Portraits of Professional Men in the Gilded Age: An Investigation of the Life and Art of Thomas Eakins

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Portraits of Professional Men in the Gilded Age:
An Investigation of the Life and Art of Thomas Eakins

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Art History from
The College of William and Mary

by

John Eric Starcher

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ........................................................................................................... 2

**Chapter 1** ........................................................................................................... 7  
_Goodrich's Thomas Eakins_

**Chapter 2** ........................................................................................................... 18  
_The History of Eakins Scholarship: Reading Art Through Life_

**Chapter 3** ........................................................................................................... 29  
_Investigating Peculiarities Within Eakins's Oeuvre_

**Chapter 4** ........................................................................................................... 48  
_The Gross Clinic as a Social Portrait_

**Conclusion** .......................................................................................................... 64

**Bibliography** ......................................................................................................... 66
Introduction

Figure 1: **Thomas Eakins Age 35-40.** Photo courtesy of Charles Bregler' Thomas Eakins Collection, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

Thomas Eakins is one of the most controversial painters in the history of American art. In viewing Eakins’s work, one is struck by the physical realism he captured. Discussions of Eakins's work have often revolved around his unusual life and the meaning that his life can be seen to imprint on his paintings. To study Eakins as an artist, then, one must also study Eakins as a man. For better or worse, Eakins’s art must be viewed through the lens of his life. As our knowledge of Eakins’s life has evolved over the 80 years that have passed since Lloyd Goodrich published the first definitive study of Eakins's life and art, so too have scholarly interpretations of Eakins's art changed in order to account for this new information.
Discussion of Method and Limitations

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: 1) to present a history of scholarship on Thomas Eakins and 2) to investigate peculiarities that exist throughout his oeuvre and extrapolate new meaning from these peculiarities. In attempting to accomplish these two objectives I was forced to make decisions that have affected the conclusions of this thesis. In an effort to make these decisions as transparent as possible, I will attempt to summarize my approach.

As I began my research the polarized nature of existing Eakins scholarship immediately became apparent to me. The first two books I read were Goodrich’s 1982 two-volume *Thomas Eakins* and Henry Adams’s *Eakins Revealed*, published in 2005. The tension that exists between these two books set the tone for the rest of my research. Perhaps for this reason I became very interested in the diversity of scholarship addressing Eakins’s life and art. I sought to find among this diversity a middle ground between Goodrich’s idealism and Adams’s cynicism. In writing this thesis I attempted to synthesize such a middle ground.

The ideological middle ground I arrived at is fairly simple in theory. I tried to reconcile, as much as possible, the narrative set forward by Goodrich and the criticisms raised by later scholars based on the Bregler papers. The main result of this process was that Eakins’s character was eliminated from the discussion of his art. The accusations contained within the Bregler papers confirm that we can no longer approach Eakins as a modern hero. At the same time, however, mere accusations do not prove guilt and thus we...

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1 The Bregler papers are a collection of letters, sketches, and other materials in the possession of Charles Bregler’s estate until 1989. These papers were made available to the public for the first time in 1989 and revealed a great deal of new information about Eakins, including details regarding several controversies involving Eakins. A full discussion of these papers and their implications can be found in Chapter 2 of this thesis.
are also unable to denounce Eakins as a villain. What remains, therefore, is a person who is neither a hero nor a villain. In my analysis I chose to focus primarily on the formal qualities of the paintings themselves. I then interpreted peculiarities of Eakins’s art and speculated as to the motivations behind some of his odd choices. In doing this I was forced to make some generalizations about Eakins, but refrained from allowing “character” to reenter the discussion.

I must admit that I am guilty of many of the crimes that I accuse previous scholars of. In writing the summary of Goodrich’s 1933 monograph on Eakins, I had to be selective about what information to include, although I tried to remain as objective as possible. Likewise, I was unable to incorporate every pertinent text into my discussion of the history of Eakins scholarship. The detail I include about each text also varies, but in general I included more complete summaries of works that are directly relevant to later discussions of Eakins’s work. In order to make a clear statement about his work, I found myself making generalizations and oversimplifying aspects of Eakins’s life in order to make them more readily applicable to his art. To make substantive claims about Eakins’s art, I also had to adopt a very narrow perspective when analyzing the peculiarities I investigated. Although I briefly address his images of women, my primary focus was on Eakins’s paintings of professional men. Moreover, Eakins’s photography and sculpture go almost completely unmentioned. Again, this is an unfortunate consequence of my efforts to craft a concise analysis.

The conclusion I reach regarding the meaning behind the odd choices Eakins made in his paintings represents only one interpretation. I do not try to suggest that other readings of his work are wrong or that there are no other valid interpretations of the
peculiarities I investigate. Instead I hope that my arguments present a convincing and useful new lens through which to observe Eakins’s oeuvre.

**Summary of Argument**

Given the complex history of the scholarship, it is important to understand not only *what* past scholars concluded about Eakins’s work but *how* they arrived at their conclusions. This paper will first seek to outline the biographical narrative set out by Lloyd Goodrich in 1933. This narrative has been the starting point for all subsequent Eakins scholarship. In order to understand the evolution of scholarly writing on Eakins it is critical to thoroughly understand this biographical starting point.

Next the paper will trace the history of Eakins scholarship by highlighting and summarizing some of the most influential and important studies of the artist. This chapter will also address the publication of the Bregler papers, which critically altered the course of Eakins scholarship. We will see that Eakins scholars are still struggling to come to terms with the Bregler papers’ implications. Recent attempts to spark a fresh discussion on the subject have failed to do so. Scholars either refuse to abandon assumptions that are no longer tenable or merely tear away at past scholarship without presenting convincing new arguments.

The time is ripe to begin a new discourse on Eakins’s life and art. The obvious peculiarities in his oeuvre, though often dismissed, are in my opinion the key to gaining new insight into his work. This paper will investigate some of these peculiarities, namely Eakins’s preference for dark space and muted color, the nature of the physical and emotional depictions of his sitters, and the recurring theme of being watched and isolation.
in his compositions. By investigating the choices and motivations behind these oddities and interpreting these through our understanding of Eakins’s life, we will, I hope, gain a fresh perspective on the meaning of his oeuvre.

Finally, by applying this new perspective to Eakins’s most famous and enduring work, *The Gross Clinic*, we will uncover new meaning within the image. Eakins’s most “heroic” painting is, just under the surface, a discourse on societal expectations and the isolation of man in the modern age. Eakins’s art is a tragic commentary on Philadelphia society in the second half of the nineteenth century. His inability to achieve professional, social, or personal success tainted his view of the societal forces that condemned him to failure. His work reflects the sadness, darkness, and pressure that he perceived to be the underlying truth of life in the Gilded Age. Isolated, somber, and under the constant gaze of both society and the viewer, Eakins’s sitters are an enduring testament to the dark emotional underside of the Gilded Age.
Chapter 1:

Goodrich’s Thomas Eakins

Published in 1933 during the heart of the Great Depression, Goodrich’s monograph, simply titled *Thomas Eakins; His Life and Work*, found a large audience. The public was ready to accept Eakins as an important artist; “pretty” painting no longer seemed relevant. Eakins’s dark and brutally honest depictions of American subjects that had been dismissed as bleak during his lifetime (1844-1916) were seen as honest, introspective, and insightful.¹ Eakins had gradually gained popularity and praise since his death, but Goodrich was the first historian to attempt to create a comprehensive study of the artist.²

Goodrich’s monograph is primarily a biographical work and does not attempt to interpret Eakins's work. It does, however, create a lens through which to view and interpret Eakins's paintings. The picture Goodrich paints is of a man of good character

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¹ Mumford, 1931, pp. 210-220.
whose artistic honesty and genius were misunderstood by his contemporaries. Goodrich draws a stark comparison between the narrow-mindedness of the Victorian society in which Eakins lived and the progressive nature of Eakins's approach to life, teaching, and art. Eakins, in Goodrich’s view, was a classic example of a neglected genius who fought convention but was unable to achieve success. Eakins refused to alter his artistic principles merely to achieve passing success and fame and instead continued to adhere to his vision of good art even in the face of criticism and professional failure. Eakins was, above all else, interested in producing honest representations of his subjects. This premise became the starting point for all Eakins scholarship over the next 40 years. The following is a summary of the biographical information upon which Goodrich’s work is built.

**Early Life**

Thomas Cowporthwait Eakins was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on July 25, 1844. He spent nearly his entire life in the city of his birth and the art he produced drew its inspiration from the contemporary people and locales of his hometown. Born into an affluent middle class family, Eakins enjoyed a happy childhood. His father was a successful writing master and calligraphy teacher who enjoyed regular employment as an inscriber of official documents and papers. Eakins attended a respected public school and was a good student, displaying a special talent for drafting and drawing from a young age. As a child he was highly athletic and enjoyed a variety of physical activities in which he participated with his father and three younger sisters.

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4 In his book Goodrich divides Eakins’s life into many chapters, but I will present his narrative under the three headings of “early life,” “middle life,” and “old age” for simplicity’s sake.
5 Goodrich, 1933, p 3.
6 Goodrich, 1933, p 5.
Shortly after finishing high school Eakins continued his art studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts where he developed a special interest in the human body. He supplemented his studies at the Academy, which focused almost entirely on drawing from plaster casts, by attending medical classes and studying human anatomy at Jefferson Medical College. Because of these classes, Eakins’s anatomical knowledge of the body grew to be deeper and more scientific than that of artists engaged in any traditional art curriculum. After studying art and anatomy for several years, Eakins felt he had learned all he could in the city of Philadelphia and decided to continue his studies in Paris.

Goodrich discusses Eakins’s time in Europe in great detail, partially because most of the letters to which Goodrich had access were from this period. Eakins arrived in Paris in October of 1866. Utilizing connections he had made through his teachers at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he gained admission to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and began studying under the tutelage of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Eakins had a great admiration for his mentor and his letters home during this period include glowing reports regarding Gerome’s works and style. Gerome specialized in scenes derived from ancient history, Greek mythology, and Oriental themes. He was a demanding teacher but was able to achieve remarkable results with his students, and Eakins quickly began to see improvement under his guidance.

While Eakins's study at the Pennsylvania Academy had been based primarily on drawing from casts and sculpture, the foundation of artistic training in Paris was the nude.

7 Goodrich, 1933, p. 9.
8 Goodrich, 1933, p. 10.
9 Goodrich, 1933, p. 12.
10 Letter to Benjamin Eakins, Nov 11, 1866 Quoted in Goodrich, 1933, p. 11.
11 Letter to Benjamin Eakins, March 21, 1867 Quoted in Goodrich, 1933, p. 11.
For students in French art academies the ultimate goal was to produce naturalistic representations in charcoal or pencil of live models. Students only began painting when they were deemed to have mastered these drawing skills. Eakins was less familiar with drawing nude forms and did not begin painting until 5 months after his arrival in Paris.

Eakins initially struggled with painting. His letters home during this period contain a great deal of frustration regarding painterly technique and controlling and creating vibrant color.\(^\text{12}\) Eakins retained a tendency toward somber and dark color throughout his career that was perhaps in part born of this initial struggle. Despite early difficulties, however, Eakins's letters to his family and friends began to suggest an increased confidence in painting that is reflected in the growing competence of the studies that survive from this period.\(^\text{13}\) In November of 1869 Eakins traveled with several of his friends to Spain and it was there that he completed his first full composition in oils, *A Street Scene in Seville* (1870, Private Collection).\(^\text{14}\) With this work completed, Eakins decided his studies were at an end and, shortly after his return to Paris, set sail for the United States.

**Middle Life**

When Eakins arrived home in 1870 the country had changed. In the aftermath of the Civil War large northern cities such as Philadelphia had experienced growing wealth which had in turn produced a new demand for art and other luxuries. Foreign art was being shipped into the country to decorate the walls of new upper-middle class homes.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) Probably to Benjamin Eakins, Sept. 21, 1867 Quoted in Goodrich, 1933, p. 18.
\(^\text{13}\) Goodrich, 1933, pp. 17, 25.
\(^\text{14}\) Goodrich, 1933, p. 33.
\(^\text{15}\) Goodrich, 1933, pp. 35-37.
While some artists returning from Europe initially struggled to settle back into American life, Eakins was quick to slip back into the life he had left behind 4 years earlier. He reached an agreement with his father by which he would live in the family home and work in an upstairs room that had been converted into a studio in exchange for $20 a month.\textsuperscript{16} Shortly after returning, however, Eakins's mother began to experience a rapid deterioration of mental health. She died in 1872 and her death was a huge blow to Eakins, who had been very close to her.\textsuperscript{17} Despite this tragedy, Eakins was able to produce many works in his first years at home.

Goodrich explains the nature of Eakins's earliest work. It is no surprise, he suggests, that most of the works Eakins produced during this time were portraits or home scenes featuring family members as sitters. In the early 1870s Eakins's three sisters, Frances, Margaret, and Caroline, were his favorite subjects.\textsuperscript{18} He was especially close to his middle sister, Margaret, and he painted her more frequently than any other member of the family. Eakins also became engaged at this time to Kathrin Crowell, a longtime friend, and his fiancée also makes appearances in several of his works from this time. Unfortunately, Kathrin died in 1879 before she and Eakins were able to marry.\textsuperscript{19}

While family scenes made up the bulk of Eakins’s paintings when he first returned to Philadelphia, his interest in outdoor activities is also reflected in the works he produced in this period. Shooting, ice skating, and rowing were among his favorite activities, and these interests quickly found their way into his art. Rowing was an especially popular sport in Philadelphia at the time. The Schuylkill River was Eakins's favorite rowing spot

\textsuperscript{16} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 37-38.  
\textsuperscript{17} Goodrich, 1933, p. 38.  
\textsuperscript{18} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 38-39.  
\textsuperscript{19} Goodrich, 1933, p. 38.
and the site of many races between amateur rowers. Eakins painted six compositions in
the early 1870s that took as their subject matter races and rowing scenes. Eakins's first rowing scene, *The Champion Single Sculls or Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* (1871, Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York), is among his best known works and was his first painting to be publicly exhibited. It depicts Eakins's childhood friend Max Schmitt, a champion amateur rower, practicing on the Schuylkill River. Eakins went on to paint many more rowing scenes over the next several years, including a series of compositions featuring the professional oarsmen, the Biglin brothers. In addition to his well-known series of rowing pictures, Eakins also painted several scenes of sailing and bird hunts during the early 1870s.

While many of Eakins's rowing pictures were portraits of local rowing celebrities, Eakins also painted more traditional portraits of recognizable professional figures in the Philadelphia community in an attempt to bolster his reputation as a portrait painter and attract commissions. Upon his return to the United States, Eakins had resumed his studies of anatomy at the Jefferson Medical College and it was there that Eakins found his first portrait subjects. In 1874 he painted a portrait of Professor of Chemistry Benjamin Rand, who had taught Eakins in high school. Shortly thereafter, in 1875, Eakins became acquainted with Dr. Samuel Gross, who at the time was one of the most respected and recognized surgeons in the country. Eakins was able to attend many of Gross’s surgical clinics and drew inspiration for his most well known work, *The Gross Clinic* (1875, Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), from these lectures. He was able to exhibit the work at the Haseltine Galleries in 1876 but the painting drew largely

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20 Goodrich, 1933, pp. 41-42.
21 Goodrich, 1933, pp. 49-50.
negative reviews from the public and critics alike. Viewers were taken aback by both the graphic nature of the subject matter and the vivid depiction of the surgery. Critics were especially unhappy with Eakins’s representation of Gross’s bloody hand and the wound on the patient’s leg.

Despite the disappointing reception of The Gross Clinic, Eakins received his first major commission in 1877 from the Union League of Philadelphia to paint a portrait of newly inaugurated President Rutherford B. Hayes. Eakins traveled to Washington to study the President for his portrait. The work Eakins produced has been lost, but reactions to the painting were less than enthusiastic. Initially the League refused the painting, which accounts say made the President appear flushed and tired. After further consideration, however, the League agreed to purchase it for the promised price of $400.

After discussing Eakins's paintings from the 1870s, Goodrich shifts gears to discuss Eakins's time as a teacher. Even though he initially achieved little success in attracting portrait commissions, his abilities as a painter did not go unnoticed. In 1876, the Pennsylvania Academy opened an art school and, after spending two years there as an unsalaried volunteer teacher, Eakins was given a position as professor of drawing and painting. When he began teaching at the Academy he brought with him the teaching methods he had learned in Paris. While he valued drawing from casts, his main focus was drawing from live models. Just as Eakins's teachers had emphasized mastering drawing before attempting to paint, so, too, did Eakins teach the importance of learning strong

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22 Goodrich, 1933, p. 51.
23 The President had originally hoped Eakins would work from a photograph and was unwilling to take the time to do a conventional sitting when Eakins requested one. Instead Hayes allowed Eakins to observe him as he worked in his office.
24 Goodrich, 1933, pp. 56-57.
25 Goodrich, 1933, pp. 74-76.
drafting skills before painting could be undertaken.\textsuperscript{26} The Pennsylvania Academy, which was progressive in its emphasis on dissection and lectures, also allowed Eakins to instill in his students his belief that a detailed scientific understanding of anatomy was of critical importance.\textsuperscript{27} While Eakins was generally well liked by his students, the directors of the Academy for the most part were skeptical of his radical ideas, especially his focus on working from the nude. His use of nude models in his classes as well as his uninhibited and sometimes crass personal demeanor offended the directors and conservative students alike.\textsuperscript{28}

When it came to light that several of Eakins's students, both male and female, had begun posing nude for each other and for Eakins himself, the directors' skepticism regarding Eakins's teaching methods came to a head. In early 1886 Eakins removed the loincloth from a male model posing for a female drawing class.\textsuperscript{29} This was the last straw for the directors. They formed a special committee to investigate the incident and decided to give Eakins an ultimatum: either exercise appropriate discretion when instructing his students or resign. Unwilling to agree to any restrictions on his teaching methods, Eakins tendered his resignation to the directors on February 13, 1886. Despite the protests of many of Eakins's students, the Academy accepted his resignation.\textsuperscript{30}

After his break with the academy Eakins was invited from time to time to give special lectures on anatomy at other art institutions. Several of Eakins's former pupils formed a short-lived league that met to draw from nude models, and Eakins offered criticism and advice to this group several times a week. The group never attracted any

\textsuperscript{26} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 75-76.
\textsuperscript{27} Goodrich, 1933, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{28} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 84-85.
\textsuperscript{29} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 86-87.
\textsuperscript{30} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 87-89.
new members, however, and disbanded within a few years of its founding. Other than these brief forays into academia, Eakins would never teach again.\textsuperscript{31}

During his years as a teacher Eakins also experienced significant changes in his personal life. In 1882, his favorite sister, Margaret, died in her mid-twenties. His other two sisters, Frances and Caroline, had both married and moved away to start families of their own. In 1884, Eakins married Susan Macdowell and moved out of his father’s home for the second time in his life. Eakins and his wife spent only a year living on their own, however, before choosing to move back in with Eakins’s father.\textsuperscript{32} While Eakins never achieved financial success with his work, his father owned properties that paid a steady income, allowing Eakins and Susan to live in relative comfort even after he resigned from his teaching job. In 1887 Eakins traveled to west to Chicago and the Dakotas for 3 months to escape from the controversy still swirling around him after his resignation from the academy. He very much enjoyed the time he spent living in the outdoors and expressed in letters to his wife that he desired to stay away from Philadelphia even longer.\textsuperscript{33}

During these years, Eakins all but abandoned the subjects of physical activity he had painted in the early 1870s. During the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Eakins mainly produced portraits of close friends and recognizable local figures. A few notable exceptions to this trend are his works that explore the nude: \textit{William Rush} (1876-77, Philadelphia Museum Of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), \textit{The Crucifixion} (1880, Philadelphia Museum Of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), \textit{Arcadia} (1883, Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York, New York), and \textit{The Swimming Hole} (1883,

\textsuperscript{31} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 90-94.  
\textsuperscript{32} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 96-97.  
\textsuperscript{33} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 102-103.
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas).\textsuperscript{34} It is surprising that, despite Eakins’s interest in the nude, he only attempted to incorporate nude models into these four paintings.\textsuperscript{35} Arcadia and The Crucifixion are also noteworthy in that they represent Eakins’s only completed compositions that involve subject matter drawn from classic or religious themes rather than from firsthand experience.

While Eakins never achieved commercial success as a portraitist, receiving only a few commissions, portraits make up the majority of his work. When portraying males, Eakins closely associated sitters with their profession and often painted them either engaged in their work or with elements of their work around them. In all of his portraits, Eakins tended to use dark colors and employed unforgiving realism, making many of his sitters look tense and absorbed.\textsuperscript{36} Because of this tendency, many of the commissions that he did receive were refused by his clients, who desired more flattering images of themselves. While Eakins continued to produce portraits into the early twentieth century, he never gained serious recognition for his efforts.\textsuperscript{37}

**Old Age**

Eakins’s father died in 1899 leaving Eakins and Susan the house in which Eakins had lived his entire life.\textsuperscript{38} In the early 1900s, Goodrich highlights that Eakins began to achieve some minor recognition from his contemporaries. He won several awards and was elected to the National Academy of Design, first as an associate and then as an academician. He gained mention in several art publications and critics began to take

\textsuperscript{34} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 109-111.
\textsuperscript{35} I do not include Eakins’s boxing series from 1898 and 1899 in this list. Though his preparatory sketches for these works show the boxers nude, the finished works show them clothed.
\textsuperscript{36} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 112-114.
\textsuperscript{37} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 117-121.
\textsuperscript{38} Goodrich, 1933, p. 135.
notice of his work, but he was never as popular or well-respected as the leading artists of his day.\textsuperscript{39} During the 1900s, Eakins remained highly productive, creating some of his best known works, including \textit{The Thinker} (1900, Metropolitan Museum Of Art, Manhattan, New York, New York) and his boxing series. Eakins's health began to deteriorate around 1910. The cause is unclear, but accounts given to Goodrich by those close to Eakins during these years suggest he was suffering from kidney failure.\textsuperscript{40}

Eakins died in June of 1916 at the age of 71. Per his request, no religious service was held; family and friends gathered at his house to say goodbye, and afterwards his body was cremated.\textsuperscript{41} Eakins died relatively unknown and unappreciated by his contemporaries. At the time of his death his work was represented in only three museums. In 1894 he famously wrote that “[his] honors [were] misunderstanding, persecution & neglect, enhanced because unsought.”\textsuperscript{42} It was only well after his death, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, that the art community would take greater notice of his art and deem him one of the greatest American painters of all time.

\textsuperscript{39} Goodrich, 1933, pp. 135-137.
\textsuperscript{40} Goodrich, 1933, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{41} Goodrich, 1933, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{42} Quoted in Sewell, 1982, p. xvi.
Chapter 2:

The History of Eakins Scholarship: Reading Art Through Life

The history of scholarship on Thomas Eakins is complex. Much like the life of Thomas Eakins himself, the development of scholarship on his art is full of contradiction and controversy. Art historians seeking to analyze his life have had to rely heavily on a limited stock of primary sources from which to draw their conclusions. Because Eakins failed to achieve much fame as an artist until shortly before his death in 1916, little was written about his life or art until after his death. In addition, relatively few letters written by or to Eakins were accessible prior to 1989, and the majority of those that were came from the years Eakins spent in Europe from 1866 to 1870. Thus, in the years immediately following his death, writers attempting to create a narrative about Eakins were faced with a difficult task.

Over the years since Lloyd Goodrich published the first comprehensive book on
Eakins, new and, at times, explosive information has gradually come to light. This information revealed aspects of Eakins’s life that were not incorporated into Goodrich’s initial monograph. As interesting as this new information has been, the effect it has had on scholarly interpretations of Eakins’s art is equally intriguing. The degree to which art and life are connected in the realm of art history becomes apparent when one investigates the evolution of Eakins scholarship.

**Early Eakins Scholarship: Goodrich and his Followers**

Lloyd Goodrich, the first art historian to write a comprehensive account of Eakins's life, faced a difficult task. As previously mentioned, relatively little information was available about the artist at the time he wrote. A series of articles by Alan Burroughs published in 1923 and 1924 represented the first attempt at writing a biography and included photographs of many of Eakins’s works that had been in storage and were thus previously unavailable to the public.\(^1\) Also, in the years after his death, some of Eakins’s paintings were acquired by major American museums.\(^2\) Yet the information available to Goodrich as he began his research was still very limited.

Goodrich overcame this difficulty by conducting a series of interviews with a number of Eakins's family members, friends, and coworkers.\(^3\) Through these interviews, Goodrich came across letters to and from Eakins, sketches, and other written materials which helped him develop a coherent narrative. Although the monograph Goodrich ultimately published drew from a wide range of individual testimonies, he relied most

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\(^1\) Burroughs, March 1923, December 1923, and June 1924.
\(^2\) In the years after Eakins’s death The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fort Worth Art Association, the Addison Gallery, the Brooklyn Museum and the Worcester Art Museum all acquired works by Eakins.
\(^3\) Goodrich, 1933, p. 1.
heavily on the interviews he conducted with Susan Eakins, who remained in possession
of many of Eakins's works and writings.\footnote{Adams, 2005, pp. 36-37.}

Goodrich’s book, \textit{Thomas Eakins: His Life and Work}, was immediately successful
within the art history community.\footnote{Adams, 2005, p. 25.} The information gathered from his interviews and
research shed new light on Eakins’s life and art, providing a more complete picture of the
artist. Much of Goodrich’s research, however, was never made public.\footnote{Foster, 1989, p. 8.} The only
information that was available from the interviews he had conducted was the information
he used in his writings. Thus historians who subsequently wrote about Eakins had limited
access to any information that would support conflicting conclusions about Eakins's life
and art or complicate the narrative Goodrich had set forth. Consequently, for several
decades after its publication, Goodrich’s monograph on Eakins went largely
unchallenged. Writings on Eakins from the 1930s through the 1960s only supported and
expanded upon Goodrich’s conclusion that Eakins was one of the great American painters
of his time.\footnote{Wilmerding, 1976, p. 138.}

Elizabeth Johns’s book, \textit{Thomas Eakins; The Heroism of Modern Life}, is an
influential work that falls very much in line with Goodrich’s ideas on Eakins's life, even
though it was published in 1983, 50 years after the publication of Goodrich’s book. Her
monograph looks at five important paintings and uses those images to investigate Eakins's
attraction to portraiture. Before beginning her analysis of the five paintings, Johns first
sets out several aspects of Eakins's life that she deems relevant to her investigation. She
highlights the fact that Eakins was financially secure throughout his life due to his
father’s real estate holdings and the income they provided him and his family. Eakins, she argues, never had to worry about the popularity of his work or his ability to attract commissions, and therefore he was able to create the art he wanted to, free from external constraints. The choices he made regarding style and subject matter, then, must have been made completely of his own volition and consequently offer important insights into the intent behind his portraits.

Next, Johns discusses the concept of the “modern” hero that arose in the United States after the Civil War. Still reeling from the effects of the bloody conflict, Americans were in search of a contemporary version of the traditional hero. These so-called “modern” heroes were educated, scientific men. They were hard workers who had achieved their status through relentless pursuit of their goals. They were also progressive, in the sense that they were aware of and in tune with the changing nature of their time. Finally, they were egalitarian in their endeavors: open to all people and all ideas. Johns suggests that Eakins was the portrait artist who was best able to capture the essence of these modern heroes. She believes that Eakins, very much a modern hero himself, had great respect for these men and identified with them as well. His paintings of such important figures as Samuel Gross, done in large scale using dramatic chiaroscuro lighting, are clearly meant to heroize the subjects he chose to depict. His style of portraiture, dark, introspective, scientific, and totally honest, was the perfect mode of capturing both the likeness and the spirit of the modern hero.

Johns then discusses five of Eakins's major works (The Champion Single Sculls,

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8 Johns, 1983, p. 11.
9 Johns, 1983, p. 3.
10 Johns, 1983, pp. 4-6.
The Gross Clinic, William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River, The Concert Singer [1890, Philadelphia Museum Of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania], and Walt Whitman [1887, Philadelphia Museum Of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania] and relevant aspects of Eakins’s life to support her general assertion regarding the modern hero. Her arguments are well organized and effective. Her interpretation of Eakins’s work has enjoyed significant influence in recent years.

Although scholars like Johns continued to write in the same vein as Goodrich through the 1980s and 1990s, in the 1970s some art historians began to question aspects of Goodrich’s interpretation. Goodrich wrote his 1933 monograph for a generation that was vastly different from modern audiences. He had selectively censored many of the more colorful aspects of Eakins's life such as his obsession with the nude, his unconventional relationships with his male and female students, as well as several other controversial episodes of Eakins's personal life that undoubtedly would have proved offensive to readers in the 1930s. Writers and publishers of monographs in the 1970s, however, did not deem it necessary to practice the same restraint, and the result was a gradual change in the biographical narrative of Eakins’s life.

Gordon Hendricks’s monographs from 1972 (The Photographs of Thomas Eakins) and 1974 (The Life and Work of Thomas Eakins) are two significant examples of this trend. Hendricks brought to light Eakins’s lifelong interest in photography, which Goodrich had completely omitted from his monograph. Hendricks’s books introduced substantial new material about Eakins, whereas previous writings had relied almost exclusively on preexisting information. Subsequent writings on Eakins followed suit and the amount of information available about Eakins gradually expanded. Goodrich

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12 Hendricks, 1974, pp. xxi-xxii.
himself chose to respond to the introduction of significant new information about
Eakins’s life by publishing a two-volume work in 1982 titled simply *Thomas Eakins*.
While maintaining the basic narrative structure of his 1933 work, Goodrich included
chapters addressing Eakins’s photography, sculpture, and other material omitted from his
first book.\(^{13}\)

**The Bregler Papers**

When Goodrich conducted his initial research, he had access to a large number of
sketches, letters, and other materials kept by Susan Eakins in Eakins’s fourth-floor
studio.\(^ {14}\) Goodrich copied some of the letters, but Susan was unwilling to allow anyone
access to most of them. The materials remained in her house until her death in late 1938.
At that time, with none of Susan’s beneficiaries interested in preserving the materials,
they were supposedly lost when the house was emptied and readied for sale.\(^ {15}\) However,
Eakins’s former student, Charles Bregler, visited the house at some point during the
moving process and decided to rescue the materials stored in Eakins's studio.\(^ {16}\) Bregler
had become close with Susan Eakins after her husband’s death and was well aware of the
nature of the materials she had kept in her possession. About 4,500 items, ranging from
letters to equipment, were removed by Bregler and taken to his home in Philadelphia.
Although some of the materials were later sold to ease Bregler’s financial situation, most
of what he had taken remained in his home.\(^ {17}\)

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\(^{13}\) Goodrich, 1982 vol. 1, pp. xi-xiv. Goodrich discusses the process by which new
information had become available over the 50 years since he published his first book on Eakins in 1933.

\(^{14}\) Foster, 1989, pp. 6, 8.

\(^{15}\) Foster, 1989, p. 13.

\(^{16}\) Foster, 1989, pp. 13-16.

\(^{17}\) Foster, 1989, p 19.
After Bregler’s death in 1958, his wife, Mary Bregler, inherited the materials. Although she shared her husband’s unwillingness to show the materials to the public, she eventually decided to lend the collection to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1984. While on extended loan, the Academy documented and analyzed the collection. After about 5 years of research and investigation, Kathleen Foster and Cheryl Leibold published manuscripts of the materials, with commentary, in 1989.

The Bregler papers provided a great deal of new information about Eakins. They have forced scholars to reassess many of the fundamental assumptions about Eakins’s life that were previously taken for granted. Among the papers are a large number of preparatory sketches and other drawings that have helped scholars to better understand Eakins’s creative process. Perhaps more important, however, are the letters and other written materials that were brought to light. While a basic understanding of the major controversies in Eakins’s life existed before the Bregler papers, the papers have fleshed out details of some of the more disturbing episodes in Eakins’s life.

Chief among these episodes were accusations that he had inappropriate relationships with both his younger sister Margaret and his niece Ella. His relationship with his niece Ella may have even led to her suicide in 1896. Similar allegations were made that Eakins had inappropriate relationships with several of his female students, culminating in the insanity of Lillian Hammitt. While we cannot know for certain how true any of these accusations are, at the very least the perception of Eakins as a modern hero or any sort of moral exemplar has been thrown into question.

As scholars have begun to reject the concept of Eakins’s “strong character,” the

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18 Foster, 1989, p. 21.
19 Foster, 1989, pp. 105-122.
20 Foster, 1989, pp. 89-104.
results have been profound. When the overarching theme of Eakins’s character is removed from past interpretations of his art, many aspects of his work previously thought to have been explained become perplexing. As scholars have begun to address these issues and the questions they raise about Eakins’s life and art, writings on Eakins have become increasingly diverse.

**Eakins Scholarship: New Perspectives**

The first examples of this new approach to Eakins’s work were written even before the Bregler papers were published. David Lubin presents an interpretation of Eakins’s painting in his 1985 work *Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James* that is drastically different from that of any previous Eakins scholarship. In his essay on *The Agnew Clinic* (1889, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) he argues that the painting contains imagery that connotes penetration and masculine dominance. For example, he suggests that the painting shows the female patient being symbolically raped by the male doctors as a crowd of male figures look on.21 Though his ideas are extreme, Lubin’s essay is important in that it represents one of the first attempts by an Eakins scholar to break away from the framework established by Goodrich in 1933.

Only 2 years later, in 1987, Michael Fried’s *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* presented yet another unprecedented interpretation of Eakins’s most well-known work, *The Gross Clinic*. Fried draws a connection between the scalpel Gross holds in his hand and the pencil and brush Eakins used to create the image. He highlights the importance of drawing and writing in many of Eakins’s paintings and also discusses Eakins’s recurring

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21 Lubin, 1985, pp. 32-35.
use of bright, coral reds in his work. Fried ties all of these observations together by making a connection between the physical pain Gross causes through the act of surgery and the visual pain Eakins is able to convey with his brush. His careful investigation of Eakins’s oeuvre and the conclusions drawn from his observations make his work a convincing and significant contribution to Eakins scholarship.

Martin Berger’s *Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood*, published in 2000, is another important work. Berger constructs his argument by analyzing Eakins’s oeuvre as it relates to Gilded Age society. He specifically focuses on how societal conceptions of masculinity influenced Eakins’s portrayal of men.

Eakins failed to achieve a number of important milestones of masculinity, such as financial independence and professional success. According to Berger these failures led Eakins to portray his male sitters in a conspicuously masculine way in order to compensate for this. This generalization is divided into three subcategories of men: those characterized by physical activity, mental or professional engagement, and nudity.

Eakins, Berger maintains, tries to connect himself visually to men engaged in physical activity and, consequently, imbue himself with the conspicuously masculine traits they embody. The best example of this is *The Champion, Single Sculls*, in which Eakins includes himself rowing directly behind his central subject, Max Schmitt. In his images of men engaged in thought or work, however, Eakins attempts to complicate the gender identity of his sitters by giving them both masculine and feminine traits. *Professor Benjamin Howard Rand* (1874, Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

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25 Berger, 2000, pp. 11-12.
26 Berger, 2000, p. 3.
exemplifies this argument. Eakins complicates Rand’s masculine identity by including a conspicuously red rose, a symbol with feminine implications, on his desk. Berger concludes his argument by stating that Eakins’s paintings of nude men represent the final step in the evolution of his attempts to reconcile his work with the Gilded Age constructions of masculinity. The few nude scenes Eakins produced, for example The Swimming Hole, reject the narrative of the “self-made man” that defined masculinity in American society of the time altogether. They depict men who are completely removed from society and define their masculinity on their own terms. These scenes, Berger suggests, depict and glorify man freed from the pressure of society’s cloistering conception of masculinity.

In 2005 Henry Adams published perhaps the most explosive challenge to Goodrich’s 1933 monograph. Eakins Revealed: The Secret Life of an American Artist presents drastic evaluations of almost every aspect of Eakins. Far from painting Eakins as a hero, Adams casts him as a socially troubled, angry, and perverse villain. He begins by explaining how Goodrich’s interpretation of Eakins’s life was a conscious lie and continues on to describe how the entire history of Eakins scholarship wrongly confirmed Goodrich’s praises. Adams spends a significant portion of his book discussing in depth the major controversies of Eakins’s life. While perhaps too preoccupied with these events, Adams does make one of the first serious attempts to understand the truth behind the various accusations made against Eakins. Despite the aggressive stance Adams takes, he is able to shed interesting new light on many assertions that have long been taken for

27 Berger, 2000, p. 4.
28 Berger, 2000, p. 65.
29 Berger, 2000, pp. 4-5.
granted. Although some of the conclusions he reaches are too extreme to be entirely believable, Adams’s willingness to holistically reject previous scholarly opinions does lead to some powerful new ideas. His reevaluation of the assumption that Eakins’s work is exceptionally real is especially insightful and convincing.\footnote{Adams, 2005, pp. 383-412.}

The diversity of writings over the past 20 years suggest that the verdict is still out on the meaning behind Eakins’s life and art. While many new interpretations have been posited since the publication of the Bregler papers, none of them have taken root. New publications will likely continue to emerge in the coming years as Eakins scholars seek to arrive at a new consensus on his oeuvre. In the meantime, we are left to wrestle with the uncertainties and contradictions of existing scholarship.
Chapter 3

Investigating Peculiarities Within Eakins’s Oeuvre

Figure 4: Swimming Hole Sketch, 1884. Oil on fiberboard mounted on fiberboard, 22.1 x 27 cm., 8 3/4 x 10 3/4 inches, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.

The diversity of existing scholarship on Thomas Eakins reflects the evolution of our understanding of the artist’s life. Examining the history of Eakins scholarship, it becomes apparent that a paradigm shift has occurred over the past twenty years. Between 1983, when Elizabeth Johns published her book, and the publication of Adams’s book in 2005, our understanding of Eakins has radically changed. The Bregler papers uprooted traditional interpretations of Eakins’s life and art. Explanations that once seemed plausible no longer ring true. Art historians have struggled for the past two decades to come to terms with these changes and to create a new narrative in light of what we now know. For some reason, however, a new consensus has not been reached regarding the meaning behind his oeuvre.

While our understanding of Eakins the man has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, it is perhaps too extreme to suggest the Bregler papers have fundamentally changed our understanding of Eakins’s art. Instead, the Bregler papers have shown that
many earlier assumptions about Eakins’s art must be reconsidered, questioned, and perhaps modified. Past scholars dismissed many of the peculiarities of Eakins’s art as somehow symptomatic of his strong moral character and unflinching commitment to realism. Instead of attacking and deconstructing these past interpretations, I will attempt to reconcile with them and assess the oddities of Eakins’s art with a fresh perspective. Taking into account everything we now know about Eakins, I will attempt to interpret some of the striking peculiarities in his work.

**A Fresh Perspective**

Eakins scholarship is now polarized, few writers are able to find a middle ground between the idealism of Goodrich and the sensationalism of more recent writers like Adams. Did Eakins really sexually assault his niece? Was he responsible for the insanity of Lillian Hammitt? Perhaps a more important question to ask is, what implications do these questions have for his art? By focusing solely on the accusations levied against Eakins during his lifetime, we lose sight of the art itself. Yet, by ignoring these accusations we are left with an unsatisfying understanding of Eakins’s oeuvre. We can accept that Eakins was not a particularly moral or upstanding individual without denouncing him as a villain. Taking into account all we now know about Eakins, we can make some generalizations about his character without judgment or idealization.

We know that the accusations levied against him caused many in Philadelphia, including his sister Caroline and her husband, to shun Eakins.¹ He was no doubt aware that many of his peers looked down on him because of these accusations. Partially as a

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¹ Foster, 1989, p. 228.
result of the scandals that surrounded him, Eakins had very few close friends.\textsuperscript{2} Accounts
given by those who were close to him also suggest that his relationship with his wife was
cold and distant.\textsuperscript{3} Eakins’s eccentric personality and his unorthodox ideas about nudity
and propriety indicate that he had little respect for social norms and acceptable social
behavior. Finally, we can infer from many of Eakins’s actions and statements that his
professional and financial failures weighed heavily on him throughout his life.\textsuperscript{4} Accepting
these assumptions, we gain a perspective on Eakins that incorporates much of what we
know about him without painting him as either a hero or a villain.

With this perspective in mind, we can begin to investigate some of the
peculiarities of Eakins’s work. While there are many peculiarities that exist throughout
his oeuvre, I will highlight the three that I believe to be most significant: (1) Eakins’s
tendency to use muted colors and dark spaces; (2) the physical and emotional state of his
sitters; and (3) the underlying themes of being watched and isolation. These three
elements combine to create the foundations of Eakins’s dark realistic style, a style that
reflects the struggles and frustrations he experienced throughout his life.

\textbf{Color in Shadow: Eakins’s Dark Space and Muted Palette}

Two of the most striking features of Eakins’s oeuvre are his tendency to paint dark
interior spaces and his use of a muted color palette.\textsuperscript{5} These aspects of his painting, though
present throughout his work, are rarely mentioned in discussions of his art. When they are

\textsuperscript{2} Adams, 2005, pp. 110-111.
\textsuperscript{3} Foster, 1989, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{4} Many of Eakins’s letters during his years abroad in Paris express concern over his ability to earn
a living with his painting when he returned to Philadelphia. He was also very conscious of the fact
that he relied on his father for financial support and expressed optimism that he would soon be
able to support himself.
\textsuperscript{5} Quoted in Soyer, 1966, p. 19. Edward Hopper one said of Eakins’s paintings that “[they] are so
dark, it is a disadvantage.”
mentioned their significance is explained away by cultural circumstances. For example, clothing was dark in Eakins’s day and interior rooms were lit with oil lamps or other dim light sources. Also it was fashionable during the Victorian era to decorate with dark colors. While all this is certainly true, the dark, muted color palette Eakins used cannot be ascribed merely to these facts.

Eakins could have asked his subjects to wear colorful or lighter clothing and then painted them as they sat by a large open window. But Eakins chose to depict his sitters with dark and muted color. While Eakins was undoubtedly interested in depicting reality, it must be remembered that he chose the reality that he would depict. Works by John Singer Sargent and other contemporary portraitists who used bright colors, while perhaps romanticized, certainly cannot be dismissed as unrealistic. Sargent did not fabricate his well lit scenes or his pretty sitters, he merely framed reality in a different way.

If we reject traditional explanations and instead see Eakins’s muted color palette and dark interior spaces as conscious choices, then the next logical step is to identify the motives behind these choices. One reason can be found in his experiences in Spain at the Prado. Eakins’s study of works by Velasquez, Rembrandt, and Ribera and the drama they created using strong light and shadow certainly influenced his own use of dark space.

Many of the works Eakins found most interesting while abroad were in the baroque style and utilized strong chiaroscuro to achieve their drama. Classic baroque artists used light to portray dramatic scenes drawn primarily from mythology and religion. As many scholars have pointed out, however, Eakins was more interested in capturing the drama of everyday life and only completed three paintings that can be said to draw inspiration from

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7 Olsen, 1986, pp. 2-5
8 Goodrich, 1933, p. 106.
religious or classical subject matter. The result of applying chiaroscuro lighting to everyday scenes is unique. While this lighting highlights the drama inherent in the scenes of Velasquez and Ribera, for Eakins it served more as a way to create drama in otherwise everyday scenes. This technique also allowed him to be selective in his detail. Because the light source is almost never clearly defined, he is able to highlight parts of his subjects while obscuring other elements. Though his lighting choices may be derived from his study of European masters, Eakins’s preference for muted color is not shared by the painters whose work he praised while in Paris and Spain.

In searching for an explanation for this discrepancy, one might fall back on the explanation offered by earlier scholars. As previously mentioned, contemporary factors such as clothing, decorative style, and lighting all partially explain why his paintings are often devoid of bright color. Perhaps Eakins shied away from bright colorful scenes in order to create paintings that his audience would understand as especially real. This explanation is appealing based on what we already know about Eakins and his interest in depicting reality precisely.

There are two major problems with this explanation. First, it fails to explain why Eakins used muted color throughout his work, even in his outdoor scenes. While his outdoor scenes are brighter and more colorful than his interior views, Eakins’s use of color in these paintings often produces an unrealistic effect. His rowing pictures, for example, feature skies that look abnormally dim. Especially in paintings such as John Biglin in a Single Scull (1873, Yale University Art Gallery, Hartford, Connecticut) and

9 These are The Crucifixion (1880), Arcadia (1883), and An Arcadian (1883). Eakins never completed his water color inspired by Longfellow’s Song of Hiawatha and instead destroyed it, considering it a failure.
The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake (1873, Cleveland Museum Of Art, Cleveland, Ohio), the muted color Eakins chose for the skies creates an unsatisfying effect.\textsuperscript{11} Even Eakins appears to have found the sky in the painting disappointing. Research has shown that he repainted the sky many times, the last time being about 6 years after completing the painting.\textsuperscript{12} Second, the idea that Eakins was trying to create scenes that looked like everyday events is difficult to apply to his formal portraits. Many of his portraits consist of a single individual, usually seated, engaged in thought. This type of portrait, in which the subject sits for the artist as he captures his or her likeness, is a formal, staged work. It is hard to believe, then, that Eakins chose to use muted color primarily to lend these scenes an air of normalcy. Thus, Eakins’s use of muted color in his portraits cannot always be said to create images that look particularly real.

While the explanations discussed above certainly offer some insight into the reasons for Eakins’s muted color palette, they fail to provide a complete and satisfying answer. To resolve this issue, one must do what so many Eakins scholars have refused to do: turn to Eakins himself for an answer. In doing this, two likely reasons emerge. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that Eakins was not comfortable using bright color. In his letters home during his time in France, Eakins expressed a great deal of frustration with painting and, in particular, complained of his difficulty in producing colors successfully using oil paint.\textsuperscript{13} Eakins’s attempts to incorporate bright color in some of his early scenes can best be described as awkward. This is apparent in his first completed work, Street Scene in Seville, in which his reds are entirely unconvincing.\textsuperscript{14} Looking at his

\textsuperscript{11} Adams, 2005, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{12} Cooper, 1996, pp. 99-100.
\textsuperscript{13} Kirkpatrick, 2006, pp. 101-102.
\textsuperscript{14} Homer, 1992, pp. 44-45.
oeuvre in its entirety, there are few examples of bright color to be found. *The Swimming Hole* and a few other outdoor scenes may be cited as exceptions to this rule, but even in those paintings Eakins clearly holds back.

It is worth considering, then, that perhaps Eakins lacked a degree of skill in using bright color and thus chose to use muted color for most of his work. The fact that Eakins largely abandoned exterior scenes in favor of shadowy interior portraits supports this theory. At the very least it is safe to say that Eakins was much more comfortable using muted color. Another possible reason for his muted color palette, the one that I would argue is most significant, is Eakins’s artistic vision. Dark, muted colors complement the mental state of Eakins’s compositions. *The Gross Clinic*, for example, is a somber painting that demands a color palette that reflects this tone. In Eakins’s portraits, his sitters often appear somber or withdrawn. Somber colors were thus appropriate. We might understand Eakins’s muted palette to be a symptom of his intentions. Many of Eakins’s best works would express a very different mood if they included vibrant color. The emotional state of his sitters would look out of place in, say, a sitting room painted by Sargent.

It is this last explanation that is most important for our discussion of Eakins’s work. While there are certainly many factors that influenced his preferences for painting dark interior space with a muted color palette, Eakins’s artistic vision is an important motivation that is rarely considered. Whatever else might be said about this particular tendency in Eakins’s art, it must be viewed, at least in part, as a deliberate choice. Surveying Eakins’s life, the many tragedies and scandals he experienced may, in part, explain this dark artistic vision. Eakins tended towards dark, muted painting because this
style of painting best reflected the meaning he wished to convey through his work.

**Brutal Honesty: The Emotional and Physical State of Eakins’s Sitters**

Another peculiar element of Eakins’s painting is the emotional state of his subjects. Eakins painted people in a way that made them appear emotionally distant or vacant. In some of Eakins’s works, his sitters could be described as somber or depressed. This is especially obvious in his formal portraits but is visible throughout his oeuvre. The traditional discussion of this tendency holds that it is a direct result of Eakins’s unapologetic realism. Scholars have even argued that this trend in Eakins’s work is evidence of his ability to glimpse the inner reality of his sitter behind their artifices. Although this might be true, the emotional state of his subjects deserves further evaluation.

Eakins’s devotion to realism would lead one to assume that he painted his sitters without embellishment. Information provided through interviews given by several of Eakins’s sitters, however, suggests that his method was not so straightforward. Sitters reported that Eakins interacted with them very little and made no efforts to make them feel comfortable. He provided very little instruction and rarely gave them any feedback regarding their pose or facial expressions. Also Eakins’s sitters were made to sit for exorbitantly long sessions. Frances Ziegler, for example, posed from 9 in the morning to 5 at night every day for a week. Many of his sitters were asked to stand for hours as Eakins meticulously painted their likeness. Several sitters, including Eakins’s friend

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Samuel Myers, complained of enduring extreme pain due to the strenuous nature of Eakins’s sessions.\(^{19}\)

His sitters, therefore, would often sit for extremely long periods of time in near silence as he painted them. Envisioning this scenario, it becomes clear that his sitters must have felt awkward, uncomfortable, and isolated. Fully aware that they were being studied and watched, Eakins’s limited interaction with his subjects coupled with the length of the sittings must have been disconcerting. Would Eakins’s portraits have been any less realistic in a formal sense had he elicited emotions from his sitters by interacting with them? The answer, of course, is no. Eakins chose to frame the reality he captured in a very specific way. The choices he made in doing this consciously made his sitters feel isolated and uncomfortable.

Some would say that this approach merely reflects Eakins’s attempt to capture a deeper realism in his sitters.\(^{20}\) Painting his sitters in this way, one could argue, strips away the emotional artifices individuals have in place when they are in a social setting. Eakins’s method of interacting with his sitters, then, may have been a way to reduce them to a more natural state. Given his interest in realism, this is an appealing explanation. But if Eakins attempted to capture what he perceived as the deeper truth in his sitters, then what he imagined this “deeper truth” to be says much about his psyche.

While many art historians have lauded Eakins’s ability to capture the individual character of his sitters, this praise is difficult to justify.\(^{21}\) Looking at his portraits side by side, the facial expressions appear homogeneous. Almost every subject is shown with the

\(^{19}\) Morris, 1930, pp. 30-31.
\(^{20}\) Many Eakins scholars, including Goodrich and his followers, argued this was indeed the case.
\(^{21}\) Goodrich, 1933, p. 79 for example. Goodrich states “[Eakins’s] interest was always in character.”
same blank expression. Although so often said to capture the individual character of his sitters, it is almost impossible to articulate anything about what this character might be. Eakins paints his sitters in a close, intimate way, but he does not allow us to know who they are. Patrick McCaughey observed that “intimacy is constantly denied” throughout Eakins’s portraiture due to his unwillingness to show us any emotional individuality in his sitters. Their personalities are hidden behind mask-like faces (see Figure 5). If he was indeed attempting to capture the individual character of his sitters, then his idea of this underlying state appears to be a tragic one. Eakins seemed to believe that, underneath social niceties and artifices, everyone is distant, isolated, and ultimately unknowable.

It should also be highlighted that many of Eakins’s sitters were friends or family. Because he so seldom received commissions, the majority of the 246 portraits he painted were subjects of his own choosing. Consequently many of his portraits are of people he knew in a personal or a professional capacity. With no patron to satisfy, he was able to paint his sitters as he desired. That Eakins would choose to depict people close to him as emotionally distant and even somber is odd. If he had an emotional connection with his friends and family, it is nowhere to be seen in his paintings. He consciously chose to distance himself from these people and to capture them in an emotionally objective light. His portrait of his wife, *A Lady With a Setter Dog* (1888, Metropolitan Museum Of Art, Manhattan, New York), is a striking example of this (see Figure 6). Her eyes are covered by shadow and her expression conveys little emotion. To portray his wife in such a detached and emotionless way is odd. If Eakins and his wife had a loving relationship, it

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is difficult to find much evidence of it in this portrait.

In Eakins scholarship the physical appearance of Eakins’s sitters is often closely associated with their emotional state. This is understandable as the two aspects of his sitters complement each other closely. While there are parallels between these two aspects of Eakins’s work, his treatment of his subjects’ physical presence deserves separate discussion. Eakins’s portraits often make his sitters appear physically old and tired. Every wrinkle and imperfection is painted in great detail, and the eyes of his sitters appear at times to be sunken and tired. Scholars have pointed to Eakins’s unforgiving commitment to honesty to explain these tendencies. Again this deceptively straightforward explanation must be questioned in order to arrive at the reality behind Eakins’s choices.

The testimony of Eakins’s sitters again sheds some light on our investigation. In addition to their comments regarding his refusal to interact with them, many of his sitters recall that Eakins specifically asked them not to dress nicely for their sitting, instead asking them to wear old, well-worn clothes.26 While this may seem insignificant, it suggests an interest in portraying the worn, the old, and the imperfect. This preference for the old and the worn extended to his sitters as well. Eakins asked the banker William Kurtz to refrain from shaving prior to his sitting so that he would appear more worn and haggard.27 He also displayed a noticeable preference for painting older people. Looking at his oeuvre, it is striking that many of Eakins’s portraits are of elderly men and women and relatively few are of younger figures. He even wrote to a friend that he found

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26 Goodrich, 1982 vol. 2, p. 64, quoting a letter from Leslie W. Miller, written April 23, 1930.
Figure 5: **Douglass M. Hall**, 1888. Oil on Canvas, 24 x 20 inches. Private Collection.

Figure 6: **A Lady With a Setter Dog (The Artist's Wife)**, 1885. Oil on Canvas, 30 x 23 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.
an old woman’s skin particularly beautiful and he specifically sought out elderly models on several occasions. Eakins even went so far as to paint his sitters to look older than they actually were. While painting a portrait of Walter Bryant, for example, he asked permission to take liberties with Mr. Bryant’s age. Mr. Bryant, who was 50 when his portrait was painted, is depicted by Eakins as a man of 70.

Another point worth mentioning is that many of Eakins’s 25 commissioned portraits were destroyed, lost, or rejected by the patron. The fact that conventional portraits of the time romanticized and flattered the sitter is often used to account for this. This does account in part for this trend, but most of Eakins’s patrons were familiar with his work. They asked him to paint their portraits despite his reputation for unforgiving realism. It should be assumed, then, that they expected to receive a honest depiction of themselves free from the embellishments popular in portraiture at the time. That so many of his commissions were rejected in spite of this suggests that he may have gone beyond brutal honesty. Documentation exists confirming that several of Eakins’s sitters specifically rejected their commissioned portraits because they did not believe they were good likenesses. This, coupled with photographic evidence and Eakins’s instructions to his sitters, suggests that strict realism may not have been the only motive at work in his portraits.

One cannot help but see Eakins’s treatment of the emotional and physical states of his sitter as evidence of an underlying sadness in Eakins life. Given that his life was marked by the deaths of his closest family members, repeated professional failure, and

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28 From a letter to Helen Parker Evans, Quoted in Goodrich, 1982, p. 59.
bitter controversy, this sadness comes as no surprise. Just as importantly these trends suggest Eakins felt isolated and emotionally distanced from the people close to him. Even when painting his wife and closest friends, he chose to show us aged and vacant shells. Eakins’s interest in depicting people in such an unflattering way may also reflect the bitterness he must have felt towards a society that rejected and shunned him time and time again.

**Watching and Being Watched: The Gaze of Others and Isolation**

The features that have been discussed to this point have been explained in some way or another by previous scholarship on Eakins. The theme of watching and being watched, however, has never been seriously investigated or explained. Many of his paintings depict the central figure being watched by others in the scene. At first this theme does not seem worthy of note, as we expect individuals in a painting to interact with one another in some way. What is odd about this in Eakins’s work is that, in most examples, the person being watched is not interacting directly with the watchers: the person being watched is a spectacle.

This is most obvious, and also most easily explained, in paintings in which the person being watched is knowingly performing for the watchers. *The Gross Clinic* and *The Agnew Clinic* are the first examples of this that come to mind (See Figures 7 and 13). In both paintings, the surgeons are lecturing in front of a crowd of students. Even earlier than *The Gross Clinic*, Eakins’s series on the Biglin brothers contain crowds of people along the shore watching the professional rowing teams compete. In the boxing scenes from 1898 and 1899, the theme of being watched is again explicit. The boxers are
performing on their stage in front of large crowds that have come to watch them fight.

In many other works the theme of watching is present in less obvious ways. In his first work, *A Street Scene in Seville*, a woman watches the street performers from the window in the upper left. Also, Eakins paints the shadow of a spectator in the bottom left of the scene to signal to the viewer that this performance is being watched by other individuals. In *Home Scene* (1871, The Brooklyn Museum, New York, New York), painted only a year later, being watched is again an underlying theme in the painting. Eakins’s sister Margaret turns from her sheet music to watch her younger sister who, unaware that she is being observed, prepares to write on the slate.

In *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*, a painting from later that same year, “watching” is present in a different way (See Figure 8). Schmitt, who is shown practicing as opposed to competing, has stopped rowing and turns to face the viewer.\(^{32}\) He is alone in the middle of the river but his direct gaze as well as his arrested action signal to us that he is aware we are watching him. Eakins uses a similar device to emphasize that the subject is being watched in *Professor Benjamin Howard Rand*. In this painting, the cat looks directly at us, aware that we are watching, while Professor Rand himself seems oblivious to the fact that someone has entered his study and is silently observing his actions.

*The Zither Player* (1876, Art Institute Of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois) and *The Chess Players* (1876, Metropolitan Museum Of Art, Manhattan, New York) once again bring the theme of watching and being watched to the foreground (See Figure 9). In both, the titular figures are engaged in their activity while another man looks on unacknowledged. This same relationship exists in *Courtship* (1878, Fine Arts Museum Of San Francisco, San Francisco, California), in which the young woman spinning is being

\(^{32}\) Cooper, 1996, pp. 29-30.
Figure 7: The Agnew Clinic, 1889. Oil on Canvas, 74 ½ x 130 ½ inches. The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Figure 8: Max Schmitt in a Single Scull, 1871. Oil on Canvas, 32 ¼ x 46 ¼ inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

Figure 9: The Chess Players, 1876. Oil on Canvas, 11 ¾ x 16 ¾ inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.
watched by the young man sitting beside her. In *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* the act of watching is embodied in William Rush, who observes his model as he carves his statue, while his model, standing naked on a pedestal, bares herself before his gaze.

It becomes more difficult to find examples from the 1880s and 1890s, since Eakins painted primarily individual portraits during this period. Yet even in these paintings, the theme of being watched is still present. In every portrait the idea that the sitter is being watched is present. The viewer and the sitter are both aware that the portrait is the result of an arranged sitting in which the subject was closely observed by the painter. As previously discussed, however, Eakins’s portraits complicate this traditional formula. The sitter is being watched, but he or she does not interact with or even acknowledge the viewer. In many of the portraits the sitter stares vacantly into the distance or slouches down in the chair, relaxing. There is an uncomfortable feeling that we are invading the sitter’s personal space. It is a feeling that we are watching them without their knowledge.

One effect this often has is to isolate the central figure, the one being watched, from the other figures in the composition. As previously discussed, the figure being watched is seldom interacting with the person or people watching him or her. This effect, combined with the emotionally vacant expressions so common in Eakins’s work, causes the “watched” figure to appear objectified and alone. A good example of this effect is *The Concert Singer* (See Figure 10). The hand awkwardly included in the bottom left-hand corner of the canvas reminds the viewer that the subject of this painting is being watched.
by others. While Eakins makes us aware that the singer is indeed performing for a crowd, he does so in a way that maintains her isolation. The disembodied hand hardly mitigates the fact that this woman, at first glance, appears to be singing to herself in a vaguely defined space. He also depicts her in mid-song, her mouth open and her throat muscles tensed. She stares out into the distance, presumably over the heads of the crowd, immersed in the song. Eakins has simultaneously portrayed this woman as watched and alone.

*The Biglen Brothers Turning the Stake* is another striking example (See Figure 11). We can clearly see the crowd that has assembled along the shore to watch the race, but the brothers themselves are isolated from the crowd. The brothers are, in fact, even isolated from each other. Eakins has chosen to depict the rowers at the one moment in the race during which they row against each another. While the brothers would normally be united by their shared action, here they are working against one another, each rowing in his own direction. They are watched by the crowd, but alone in the middle of the river. They are linked to one another by the boat, but also isolated from one another by opposing action.

What is to be made of this trend? What could have caused Eakins to return so frequently to the themes of watching and isolation? Surveying Eakins’s life, the answer seems all too obvious. Throughout his life, Eakins had to deal with the disapproving gaze of contemporary Victorian society. His unconventional lifestyle, gruff demeanor, and progressive attitude towards teaching isolated Eakins from the prevailing social norms of his day. Constantly watched and judged by his contemporaries, it is not surprising that

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34 Cooper, 1996, pp. 50, 52.
Eakins would include the ever-watching eyes of others in so many of his paintings. The effect this gaze seems to have on Eakins’s subjects is also not surprising. The isolation we see throughout his work speaks, perhaps, to the isolation he himself suffered.

Figure 10: The Concert Singer, 1890. Oil on Canvas 75x 54 inches. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Figure 11: The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake, 1873. Oil on Canvas, 40 x 60 inches. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio.
Chapter 4:

The Gross Clinic as a Social Portrait

The Gross Clinic is undoubtedly Thomas Eakins’s best known work (See Figure 12). Painted in 1875, its impressive size and dramatic subject matter made it the most ambitious work of his early career. It was submitted for the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and subsequently rejected. Eventually displayed at the Haseltine Galleries, the work drew almost entirely negative reviews from the contemporary press. After Eakins gained fame and prestige in the art community in the early 20th century, however, the painting garnered considerable praise and increased in importance. In 2002, a New York Times critic went so far as to call it “hands down, the finest 19th century American Painting.”

The history of scholarship on this painting is, in essence, the history of scholarship on Thomas Eakins. It is a superb example of his work, displaying many of his

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1 The exact measurements of the piece are 8 feet (240 cm) by 6.5 ft (200cm)
stylistic and thematic tendencies. Also it prominently displays each of the qualities discussed in the previous chapter, and it is therefore an ideal work for us to analyze. It features muted color, a dark interior space, Eakins’s typical physical and emotional treatment of the subject, and the themes of watching and isolation. Investigating these themes within the painting will display how they work in concert with one another to create new meaning.

**An Unsuccessful Portrait**

The most striking feature of the painting is the extremely dark nature of the scene depicted. The subject matter is surprising and graphic. Contemporary critics were shocked by the vivid depiction of the gaping, bloody wound on the patient’s leg and even today this painting appears surprisingly blunt in its depiction of the surgery.\(^3\) In addition the space in which the surgery is taking place is darkly lit. Nearly half of the picture plane is occupied by the shadowy, barely visible students observing Gross’s lecture. Contemporary accounts of similar surgeries confirm that the rooms in which these procedures took place were darkly lit. Eakins’s own notes and sketches drawn from suggest that his treatment of light accurately depicts the lighting conditions.\(^4\) As previously discussed, however, Eakins’s use of dark space and muted color often served to complement the overall mood of his paintings and *The Gross Clinic* is no exception. The harsh, shadowy space complements the dramatic surgery being depicted.

While the dark lighting of the space is reasonably explained by contemporary accounts of the actual conditions that existed during such surgeries, Eakins’s shadowy

\(^3\) Goodrich, 1933, pp. 51-53.
Figure 13: The Gross Clinic, 1875. Oil On Canvas, 96 X 78 inches. The Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
treatment of the titular Dr. Gross is more difficult to rectify. The painting was, among other things, intended to show Eakins’s skill in capturing likenesses in the hope that its success would attract future commissions. While the whole scene is darkly lit, one would expect Eakins to arrange the composition in such a way as to clearly light the face of the man whose portrait he was painting. Gross’s face, however, is almost completely in shadow. Neither of his eyes are visible and the entire right side of his face is obscured in darkness. While Eakins was still able to create a recognizable likeness of his subject, it seems odd that he would obscure so much of the face in shadow.

Gross’s emotional state is also interesting given that he is supposedly the central player in this scene. The great surgeon peers out into the distance, perhaps silently composing his thoughts before he addresses the audience that has come to observe him. His stern, emotionless face makes him appear detached from the brutal surgery that strikes us as so emotionally charged. Perhaps the strangest aspect of the doctor’s emotional characterization, however, is that Eakins completely obscures his eyes. Unable to see Gross’s eyes, we are unable to fully interpret his expression. The overall impression we get from Gross is a serious one. There is nothing in his facial expression we can relate to or empathize with. His face might best be described as mask-like.

All of these choices seem to contradict the traditional purpose of portraiture. This “portrait” fails to coherently depict the sitter physically or emotionally. Gross’s physical features are covered by shadow while his emotional state is obscured by his distant expression. What is to be made of this apparent failure? What aspect of Gross did Eakins capture in this painting?

A Watched Man

It is obvious that the central action in this scene is being observed by a large crowd of students. Eakins, however, has chosen to emphasize this fact and its implications at every turn. He has captured Gross at the moment he is most conscious of the fact that he is performing for a crowd. He has turned away from the patient in order to address his audience regarding some aspect of the procedure. Gross, the surgery, the patient’s mother, and the clerk are all in the brightly lit center of the room while the students sit in the shadowy benches surrounding the surgery floor. While the shadowy treatment of the audience serves to keep the main focus of the painting on the central action, it also highlights the fact that the surgery is a performance. It is no coincidence that such rooms are known as surgical theaters: the students look down on the brightly lit surgery floor much as an audience observes a play on a stage.

We must also recognize that Eakins’s decision to depict this surgery is an odd one in and of itself. If he wanted to paint a portrait of a well-known public figure that would attract future commissions, then this scene seems to be a poor choice. As previously discussed, Gross and the surgery are clearly made to be the focal point of the composition, but a great deal of the painting is devoted to the audience, not the surgery. Nearly half of the picture plane is occupied by the shadowy outlines of the watchers. The mass of seated figures rises above and around Gross’s head, engulfing and surrounding the surgery team. Imagine how different the image would appear if everything above the clerk’s head were cropped away. The composition would be just as convincing, if not more so, if the crowd were removed. Eakins must have chosen to include them in his composition for a reason.

6 Fried, 1985, pp. 34-35.
All of these choices are unquestionably odd, but there is clearly a reason behind them. Combining everything we have discussed about this image we begin to arrive at what this reason might be. The choices Eakins made in composing and creating this image seem to suggest that he was not primarily interested in capturing Gross’s physical or emotional state. While the image represents both a physical and emotional depiction of the doctor, these aspects are noticeably subjugated to other elements. Thus it cannot be said that this portrait’s primary goal is to capture either a physical or emotional likeness of its professed subject.

Instead this work seems to capture another layer of Gross altogether: it is a portrait of Gross’s social existence. What I mean by this is that Eakins’s choices consistently indicate that he was primarily interested in depicting Gross as he existed in the eyes of society. This is not unprecedented in the history of portraiture. Portraiture has always attempted to incorporate elements of the sitter’s social and professional life. Symbols that indicate wealth, occupation, and status are visible throughout the history of portraiture. What is unique about Eakins’s approach to this tradition is that he has aggressively subjugated physical and emotional likeness in order to emphasize of the sitter’s social role.

If we accept that Eakins attempted to present a social depiction of Gross, then many of the features of this painting are explained. The elements that highlight the doctor being watched make sense if Eakins was indeed trying to represent Gross through the eyes of society. The presence of the large crowd behind Gross serves to indicate his professional success and highlight that this success places him in the public eye. The odd lighting is also explained. By selectively lighting only the doctor’s hand and forehead,
Eakins indicates the means by which Gross has obtained his professional success and respect. His hand represents his manual dexterity while his extensive knowledge is represented by his head. The one aspect of the painting that still seems peculiar, however, is Eakins’s treatment of Gross’s physical and emotional state. It is difficult to determine what meaning the doctor’s emotional distance and shadowy face might contribute to Eakins’s social portrait of Samuel Gross. The underlying theme of isolation that exists in the painting leads us to an answer.

**An Isolated Man**

Though it may initially seem impossible that Eakins could simultaneously depict Gross as conspicuously watched and conspicuously isolated, close examination reveals that this apparent contradiction does indeed exist within the painting. We again take note of the moment Eakins has chosen to depict. Gross is shown as he turns from the surgery for a moment, preparing to address the crowd. By choosing to depict the doctor in this lull between actions, Eakins has isolated the doctor from his surroundings. Although Gross holds the scalpel expertly in his right hand, he is no longer actively engaged in the surgery which continues on without his direct participation to his left. Yet at the same time, his mouth is closed and he holds the scalpel in his hand, indicating that he has only just turned away from the surgery. Gross is depicted as he composes his thoughts before beginning his verbal interaction with the audience. The students wait for him to address them but he has not yet said anything. So he is isolated both from the surgery and the crowd that surrounds him. In this moment he is alone. Alone, ironically, in a room full of people who have come to watch him.

7 Fried, 1985, pp. 45-46.
Even the audience’s gaze cannot be said to involve a real interaction. Gross’s isolation is further emphasized by the audience’s presence when we realize that, despite appearances, almost no one in the room is actually looking at the doctor. The assistants are completely focused on the patient, while the clerk seems to be immersed in his notes. The patient’s mother covers her face, immersed in her own emotions. Peering into the dark space the students occupy, it becomes apparent that the students hardly represent an attentive audience. Many of the students appear to be bored or dozing off while the remainder appear to be directing their gaze at the surgery, not the doctor.

It is also significant that Gross has his back to the rows of students that we are able to see. Even if they are looking directly at the doctor, they are staring at the back of his head and cannot see his face. Conversely, Gross cannot see them. We can assume that students are seated all around the operating floor, but our viewpoint suggests that even students seated directly in front of Gross are unable to see his face clearly. In this moment, then, Gross interacts only with himself despite the audience’s gaze.

Another element that serves to isolate Gross is the halo of empty space that surrounds his head. His brightly lit forehead is an island in a sea of muted browns. The only empty seat in the house is, strangely, directly above Gross’s head and the two students to either side of this void lean outward, expanding this emptiness. In fact the entire painting can be divided into three diagonal sections: the top occupied by the students and the clerk, the bottom occupied by the surgery team and the patient, and the middle section occupied only by Gross and the patient’s mother.\(^8\) Considering how closely the other figures in the painting are grouped together, Gross is conspicuously isolated within the composition.

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\(^8\) Fried, 1985, 47-50.
Even Gross’s gaze serves to isolate him from the rest of the scene. While the gaze of every other major character is focused within the composition, Gross stares off into the distance. When our eyes reach the doctor, they can go no further. Nothing in the painting allows us to visually connect his face with the rest of the composition. Imagine how different the painting would be if Gross occupied the same space but was turned to face the surgery. Perhaps he would be looking down at the incision, gesturing to some aspect of the procedure. Regardless he would be interacting with the patient and the other surgeons, tying him into the overall composition. A similar effect could have been achieved if any of the supporting characters were looking directly at Gross. If the clerk, for example, were looking at the doctor as opposed to his notes the entire mood of the painting would be subtly changed. Gross would be connected to his surroundings and his striking isolation would be mitigated. Instead Eakins chose to isolate Gross from his surroundings in almost every way.

A Social Portrait

Eakins’s stylistic choices coupled with the underlying themes of isolation and being watched create a coherent message. Eakins has indeed created a social portrait of Gross: one that conveys a critical view of the society in which both Gross and Eakins lived. During the second half of the 19th century, Americans were still reeling from the implications and horror of the Civil War. The Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1877 as well as the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments all threatened and uprooted traditional racial and gender identities. In addition, the economic depression of 1873

9 The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, provides a broadened definition of citizenship and guarantees equal protection. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, prohibits governments from denying citizens the right to vote based on race or color.
sparked widespread class conflict between the working class and the middle and upper classes. All of these issues caused the upper and middle classes to seek to distinguish themselves from minorities and working classes through strict cultural practices. The strict etiquette and social codes against which Eakins struggled exemplify this trend.

More relevant to our discussion of *The Gross Clinic*, however, is the concept of the successful Victorian man. For men in Victorian society, professional accomplishment had become of central importance. As the professional middle class gained in size and power, professional success and the financial independence it allowed became important measures of masculine identity. More and more individuals in society were defined primarily by their professions and professional accomplishments.

Eakins has depicted Gross as his society viewed him. By choosing to depict the doctor within a professional setting, Eakins indicated that Gross is to be understood primarily as a successful professional. This painting is not titled *A Portrait of Samuel Gross* or even *Dr. Gross Performing Surgery*, it is *The Gross Clinic*. Even the title confirms that Gross is most important as a teacher and a surgeon. This is not a portrait of Samuel Gross, but of Dr. Gross the successful and respected surgeon and teacher.

The lighting of this painting is more than just an attempt to realistically capture the scene Eakins witnessed. We are watching this surgery in the same way as the students. Our eyes dart first to the open wound and the doctor’s hands, then to his head. Eakins forces us to see this scene through the eyes of the spectators. The students know Gross as a surgeon and a teacher, and so Eakins casts a shadow across the doctor’s face and eyes. We understand this man only through his skills and his accomplishments. If eyes are the

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10 Bederman, 1995, p. 11-15
11 Rotundo, 1993, p. 178-193
windows to the soul, then Gross’s soul has been dismissed as unimportant by Eakins. He shows us professional men in a coldly professional setting.

In this way, Eakins expresses a critical view of contemporary social standards and expectations. Gross is put on a pedestal, isolated and objectified, by a society that values professional success above all else. This is a portrait of the ideal Victorian man. He is demure, controlled, and respected, and yet his mask-like face reminds us that this respect has come at a price. Gross’s personality is unimportant, and in this respect he is dehumanized by the probing gaze of society. Eakins’s dark realism is, in essence, a representation of his own emotional state and that of the Gilded Age in general. He shows us the unfortunate side effects of a society in which scientific and professional achievement transcend personal happiness and healthy societal interaction. These are the darker aspects of Victorian society: isolation and superficiality.

**Applicability to Other Paintings**

This same social commentary can be seen again and again in almost all of Eakins’s paintings of professional men in professional settings. It is perhaps most clearly articulated, however, in a series of works created towards the end of Eakins’s career: his boxing series. The series consists of three paintings, *Taking the Count* (1898, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut), *Salutat* (1898, Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts), and *Between Rounds* (1899, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), inspired by popular prize fights that took place in Philadelphia.12 (See Figures 14, 15, and 16). Viewing these three images with the themes we have already discussed in mind, it is instantly apparent that there are many

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similarities between these scenes and *The Gross Clinic*. All three are composed of a central group of male figures being watched by a large crowd. As in *The Gross Clinic*, the central group is isolated from the spectators. In *Taking the Count* and *Between Rounds* we see that Eakins has again portrayed his central figures with distant expressions and shadowy features. Finally he has once more chosen to paint moments in which the action of the fight is stalled. He has removed his subjects from the action of boxing in order to isolate and investigate them.

While all three paintings can be read in much the same way as we previously read *The Gross Clinic*, *Salutat* and *Between Rounds* contain particularly interesting implications. *Salutat* depicts the boxer Billy Smith victorious after his bout with Tim Callahan on April 22, 1898. It is worthwhile to note that Eakins took some liberties in his depiction of this scene: in actuality, Smith lost this match to Callahan in the final round. Eakins has isolated the boxer from his surroundings by highlighting his body, which separates him visually from the muted background. In fact his body is so severely lit that he appears to glow against the muted crowd that surrounds him.

Smith’s nudity serves to further isolate him from the crowd. Whereas Gross’s tools were his hands and his intellect, Smith’s tool as a boxer is his muscular body. Smith’s purposeful but restrained gesture carries a somber dignity. While we cannot see the faces of Smith or his trainers, their body language suggests a serious attitude. This is reinforced by the bloody sponge being carried by the nearest trainer, which reminds us of the violent nature of the match and the sacrifices made for this victory. The seriousness of Smith and his trainers stands in sharp contrast to the cheering, smiling faces of the

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Figure 14: **Salutat**, 1898. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches. Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Mass.

Left, Figure 15: **Between Rounds**, 1899. Oil on Canvas, 50 ¼ x 40 inches. The Pennsylvania Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Right, Figure 16: **Taking the Count**, 1898. Oil on Canvas, 96 x 84 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut
watching crowd. The audience seems to care little for the blood spilled in pursuit of the victory. Instead they congratulate Smith on his professional success without seeming to recognize the pain involved in the victory. Just as in *The Gross Clinic*, the watching crowd judges Smith based solely on professional success. This objectification can be taken even a step further. The title and the pose Eakins chose for this work imbue Smith with an idealistic aura. This is not the portrait of one man so much as it is a portrait of the victorious boxer.

*Between Rounds* is another clear articulation of Eakins’s dark view of Victorian society. The boxer is surrounded by symbols of authority and observation. The time keeper sits in the foreground, preparing to ring the bell that will order the boxer back into the ring. A police officer, a symbol of authority, is shown standing ominously in the background. Above, the press box is clearly denoted and the reporters have their pens poised to report the boxer’s success or failure to the larger public. Finally, the two hanging banners of a ballerina girl and Louis Mann, a comic, emphasize that this boxer is, above all, a performer.15 All of these details explicitly reiterate that the boxer, and everyone in the public eye, is constantly under the demanding, judgmental, and cloistering gaze of society.

While it is easy to see how this interpretation applies to other portraits of professional men, it is more difficult to apply to the rest of Eakins’s body of work. Yet even in paintings where the gaze of society and its implications is not explicitly depicted, its presence can still be felt. This is true in almost all of Eakins’s portraits. While there are no watching crowds in these paintings, the emotional distance of Eakins’s sitters occupy suggest that some of the same elements of social commentary are at work. *Mrs. Letitia*

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*Wilson Jordan Bacon* (1888, The Brooklyn Museum, New York, New York) and *Mrs. Amelia C. Van Buren* (1890, The Phillips Collection, Washington DC) are prime examples of this. In both portraits we encounter the women in intimate settings: the suggestion of interior space and the women’s relaxed postures indicate this. Yet these women seem uncomfortable and somber. There is no hint of an emotional connection as they stare blankly into the distance. In both portraits we get the impression that we are seeing a side of these women that we are not meant to see. Especially in Mrs. Jordan Bacon’s portrait, we feel as though we have seen through her pretty clothes and her social niceties. What we see underneath is an awkward, isolated person who seems somewhat unsure of her pose. Though these women are not being explicitly watched, the ever-present expectations of society have clearly taken their toll on these people.

**Limitations**

There are, obviously, some paintings to which these ideas do not apply. Some of Eakins’s early sporting scenes, such as *Sailing* (1874, Private Collection), as well as his two outdoor genre scenes from 1881, *Shad Fishing at Gloucester* (1881, Philadelphia Museum Of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) and *Mending the Net* (1881, Philadelphia Museum Of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), are hard to interpret in this way. In these paintings Eakins adopts a more distanced perspective on his subjects. Many of the figures look away from us or are too far off for us to clearly see their faces. They are linked to the other individuals in the composition through common action. Just as in some of the paintings already discussed, the people in these scenes are unaware they are being watched. Yet the effect here is different. These individuals are not isolated or objectified
by our gaze. They do not allow us to invade their activity with our gaze and refuse to
open themselves up to our sight. Whereas many of Eakins’s compositions highlight the
invasive nature of our gaze, in these compositions Eakins has minimized the impact we
are allowed to have on the figures.

Arcadia and The Swimming Hole are similar to these paintings in this way. The
influence our gaze has on the men and women depicted is diminished. These figures are
completely different from the isolated, uncomfortable, and solemn sitters we see in
Eakins’s portraits. These people are completely at ease. Their backs are to us and they are
unaffected by our gaze or the gaze of others. They are unified with one another by their
nudity and their shared actions. The fact that they are so comfortable in their nudity
suggests that they are not concerned that they might be watched. These paintings as well
as those discussed in the previous paragraph are the exception that proves the rule. They
represent Eakins’s depiction of man removed from the constraints and pressures of Gilded
Aged society. His Arcadian paintings as well as The Swimming Hole were painted when
Eakins was visiting his sister on her farm in the country, free from the cloistering gaze of
his contemporaries.¹⁶ Perhaps Eakins’s obsession with nudity, his love of the outdoors,
and his lifelong interest in sports were all ways he tried to obtain this ideal state of being.
This assertion deserves further exploration and discussion, but unfortunately its
implications fall outside of the scope of this thesis.

¹⁶ Adams, 2005, pp. 298-300.
Conclusion

Since his death in 1916, Thomas Eakins has become one of the most important figures in the history of American art. His realism and unique perspective have captivated viewers and art historians alike. Yet the course of Eakins’s fame has been complex. While the writings of Goodrich and his followers were dominant for over 60 years, dissenting opinions have gradually emerged and taken root. While scholars once believed him to be a moral, upstanding figure, the Bregler papers and the incidents they bring to light have thrown our understanding of Eakins into turmoil. Surveying the diverse writings that have been published over the past 20 years, it becomes clear that fresh interpretations of Eakins’s life and art are needed.

By adopting a unique perspective on Eakins’s life, this thesis has arrived at new interpretations of some of the most striking aspects of his work. Past perspectives, while plausible, fail to completely explain these peculiarities in light of all we know about his life. Rejecting these outdated perspectives and applying alternate interpretations brings new meaning to Eakins’s most important works. When we attempt to understand these paintings through the lens of Eakins’s frustration with the societal forces that judged his actions and doomed him to professional failure, we see that, on some level, his work is a bitter commentary on these forces. I do not pretend that the conclusions reached in this thesis are the only valid interpretations of Eakins’s art and life. I do, however, believe that the assertions made in this thesis may present plausible and useful explanations for the peculiar choices made throughout Eakins’s oeuvre.

It is never possible to completely understand an artist’s work. We can never know for certain what motivations, both conscious and unconscious, drove the artist to create.
Rather than attempting to fully articulate their intentions, we must instead resign ourselves to search the artist’s life and art for what meaning we can find. Whether the meaning we discover is “right” or “wrong” is impossible to know. We can only hope that whatever we discover gives us a deeper understanding of both the artist we investigate and the art they produced. I hope this thesis and the conclusions it has reached deepen our understanding of the art and life of Thomas Eakins.
Bibliography


