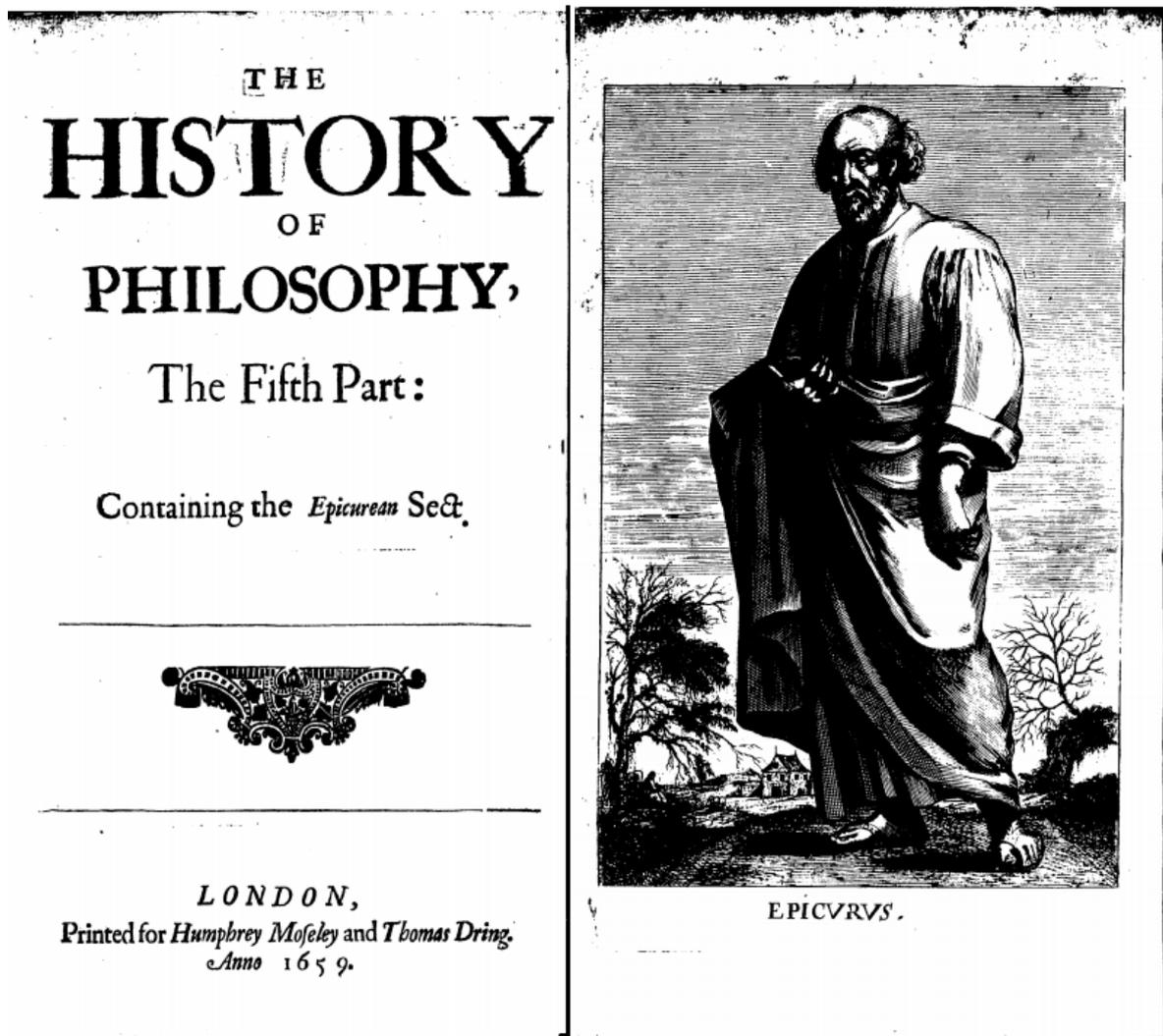
<sup>7</sup> Jean-Marie Guyau (1854-1888) French philosopher

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Marie Guyau, 1878, «*Le morale d 'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines*», Greek translation by Leonidas A. Alexandridi.

<sup>9</sup> Epicurus Gassendi as picture had publish in 3d and 4th Panhellenic Symposium Epicurean Philosophy by C.Yapijakis (2013, p.179) and by Leonidas Alexandridi (2014, p.134)

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In 1659 released «The history of philosophy» by Thomas Stanley containing a presentation of the Epicurean philosophy from Gassendi work (in English translation from the Latin original). There is included another imaging effort of philosopher Epicurus, hypothetical, of course.

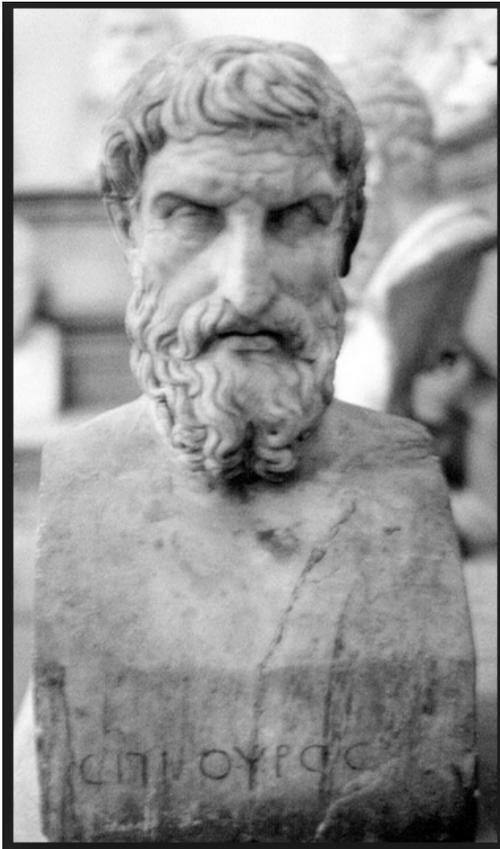


*Fantastic image of Epicurus by Thomas Stanley, 1659*

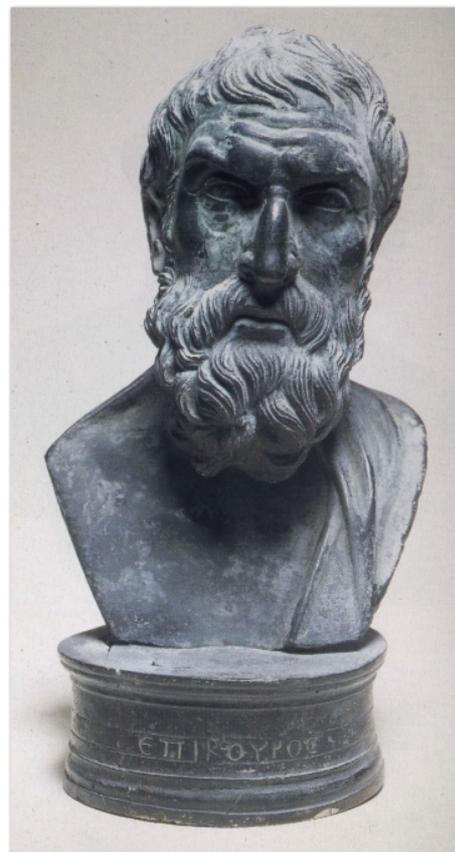
The effort to recognize the portrait of Epicurus continued thereafter. As we read in the work of Bernard Frischer, «The Sculpted Word: Epicureanism and Philosophical Recruitment in Ancient Greece», there were and others who tried to deliver statues and busts of anonymous philosophers as Epicurus. All attempts have proved unsuccessful. This was confirmed when by benevolent fate discovered the first inscribed bust of Epicurus.

### **The inscribed busts of Epicurus**

The discovery of the first inscribed busts of Epicurus happened only in 1742 in Rome. During works on the construction of the portico to the church St Maria Maggiore, they accidentally discovered a double bust of Epicurus with Mitrodorus, which were inscribed with their names (Frischer, 1982, p. 151).



*The marble bust from St Maria Maggiore<sup>10</sup>  
Rome, with the name of Epicurus.  
Museums Capitolini, Rome*



*The bronze bust from Vila dei Papiri  
with the name of Epicurus<sup>11</sup>.  
Museum of Napoli.*

The double statue was immediately placed in the collection of Pope Benedict 14th (The British Museum, 1836, p.14). The discovery was great because it finally became known what Epicurus and also Mitrodorus looked like. It also entailed the identification of remaining anonymous busts with their form.

In 1753 there was the discovery of the second inscribed bust of Epicurus when a small bronze found in the Villa of Papyrus at Herculaneum, Italy, that was covered by

<sup>10</sup> Nearby, in Villa Casali, founded at 1775 a same double bust. The British Museum «*The Townley Gallery*», 1836, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> At the same place founded the bust of Hermarhus the first scholar of Garden after Epicurus.

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the ashes of Vesuvius. In this way, it was finally confirmed as the picture of Epicurus. Total thirty busts of Epicurus have been found, all copies of the Roman period from Hellenistic prototypes. As Bernard Frischer says (1982, p. 175), "*After so many centuries, we met again the gentle character of this great philosopher*".

### **Epicurus Statues**

Today we are aware of seven statues that depict Epicurus, unfortunately they are all headless. They have the same theme, the philosopher seated, with chiton robe holding a rolled up papyrus. Just in 1912 it became known that these types of statues depicted Epicurus, (Bernard Frischer, 1982 pg. 155).



*Status of Epicurus without the head.*

*Discovered by archaeologist Georgios Dontas in Athens at late of 60s.*

The last two statues were found by the Greek archaeologist George Dontas, in the area between the Kerameikos and Metaxourgeio at the center of Athens in the 1960's, as reported by the same (Dontas, Archeological Paper, 1971).

Overall in the region were found five statues of natural size from Pentelic marble, built-in to a rough building "*an age of desolation*" as Dontas characteristically said. The two belong to Epicurus and are copies of a famous statue of the philosopher

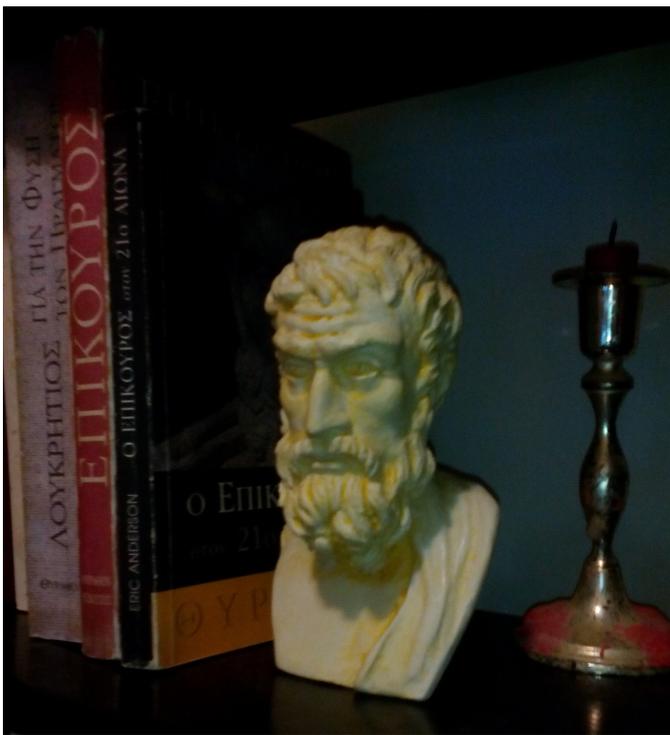
*How became known to us the image of the Athenian philosopher Epicurus - Takis Panagiotopoulos*

of 270-280 BC. The rest belong to others Epicureans philosophers. According to these findings, Dostas speculates that in this area must have been the philosophical school of Epicurus, the famous Garden. The location of the Garden and the article by Donta has already been discussed by friends of Epicurean philosophy in Athens (Yapijakis, 2010).

### **The portrait of Epicurus in our epoch**

Nowadays the portrait of Epicurus can be had the same as in antiquity for lovers of epicurean philosophy and beyond. The bust of Epicurus outside of museums is widely available, as are pictures in many books and websites. He has inspired artists to create his form again today in paintings.

In foreign museums there are available modern copies of his busts. Recently, three-dimensional printing technology was used to produce busts out of various materials.

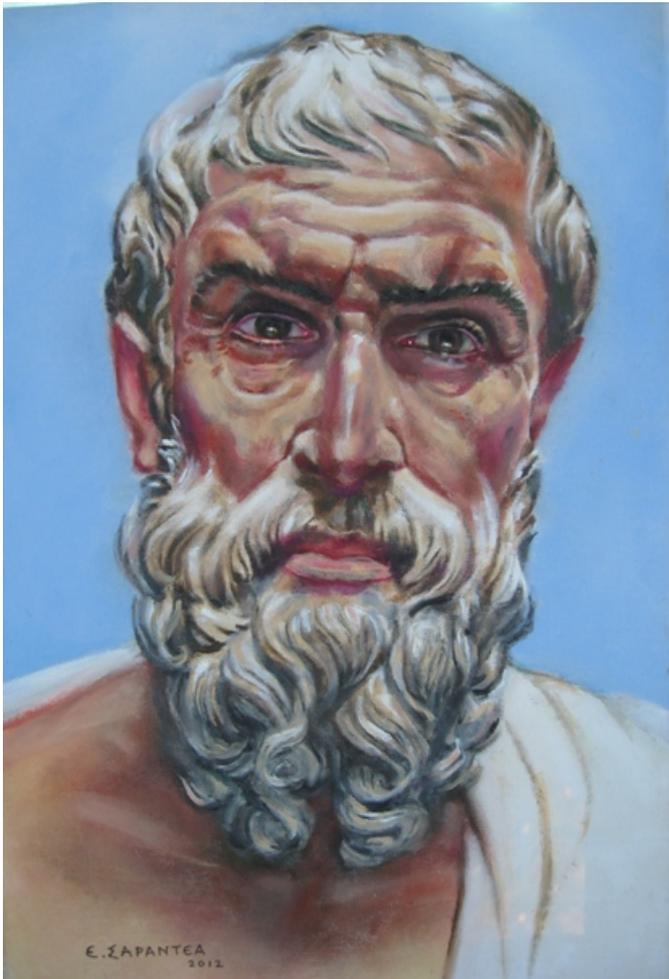


*Epicurus bust  
Exikias Trivoulides*

In Greece the painter Evi Sarantea<sup>12</sup> make “The Portrait of Epicurus” (2012) and the sculpture Exikias Trivoulides make a replica of “Epicurus bust” (2015), for the first time in modern Greece.

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<sup>12</sup> Evi Sarantea works - [www.akg-images.de](http://www.akg-images.de)



*Epicurus portrait  
Evi Sarantea*

*"In my painting, I have shown the face of Epicurus as long and narrow, with a small mouth, and sparse hair coming down on to the forehead - as he is shown in the bronze copy of the head of the original of the first half of the third century BC which is exhibited in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, i also taking other evidence into account. The typical deep wrinkling of the brow suggests intense and constant intellectual activity, while the rest of the face exudes the calm and imposing qualities which the philosopher has made his own".<sup>13</sup>*

Evi Sarantea

## **Epilogue**

By benevolent luck and many research, enlightened people, but also the admiration of the Epicureans of all time for the great philosopher, that today "we can not forget about the form of Epicurus even if we wanted to, because, the Epicureans have his image not only in paintings but also in bowls and rings ..." as said in ancient times by Atticus.

Athens 2017

*Takis Panagiotopoulos*

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<sup>13</sup> From the book INSIDE THE STATUE, REPRESENTATIONS OF ANCIENT GREEK BASED SCULPTURES p.149-150 (Greek edition) ΤΟ ΕΝΤΟΣ ΑΓΑΛΜΑ, ΑΝΑΠΑΡΑΣΤΑΣΕΙΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΩΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΩΝ ΒΑΣΙΖΟΜΕΝΕΣ ΣΕ ΓΛΥΠΤΑ, Εκδόσεις ΠΕΡΙΠΛΟΥΣ

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