



## Subjects of the Visual Arts: Endymion

by Martin D. Snyder

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In classical mythology, Endymion was a handsome, young shepherd (sometimes king) from Elis or Caria. Selene (Phoebe, Artemis, Diana), the moon goddess, fell in love with him and consequently neglected her lunar responsibilities.

As a result, Zeus offered Endymion a choice, death in whatever way he preferred or eternal sleep with perpetual youth. Endymion chose the latter. He slept in a cave on Mount Latmus where Selene continued to visit him.

The Greek poet, Licymnius of Chios, however, suggests that it was the god Hypnos (Sleep) who loved Endymion and lulled him to sleep with his eyes open so that the god might forever gaze into them.

Endymion was represented in ancient art as recumbent, usually nude or semi-nude, asleep, with one arm crooked behind his head. This motif appears commonly on sarcophagi of the Roman Empire. In the funerary context, the presence of Endymion suggests the possibility of a dream-like existence beyond death.

In domestic paintings and mosaics, the figure of Endymion is primarily erotic and represents not only male physical beauty, but also youthful innocence and sexual accessibility.

Numerous post-classical artists painted the story of Endymion, for example, Titian (ca 1508), Tintoretto (ca 1575-1580), Poussin (ca 1630), Rubens (ca 1636), van Loo (1731), and Fragonard (ca 1753-1755). Most notable is *Endymion Asleep* (1793) by Anne-Louis Girodet who captured not only the subtle effect of moonlight, but also the utter passivity of the supine Endymion.

In Jungian psychology, Endymion exemplifies the *puer eternus* (eternal youth), ageless, timeless, and fragilely connected to the invisible world, yet--at the same time--narcissistic, phallic, effeminate, and pensive.

Homoerotic photographers have evoked these "Endymion" qualities in numerous untitled compositions--luminous dreamboys, forever young and eternally available. A titled example is George Platt Lynes' *Endymion and Selene* (ca 1939).

### Bibliography

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**Top:** An ancient marble frieze depicting Endymion.

**Above:** *Endymion Asleep* (1793) by Anne-Louis Girodet.

Adapted from a photograph in Licht, Hans, pseudonym of Paul Brandt.

*Sittengeschichte Griechenlands in Zwei Bänden und Einem Ergänzungsband*. Dresden und Zürich: Paul Aretz Verlag. 1925-1928.

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### **About the Author**

**Martin Snyder** is Associate Secretary of the American Association of University Professors and Director of Planning and Development. His academic interests focus on the continuity of the classical tradition, particularly in American literature and art.