

John Addington Symonds opened his essay "Antinous" by stressing the historical existence of his subject, "no phantom of myth, but a man as real as Hadrian... as real as any man who ever sat for his portrait." Indeed, the likeness of Antinous survives in a hundred sculpted portraits, a face recognizable even in the guise of a dozen deities. Yet the personal history and psychological character read into his inert expression have been anything but static, subject rather to the shifting fantasies and fears of the modern era. The name of Antinous, once applied broadly to classical statues of male youths, came to carry more provocative meanings in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in conjunction with new ideas about the nature of homosexuality. No longer simply praised for beauty or condemned for sin, the face and figure of Antinous came to represent Hadrian's melancholy passion and an enigma of same-sex love, contemplated in treatises both psychoanalytic and poetic.

The impressive number, quality, and range of sculpted images helped mythologized the famous relationship. Writers from Paul Heyse (1865) to Benjamin Rowland (1963) characterized the many sculpted forms as so many ghosts, keeping Hadrian in thrall of his beloved, and continuing to enchant modern viewers. Although individual statues have also inspired fervent reaction, those seeking to document gay history through the icons of Antinous have made particular use of the San Ildefonso group, which features a pair of youthful male figures leaning languorously towards one another. The right-hand youth extends a torch down to a small altar, while keeping a second torch behind his back. These postures led to a range of interpretations, including the Dioscuri and Orestes and Pylades. Although not part of the original Hellenistic composition, a portrait head of Antinous has been part of the group since its recovery, giving the group a clear association with the historical lovers in the Roman era.

The incorporation of Antinous' familiar countenance as an ancient restoration to the left figure inspired new, allegorical interpretations of the ephebic pair. The beardless face and slim physique of the right statue are not easily recognized as the emperor Hadrian, but Friedrich Tieck (1868) suggested this torch-bearing figure be seen as the genius of the emperor. Treated as a coherent image of the emperor and his beloved, the sculpture became a summation of the enigma that is Antinous, as perceived by two very different authors. Symonds considered this explanation key to the very "mystery of Antinous," since it spoke to the eternal spirit of both imperial mates, represented by the two torches. This reading also recast the nature of the erotic relationship between Hadrian and Antinous, stressing their shared status, rather than distinct roles as erastes and eromenos. The portrayal of Antinous as an eroticized double for Hadrian, in sculpted form if not lived body, opened the relationship to identification with less celebratory theories of gay identity. Sulamith Ish-Kishor (1935) imagined Hadrian not merely commissioning but actually carving the San Ildefonso statues. In her "tragedy of the homosexual temperament" Hadrian created the object of his narcissistic desire and also destroyed that very love, through the act of sculpting Antinous.