



## Girodet-Trioson, Anne-Louis (1767-1824)

by James Smalls

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A French neoclassical painter of historical and mythological scenes, Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson is a transitional figure whose works lie somewhere between the rationalism of neoclassicism and the flights of fantasy associated with romanticism.

Born into the bourgeoisie, he became a painter against his parents' objections. As a youth, he studied with the renowned neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). Of all David's students, Girodet was the most gifted and the most erudite. He was also the most rebellious and competitive.

He quickly grasped the intellectual and stylistic tenets of neoclassicism, but soon set out to violate those very principles in his quest for fame and originality. Instead of taking his subject matter from Roman histories, as Davidian neoclassicism had required, he turned instead to Greek myths for inspiration. Instead of emphasizing linearity, sculptural form, and masculine virtues, Girodet chose to play with these elements by reversing their expected effects.

In his attempt to forge a new aesthetic sensibility, the homoerotic, the effeminate, and the androgynous played significant roles. These experiments can be seen in his most famous work, *The Sleep of Endymion* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), painted in Italy in 1791 and exhibited in Paris in 1793.

The painting was a critical and public success and earned Girodet a reputation as a poet of paint and brush. The critics loved the painting because of its unconventional treatment of a conventional myth. They admired its mysterious, innovative lighting effects and its dreamy, lyrical, and nocturnal mood. The startlingly original work had a lasting effect on how the male body is represented in art. Even David was not immune to its influence.

*The Sleep of Endymion* highlights androgyny as a visual theme and provokes an erotic response from the viewer to the nude male body. The image exploits feminine characteristics such as the delicate ringlets of hair that suggestively fall about Endymion's shoulders. These curls are complemented by the overall elongation of form and the waxen quality of the flesh. The taut, rigid angularity of David's male figures is gone, replaced by a passive and indolent reclining figure whose pose is typically associated with the female nude.

The protagonist of the scene is the shepherd boy Endymion, a mortal, asleep in a hidden alcove located atop the mythical Mount Latmos. He was carried here by the moon goddess, Selene, who, appearing in the painting in the guise of moonbeams, shines through the parted foliage held by a smiling overgrown hybrid figure of Cupid (the boy-god of love) and Zephyr (the personification of the West Wind). She shines upon Endymion, caressing, penetrating, and inhabiting his supple body as he sleeps. The painting is a successful realization of timeless and dreamy erotic desire.

Throughout his long career, Girodet chose to concentrate on subjects that confused and conflated masculine and feminine characteristics. In his turbulent and exotic *Revolt at Cairo* (1810, Versailles), which

attests to his interest in Orientalism, a charged homoerotic energy emerges from a physical and emotional contrast between men of different races and psychological dispositions.

After 1810, Girodet's production of large-scale paintings slowed considerably. He became bitter, taciturn, and misanthropic, devoting most of his efforts to translating and illustrating classical literature.

These illustrations, called his "anacreonic" drawings, concentrate on rendering classical stories of heterosexual and homosexual love through a lightness and delicacy of line.

Although the artist's sexual orientation cannot be determined with certainty, he was widely rumored to engage in homosexual affairs. It may well be that his relationship with another painter, Jean-Pierre Piquignot, who died in 1807, was the most meaningful of his life.

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