



*In The Gross Clinic, 1875, opposite, Dr. Samuel David Gross pauses during surgery, scalpel in hand, to lecture to his students. Opposite him Dr. James Barton probes the incision, which Dr. Daniel Apple holds open with a tenaculum. Dr. Charles Briggs holds the patient's legs, the anesthetist is Dr. W. Joseph Hearn, and the clinic clerk taking down the great surgeon's remarks is Dr. Franklin West. The Jefferson Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia.*

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ART

**W**hile French artists were waging a war with the official Salon and its rigid classicism in painting, a young Philadelphian quietly developed a style all his own, which after a long obscurity finally won him a place in the hall of fame of American painters.

He was Thomas Eakins who studied art in Paris but refused to be drawn into the current controversies. With scientific poise and thoroughness he studied the world about him and acquired a precise knowledge of subjects that he considered admirably suited for painting. And he painstakingly developed a technique to match his subjects.

**LIFE.** The only son of a master of penmanship, Benjamin Eakins, and Caroline Cowperthwait, Thomas Eakins was born in Philadelphia on July 25, 1844. Two years after his birth the family moved to a house at 1729 Mount Vernon Street, where three younger sisters were born, and where he was to live all his life, except for a few years of study abroad and his first year of marriage.

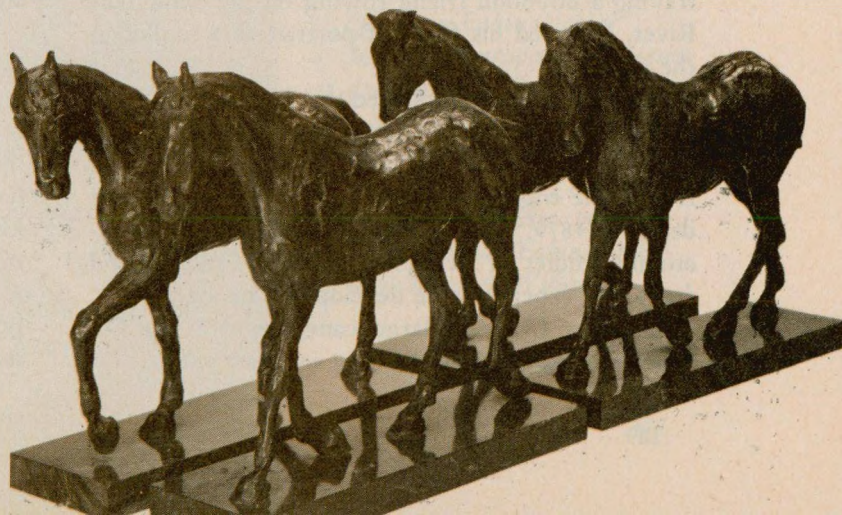
Educated in the public schools, he made an outstanding record in mathematics, sciences and languages, particularly French, and received his A.B. degree at 17. He declined to deliver a valedictory address because he said he had learned everything from books, where others could find the same knowledge for themselves. Besides excelling in his studies, including perspective and mechanical drawing, he developed into a typical outdoors boy, fond of swimming, sailing, fishing, horseback riding. He skated and hunted in the marshes with his father, with whom he maintained close ties.

After leaving school he helped his father teach penmanship for a time, then entered the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the oldest art institution in the United States. There was no regular course of instruction, but students could attend anatomy lectures and draw from casts of ancient classic sculptures, a deadening discipline that Eakins thoroughly detested. The students themselves occasionally organized life classes, monitored by the academy's curator to see that decorum was maintained and no conversation took place between students and female models, who wore masks to hide their identity.

To deepen his knowledge of body structure Eakins also attended the medical students' course in anatomy, including practice in dissection at Jefferson Medical College under the famous surgeon Joseph Pancoast. He became so absorbed in these studies that he once considered taking up surgery as a career.

# Scientific Realist

*Four small bronze figures of horses, 1879, were cast from wax studies for Eakins' painting The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand, for which commission the painter was paid \$500, the highest price he had received up to that time. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, bequest of Lisa Norris Eakins.*





After nearly five years of scientific study of anatomy and drawing, but almost no experience in painting, he obtained his father's consent to complete his training in Paris. In the autumn of 1866 he enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where he studied painting under Jean Léon Gérôme\* and Léon Bonnat, and sculpture under Augustin Alexandre Dumont. Exhausted after three years of intensive work, he spent six months in Spain before returning to Philadelphia in the spring of 1870.

In a studio prepared for him on the top floor of the family home he set to work on studies of members of his family and friends. One of his most ambitious paintings, *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*, portraying a boyhood friend rowing on the Schuylkill River, included his first self-portrait as a sculler in the distance.

After his father complained that he was seeing too many girls and ought to settle down, he became engaged to Katherine Crowell, the sister of an old friend; the engagement lasted seven years until her death in 1879. During these years he resumed anatomic studies at Jefferson Medical College, and from that experience he developed a major project, *The Gross Clinic*, a large canvas portraying Dr.

\* Extremely popular French historical and genre painter.

Samuel David Gross, the greatest American surgeon of his time, demonstrating before students in a medical amphitheatre the removal of a sequestrum, a fragment of dead bone formed as the result of osteomyelitis. Eakins completed the painting in 1875 and submitted it for display at the Philadelphia Centennial. But before the exhibition opened in May, 1876, the committee rejected the work as unsuitable for the art division because the surgeon's hands were blood-spattered (Dr. Gross also disliked this realistic touch), and relegated it to the United States Hospital, where few visitors saw it. Two years later the artist sold the painting, now generally recognized as his most important work, to Jefferson Medical College for \$200.

In 1877 the Union League of Philadelphia gave the artist his first commission, to paint a portrait of newly inaugurated President Rutherford B. Hayes for \$400. Eakins arrived in Washington on a hot summer day and painted the president as he found him working at his desk in his shirt sleeves. Union League officers, flabbergasted by this informal portrayal, at first refused to accept it but finally hung it in the League's club rooms. But it soon disappeared, to be replaced by a more seemly though mediocre version by another artist; no trace of the

controversial Eakins portrait has ever been found.

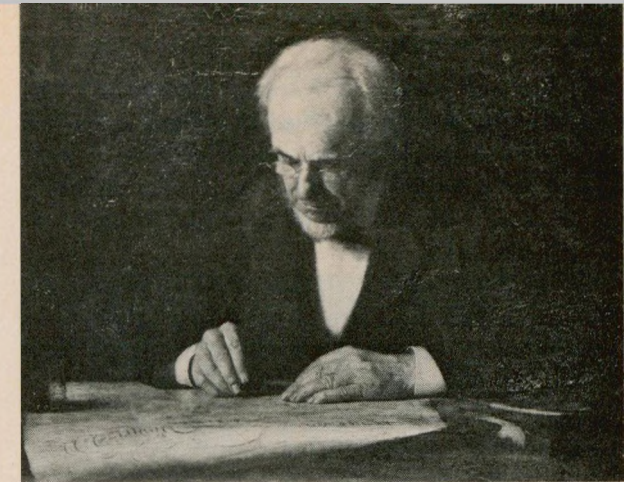
In 1882 the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where Eakins had been teaching anatomy for several years, appointed him director of its school, which became widely known under his administration as the most progressive in the United States. Some women students complained about his teaching anatomy from the naked model, and in 1886, after he removed the loincloth of a male model to demonstrate the action of the pelvis before a women's class, the academy directors demanded that he accept restrictions in posing the model or resign; he resigned and ended a ten-year association.

Nearly 50 of his staunchest partisans among the students, mostly men, withdrew from the academy and founded the Art Students' League of Philadelphia, where Eakins taught for several years. He also lectured on anatomy at the National Academy of Design in New York and Cooper Union. Because of further conflicts arising from his disregard of social taboos he finally ceased to teach in 1895.

**COMMISSIONS.** Because of his refusal to flatter sitters he obtained few commissions. The family of one prominent Philadelphian destroyed his portrait by Eakins rather than let his descendants see it.

When Dr. D. Hayes Agnew retired from teaching surgery at the University of Pennsylvania medical school in 1889 Eakins accepted a commission for a portrait paid for by the professor's students. For a second time he showed a surgeon at work in the operating amphitheatre in *The Agnew Clinic*, which the Pennsylvania Academy refused to hang in its annual exhibition of 1891, for they felt that it was "not cheerful for ladies to look at." The once liberal Society of American Artists also rejected it, and Eakins resigned from the society in protest.

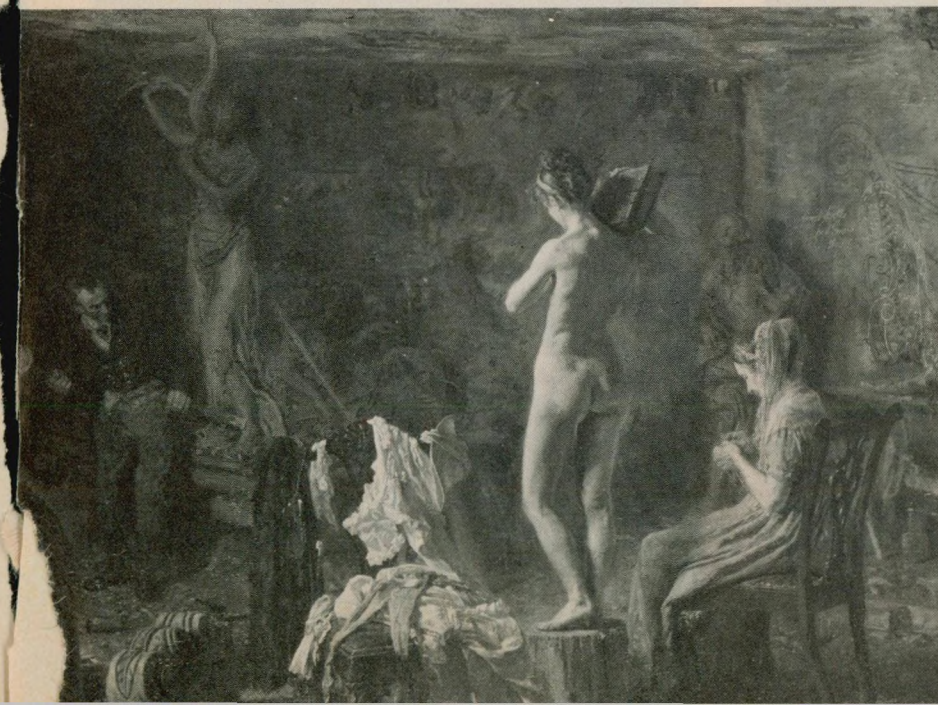
His first sculpture commission consisted of two reliefs, *Spinning* and *Knitting*, ordered by a Phila-



delphia homeowner for a fireplace decoration to be carved by a stonecutter after clay models. The patron refused to accept the models, complaining that Eakins was overcharging him, since a stonecutter would take only a week to carve the reliefs. Eakins defended the fee (believed to be \$400), and indignantly denied that a stonecutter could achieve in a week what it had taken him 20 years of study of the naked figure to accomplish.

His friend, the sculptor William R. O'Donovan, commissioned to do equestrian figures of Lincoln and Grant for the Memorial Arch in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, assigned to Eakins the task of doing the lifesize sculptures of the horses. Eakins chose a thoroughbred named Clinker as a model for Grant's horse but chose his own farm horse Billy as a more appropriate model for the mount of Lincoln the "man of the people." O'Donovan also secured for him a commission for two large reliefs for the Trenton Battle Monument in New Jersey, *The American Army Crossing the Delaware* and *The Battle of Trenton*.

**NUDES.** During his student days in Paris, Eakins wrote home about his contempt for the "smirking

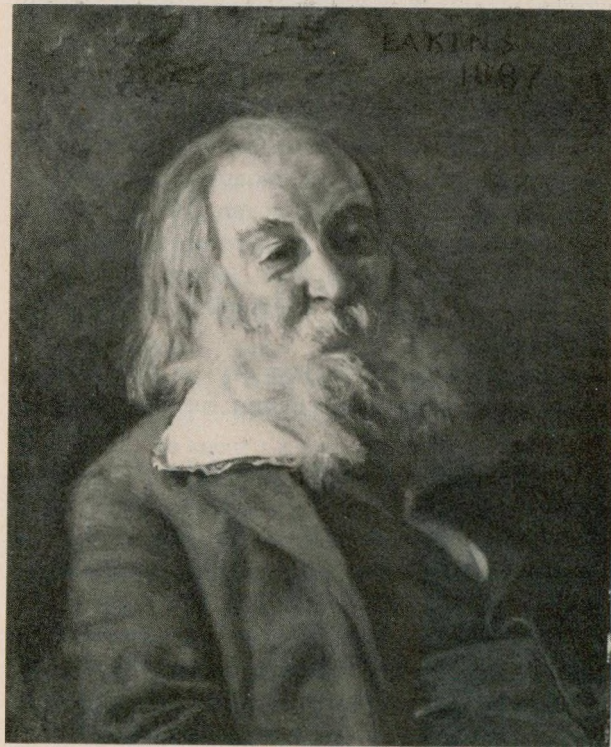


Opposite, Max Schmitt in a Single Scull, 1871. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred N. Punnett Fund and gift of George D. Pratt, 1934. The Writing Master, 1882, above, is a portrait of Benjamin Eakins, father of the artist. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kennedy Fund, 1917. Left, William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River, 1877. Philadelphia Museum of Art, given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and by Miss Mary A. Williams.

goddesses" of the official Salon exhibitions ("I hate affectation"), and he observed that there were few circumstances in which he would paint a woman naked, but if he did he would not distort or falsify her because "she is the most beautiful thing there is, except a naked man."

To justify painting a female nude, he took liberties with an historical subject in *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River*. Rush had carved his sculpture from a clothed model, but for the painter's purpose the model appeared nude, discreetly turned away from the spectator. He did several studies in oil of a female nude related to the model portrayed in the painting of Rush. He also painted a second version of the canvas of Rush at work, as well as another work showing the sculptor graciously assisting his model to step down from the posing stand, the only known frontal nude by Eakins.

He painted several male nudes in a natural setting in *The Swimming Hole*. Likewise motivated by his basically scientific interest was his *Crucifixion*. Remarking that he had never seen a Crucifixion in which the figure was really hanging or seemed to be



In 1887 Walt Whitman posed for Eakins who finished the portrait in the spring of 1888. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, general purchase fund, 1917. Addie, 1900, right, is a portrait of Mary Adeline Williams, childhood friend who lived with the Eakinses and with Mrs. Thomas Eakins, gave the painting to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

in the open air, he used as a model for his work his pupil John Laurie Wallace, whom he posed strapped to a cross out of doors.

**TECHNIQUE.** When Eakins painted a seated figure he constructed the floor and chair first to assure that the figure would be solidly situated. He made marks on the studio walls to control the placement and angle of the model's head and the direction of the eyes. He worked with steady persistence, frequently exhausting his models. Before starting work each day on the *Concert Singer*, which occupied him over two years, he would ask the model Weda Cook to sing "O rest in the Lord" from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. While she sang he would study her mouth and throat action "as if under a microscope." He persuaded a famous conductor to pose for the orchestra leader's hand that appears in the foreground.

Eakins greatly admired Velázquez and Rembrandt, and like them he worked in a subdued color range. He made few pencil studies, preferring to do preliminary studies in oil, which he enlarged for the finished work.

In a paper "On the Differential Action of Certain Muscles Passing More than One Joint," which he read before the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences, he reported that in the strain of starting a horse-car the flexors and extensors acted simultaneously. This disproved the contention of physiologists that each muscle has a single function countered by its opposite muscle and that muscular action consisted of a sequence of separate actions.

**PHOTOGRAPHY.** Eakins devised a more scientific method of photographing motion than that of Eadweard Muybridge whom Governor Leland Stanford of California employed to record a galloping horse



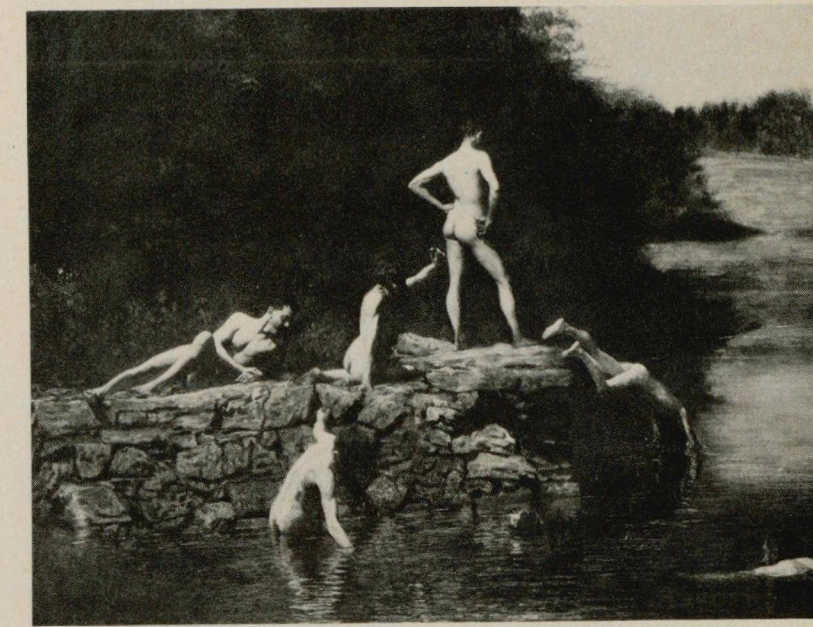
as a means of settling a \$25,000 bet regarding the nature of the horse's gait.

When Muybridge continued his experiments at the University of Pennsylvania, using a battery of cameras triggered in sequence, Eakins consulted with him, then developed a more accurate apparatus consisting of a single camera with two disks, one moving eight times as fast as the other, revolving before the lens; this produced a series of nine or ten images on a single plate. Eakins lectured in 1885 at the Pennsylvania Academy on the motions of the horse, using a zoetrope, a forerunner of the motion picture projector. Historians of the cinema have given Muybridge ample credit but have paid scant attention to Eakins' original contribution, which influenced Muybridge.

**PERSONALITY.** Thoughtful, sober, a good listener, Eakins had many friends among scientists as well as artists. He participated in an informal discussion group, mostly University of Pennsylvania professors, that met every Sunday evening.

He remained aloof from the world of wealth and fashion, although he was friendly with fashionable painters like William Merrit Chase and the younger John Singer Sargent. Chase would often drop into his studio and they would engage in rifle practice in an improvised shooting gallery. Eakins crisply characterized their difference in outlook by calling Chase's studio an atelier and his own a workshop.

The Concert Singer, 1892 (Philadelphia Museum of Art, given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary A. Williams) and The Swimming Hole, 1883 (Fort Worth Art Center Museum, purchased by Friends of Art, Fort Worth 1925.)



One of his closest friends was his favorite pupil at the Art Students' League in Philadelphia, the young sculptor Samuel Murray, who shared his studio for more than ten years. Murray introduced him to the world of prizefighting, which he portrayed in two major canvases of his later years.

Walt Whitman noted: "Eakins has no parlor galantries but something vastly better. At first sight he might be taken to be negative in quality, manner, intuition, but that surface impression wears off after a few meetings." Whitman, who agreed to sit for the painter in 1887, at first thought that his portrait looked glum but he later acknowledged that the more he looked at it "the profounder seems its insight."

Eakins began his working day very early and usually went to bed by nine. He disliked smoking, did not drink coffee or tea but enjoyed wine. In his workshop he wore an old pair of trousers and an undershirt and even on social occasions he shunned the prevailing starched look.

All his students at the Pennsylvania Academy called him Tommy. When he came to the life class, he always held the door open for his big brown setter and said "Come in, Harry." Harry would sit quietly by his master's chair throughout the session. He cautioned his pupils not to break any bones in constructing a figure and to make the pelvis wide enough to fasten on two leg bones; "If it's a wom-

*In Between Rounds, 1899, the fighter is Billy Smith and timekeeper is Eakins' newspaper friend Clarence Cranmer. Scene is the Arena at Broad and Cherry Streets, Philadelphia. Philadelphia Museum of Art, given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Mary A. Williams.*



an, give her a pelvis wide enough so that she won't die in childbirth."

One of his most brilliant pupils at the Academy was Susan Hannah Macdowell who had begun to study with him after being strongly impressed by *The Gross Clinic*. They were married in 1884 and although they had no children, their house was full of nephews and nieces. There was also a menagerie of dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, tame rats and mice and a turtle.

**RECOGNITION.** In a prophetic commentary William Clark Jr., art critic of the *Evening Telegraph* in Philadelphia, wrote when *The Gross Clinic* was first exhibited: "We know of nothing greater that has ever been executed in America." But this estimate stood alone, and the *New York Tribune* called it "powerful" but "horrible" and concluded that it should not have been painted; also negative were the *New York Times* and Philadelphia art critics.

Not a single magazine article appeared about Eakins in his lifetime but at the turn of the century there were published books on American art by Sadakichi Hartman and Charles Caffin with praise of the artist, anticipating the view widely expressed in the next century that Eakins belonged with Winslow Homer in the front rank of American painters.

Eakins also gained increasing institutional recognition: an honorable mention at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900, a gold medal at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo the following year, the Temple gold medal at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1904, the Proctor prize in 1905 at the National Academy of Design (he had been elected a member in 1902) and second prize at the Carnegie International in 1907. He attached little importance to the medals and left them lying about his studio except for the Temple gold medal.

He appeared in cycling costume for that award, and told the president of the Pennsylvania Academy who handed him the award that the academy had "a heap of impudence" to give him a medal. Then he cycled over to the mint and turned it in for its cash value, about \$75. Much more meaningful to him was the display of *The Agnew Clinic* in the place of honor in an exhibition in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1912 of historic portraits of people of the community. When reporters asked on a later occasion what honors he had been given in his lifetime, he mentioned only that he had been given a reception in Lancaster.

In 1914 the eccentric collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes made Eakins a headline figure by buying a study of Dr. Agnew for about \$5000, more than three times the highest price ever paid for an Eakins painting. Rumors spread that the price might have been \$50,000 (an Eakins today would cost more than double that amount) and reporters hurried to the 75-year-old painter's house to ask his views on the state of American art. He replied: "If America is to produce great painters and if young students wish to assume a place in the history of the art of their country, their first desire should be to remain in America, to peer deeper into the heart of American life, rather than to spend their time abroad obtaining a superficial view of the art of the Old World."

Two years later, after a steady deterioration of his health, which had made it impossible to work except at rare moments since 1910, he died on June 25, 1916; in accordance with his wishes the body was cremated. His total known production is about 320 oil paintings and watercolors and ten pieces of sculpture.

**SUMMING UP.** By Walt Whitman: "Eakins is not a painter, he is a force." 