

The Revenge of
**THOMAS
EAKINS**

SIDNEY D. KIRKPATRICK

Henry McBride Series in Modernism and Modernity

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*To agent Richard Morris
and artist Mercedes Thurlbeck*

I see no impropriety in looking at the most beautiful
of Nature's works, the naked figure.

Thomas Eakins

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introduction
In Light and Shadow



Thomas Eakins was an enigma who shocked art lovers and critics alike in his time. Today he is considered the finest portrait painter our nation has ever produced. Through sheer will, clarity of vision, depth and incisiveness of technique, he captured images of such realism and narrative fascination that viewers are pulled into them the way a theater audience is drawn into a scene from a motion picture: looking at his paintings, one experiences a feeling of being there, in the moment, with the champion boxer in a crowded, smoke-filled arena, the pianist resting her head in her hands, the physicist at work in his laboratory, or the baseball batter waiting for a pitcher to let loose. That Eakins created these inspired, fully articulated, and profoundly “modern” images more than a century ago, when our nation and its portrait painters had just begun searching for a uniquely American identity, makes his achievement the more remarkable.

Eakins’ own generation missed the point of his art altogether. For his professional debut in 1871, the twenty-seven-year-old Eakins chose the first in a series of portraits that were unlike anything done before in American art: professional oarsmen poised in racing sculls on the reflective waters of Philadelphia’s Schuylkill River. His scenes were recorded with absolute fidelity to the time of day, the precise dimensions and plane of the scull cutting through the calm water, and, in his keen attention, the rowers’ biceps.

“Men with their beautifully-ugly muscles,” the critic for the *New York Tribune* sniped. “A shock to artistic conventionalities,” declared the *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph*. “Peculiar,” another reviewer remarked. Most brutal was a critic from the *American Art Review* who described Eakins’ work as a “scientific statement” rather than “an embodiment of movement and color.” Reviewers of his work were more receptive in Paris, where Eakins had completed advanced art studies a few years earlier. Still, they found his rowing paintings little more than “photographic proofs,” lacking “poetic imagination.”

Eakins was bewildered by the response. Real beauty, he believed, was not a quality that had to be imagined or hidden. It existed everywhere. “I love sun-

Overleaf: Thomas Eakins at about seventy, tweaking his dog’s ear in the rear doorway of the family home at 1729 Mount Vernon Street, c. 1914; photographer unknown (Courtesy of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Charles Bregler’s Thomas Eakins Collection; purchased with the partial support of the Pew Memorial Trust)

light and children and beautiful women and men, their heads and hands and almost everything I see,” Eakins had once written in a letter to his father.

Though technically brilliant in its precise observation of subjects, Eakins’ art was judged provincial by the French and yet too avant-garde by Victorian America. Rather than adapt his course in such an environment, Eakins forged stubbornly ahead, obsessively pursuing themes and honing a technique that continued to be largely ignored by the French and deemed offensive at home. No one disputed his technical mastery of anatomy and perspective; critics and patrons simply couldn’t come to terms with how he chose to apply his talent. “If he had been a French painter, or even an English one, every European museum would covet his work,” one critic has observed. “He would be as familiar to collectors, dealers and art students as Manet and Degas. But although French-trained, Thomas Eakins was . . . thoroughly American.”

During Eakins’ tumultuous four-decade career he had only a single one-man showing of his work. At the Exposition Universelle, held in Paris in 1889, when American painters emerged as a sophisticated and competitive presence in the community of world art, receiving an astonishing fifty-seven awards and twenty-four honorable mentions, Eakins’ two submissions went unnoticed by the judges. The most significant honor he received in his later years was a gold medal presented by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; by then, out of spite, after years of meticulous work being met with misunderstanding, he melted the medallion down and redeemed it for cash. A full century passed before Eakins’ post-mortem revenge began.

Like his art, Eakins himself included deep and vexing contrasts: a complex mix of conservatism and daring, loyalty and rebellion, classical technique and cutting-edge science. Handsome and charismatic in his youth, he nonetheless dressed in a slovenly manner and offended visitors to his studio with crude remarks. He studied logarithms and etymology for fun, built his own cameras, and designed elaborate gymnastic devices to demonstrate the muscular actions of the human body. He was fluent in seven languages and could dissect cadavers with the skill of a trained surgeon. Yet he detested popular culture, politics, literature, and anything that smacked of delicacy, refinement, or religious dogma. And although he had once distinguished himself as an art

student in Paris and traveled widely throughout Europe, he lived and worked virtually his entire career in the accommodating but modest Philadelphia row-house where he grew up. He married late in life, had no children, and spent his nonworking hours with friends and admirers, many of them students and fellow sportsmen. Had it not been for financial support from his doting father, he might well have given up painting altogether to pursue a career in medical science, a field that interested him nearly as much as art.

The reason most often cited for Eakins' lack of commercial success was his failure to abide by the artistic trends that defined his times. At the height of the great Gilded Age "cover-up," when everything from clothing to office buildings to piano legs was disguised by pretentious overdecoration, and when portraiture both at home and abroad was an exercise in social flattery, Eakins' art was blunt and direct. He stripped his images of glamour and artificiality. It may not, in fact, have occurred to him to paint any other way. The romantic imagery and majestic panoramas of his American contemporaries Frederic Church and Eastman Johnson held no more interest for him than the light-hearted spontaneity of the French impressionists. His goal was to depict his current world exactly as he saw it, even if that meant reaching back into antiquity to reinvent the academic realist tradition. His hero was Phidias, the legendary Greek sculptor of the Parthenon. His inspiration was the work of Diego Velázquez, whom he considered the greatest of all the Spanish masters. Into the remnant shell of academic realism Eakins injected modern science, technology, and his own remarkable talents, generating likenesses of extraordinary and compelling intensity. His work was as truly American as the ten-ton Baldwin steam engines and locomotives that were produced in a Philadelphia factory several blocks from his home.

Eakins' paintings poised on a balance between carefully composed imagery—featuring subjects often admired for aesthetics or sentiment—and an insistence on realistic honesty that both onlookers and experts found hard to understand. In what many critics now consider our nation's finest painting, Eakins depicted Dr. Samuel Gross and a team of surgeons removing diseased bone from a patient's leg. Eakins' contemporaries found the scene's theme objectionable, as they did the artist's unblinking attention to "horrible and disgusting detail." As one Philadelphia reviewer complained in 1880, "The

more we study it, the more our wonder grows that it was ever painted in the first place, and that it was ever exhibited in the second.” The *New York Tribune’s* critic agreed, though he, like so many others who stood in judgment over Eakins’ work, acknowledged the strange impact the painting had on viewers. “Powerful, horrible, and yet fascinating. . . . The more we praise it, the more we must condemn its admission to a gallery where men and women . . . must be compelled to look at it.” Other acknowledged Eakins masterpieces, such as his portrait of Dr. Hayes Agnew performing a mastectomy, were considered too graphic and finely detailed for public display. A painting that is today considered one of his finest, a classically themed, nearly mythic depiction of nude men swimming and sunbathing at Dove Lake, near Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, hastened his transition from avant-garde artist and teacher to Philadelphia outlaw.

Eakins’ philosophy of art without artifice upset many of the people who sat for his portraits as well. They wanted paintings that would enhance their self-image, not catalogue what might be deemed their “physical deficiencies.” Eakins sometimes asked his portrait subjects to wear old, rumpled clothing and worn-out shoes; he instructed more than one sitter not to shave for twenty-four hours before posing. The artist did not banter charmingly with his sitters in order to coax lively expressions from them; instead, he painted in stony silence, searching for truths that could not be pried loose with lighthearted conversation. “His gift,” scholar James Thomas Flexner wrote, “was to catch people at the moment when they lapsed into themselves.”

Eakins’ steadfast refusal to remove a mole or smooth wrinkles from a subject’s face is perhaps why he has the unique distinction of having had more of his paintings destroyed than any other great artist of modern times. Eight of his portraits were burned or shredded by the people who appeared in them; another fifteen simply disappeared under questionable circumstances. A portrait of the revered mother superior at a local convent was either destroyed or conveniently lost after her death by nuns seeking to do Christian service to her memory. The daughter of the subject of another Eakins portrait merely refused to let her family hang it on the wall. To visitors who asked to see it, she said apologetically, “Mother was sick when this was painted . . .”

In addition to the offended sensibilities of his sitters, viewers found even

greater objections at the core of Eakins' work. Philadelphia art patrons had considerable difficulty accepting Eakins' passionate belief that the nude human body was the most beautiful thing on earth. He studied it artistically as he did scientifically, not overtly as an object of desire, but as a miracle of muscle, bone, and blood. At a time when unclothed female models were often required to wear masks to hide their identities, and male models wore loincloths in female art classes, Eakins insisted on total nudity and encouraged students to pose nude for each other in his classes or in various outdoor locations where he would photograph them. After one much-discussed incident at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he had served as a faculty member for nearly a decade, he removed the loincloth from a male model in an all-female life studies class. Eakins was barred from ever teaching there again.

Another incident found Eakins painting a portrait of the buxom wife of a prominent businessman. He stepped away from his easel and poked his fingers into her lace bodice. "Feeling for bones," he blithely remarked. Yet another patron bolted from the room when Eakins expressed his joy in having her model. "How beautiful an old woman's skin is," he exclaimed. "All those wrinkles!"

Eakins' fellow artists turned out to be no more helpful to his reputation. They voted unanimously to expel him from Philadelphia's most respected art association. They made no specific accusations, at least not in public, and presented no hard evidence to a designated "morality" committee. However, rumors circulated of Eakins having committed acts "unbecoming of a gentleman." Underlying such rumors were stronger hints of scandal that roiled his career. In a letter to the chairman of the Pennsylvania Academy, Eakins defended himself by alluding to shameless backstabbing and a "secret conspiracy" of unnamed parties. "A man could easily be accused of lewdness, and his action be truthfully described in fearful terms, yet if the explanation were once listened to that he was an obstetric physician practicing his calling he might rest blameless," Eakins wrote. "To study anatomy out of a book is like learning to paint out of a book. It's a waste of time."

Thirty-eight of Eakins' students withdrew from the Pennsylvania Academy after his dismissal and joined him in forming their own artists' cooperative. Yet Eakins' later efforts to repair his reputation did nothing except further

alienate him from Philadelphia's established institutions and the millionaire elites who funded them. Fearful that his art, artistry, and "Parisian turpitude" would catch on, critics and patrons of the arts quietly agreed to quarantine the artist by having his work rejected from exhibition.

Neither did Eakins find a market for his art in Paris. Enthusiasm for impressionism and the introduction of post-impressionism made his brand of realism seem dated, almost quaint. Nearly a century later, the art and literary critic Richard Blackmur neatly summarized the problem when he was attributed as saying, "Talent seldom expresses the right thing at the right time in the right place."

Hostility became neglect, and with neglect came obscurity. Eakins' last several paintings were dark, almost elegiac. In 1907, at age sixty-three, Eakins retreated with his wife, the artist Susan Macdowell, into near-complete isolation in their Philadelphia home. In spite of several significant sales and belated honors, his paintings, more than three hundred in all, could not be sold or even given away. "No one collected Eakins but Eakins," one critic later remarked. "Few could paint like Eakins [and] even fewer seemed to want to," wrote another. At his own request, no funeral services were held for Eakins when he died in the spring of 1916. "My honors are misunderstanding, persecution & neglect, enhanced because unsought," he had written of himself.

The settling of accounts in Eakins' favor finally got under way forty years later. Thanks to his widow, Susan Macdowell Eakins, along with her companion, Mary Adeline Williams, who together made a substantial gift of his paintings to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Eakins' creative genius came to the attention of a new generation of realist painters. The artist Reginald Marsh, heir to a Chicago meatpacking fortune, funded the first Eakins biography, written by Lloyd Goodrich, which was published in 1933. Though devoted to her husband's memory, Macdowell was initially skeptical that the general public would be interested in her husband's art. "I appreciate very much your desire to publish an illustrated discourse on the Eakins work," she wrote Marsh. "I believe, however, the Eakins pictures will never be popular, and for this reason, I think your project may not repay you for the time and expense." The help she provided the author contributed in no small measure to our appreciation of the artist today. Goodrich's acclaimed biography became

the definitive statement on Eakins and an atonement, however prosaic, for half a century of neglect.

Having been previously damned as a philistine, Eakins came to be declared a hero. Lewis Mumford, a father of modern American literary criticism, saluted Eakins' "hearty contempt for the hierarchies of caste and office," and Henry McBride, art critic for the small but influential literary magazine *The Dial*, drew parallels between the paintings of Eakins and the literature of Herman Melville. Literary critic F. O. Matthiessen, in 1941, compared portraits by Eakins to the poetry of Walt Whitman.

Like a dam breaking, a deluge of unabashedly laudatory praise followed. Critics likened Eakins' faithful rendering of anatomy and perspective to Leonardo da Vinci's, and compared his layered and textured use of oils to those of Rembrandt and Vermeer. And, where Eakins' own generation had seen oddity and immoral behavior, viewers now saw heroic character and charming eccentricity. "Only his greatest virtue, honesty, counted against him," wrote *Time* magazine's art editor Alexander Eliot in 1957. Critics were soon describing Philadelphia's previous "outlaw in an undershirt" as a "lonely visionary" and "uncompromising individualist" who triumphed against adversity and Victorian prudery to produce "timeless portrayals" of his contemporaries. John Canaday, the anti-modernist art critic for the *New York Times* in the 1960s, praised Eakins as "twice the rebel that most of the contemporary stable is, and ten times as original as the noisiest of them." Declared Darrel Sewell, curator of American art at the Philadelphia Museum: "Eakins, the opera, was opening to rave reviews."

The artist's late but rapid ascent from obscurity, however, was still incomplete. Key pieces of his story turned out to be missing, owing to a lack of biographical fact for a basis to examine his career. Eakins wrote no memoir and kept no personal diaries. In his lifetime not one full-length article featuring him was published. Except for a relatively modest archive of correspondence, sketchbooks, and photographs, and the scholarship of Lloyd Goodrich, biographers had nothing but Eakins' drawings and paintings—however rich a visual guide—to illuminate their probing of the contradictory impulses appearing to motivate his art. No one could say for certain how Eakins' personal life and relationships influenced the dark and troubled moodiness of his later

paintings, or who in the Philadelphia art community had masterminded the “secret conspiracy” to prevent his work from being displayed, or whether Eakins’ love of nudity was driven by an elevated appreciation for the human body or by prurient desire. The big questions did not get asked, because they apparently could not be answered.

Just when it seemed the curtain was about to fall on Eakins “the opera,” the artist’s story received a few new plot twists, if not an entirely new ending. In what has been hailed as one of the most significant discoveries in recent art history, art curator Kathleen Foster and her assistant Elizabeth Milroy, at Eakins’ alma mater, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, obtained a virtual Pandora’s box of Eakins’ personal papers, correspondence, and photographs.

The Eakins opera continued as this trove provided valuable new material for postmodern and other art historians and scholars to reexamine Eakins’ life and career. It also opened the way for operatic extremes of lurid suppositions—used as platforms that magically transformed into fact, in turn used to launch further suppositions. Such approaches, epitomized by Henry Adams in 2005 in *Eakins Revealed*, curiously make rigid use of psychological investigation, in which, instead of following this discipline’s need to be supple, the nuances of an artist’s life are thrown automatically into the most extreme possibilities. An abundance of drama already informs Eakins’ complex personal and artistic histories without having their life drained by imposing on them theory in ways that are mechanical, overly speculative, and themselves prurient. Eakins’ psyche is easily shown to be complex enough and alive with transformation. Thus it seems ham-fisted to employ without balance the nuances of the artist’s struggles and successes merely to illustrate the agendas of mannered theories. The story demands a more expansive voice.

Nevertheless, how these new documents came to be found and what they tell us about Eakins and the conflicted spirit of the age depicted in his paintings is a story brimming with melodramatic turn-of-the-century intrigue and curatorial sleuthing. Foremost among the players in the gathering, sequestering, and maintenance of these papers was Charles Bregler, Eakins’ most devoted student and later personal secretary to the painter’s widow, Susan Macdowell. For more than four decades Bregler had assisted in framing, cleaning, hanging,

and cataloging Eakins' paintings. His fierce, almost neurotic devotion to the Eakins family was not reciprocated to the degree he believed was warranted. In 1938, after the death of Susan Macdowell Eakins at eighty-seven, trust agents handling her estate excluded Bregler from the final disposition of Eakins' paintings and papers. He read about the sale of the Eakins family home in the newspaper and stopped by, he later claimed, for a "sentimental" last visit.

What Charles Bregler found inside the Eakins home stunned him. Every room was cluttered with debris. As movers had hastily carted away furniture, they left the contents of drawers and cupboards dumped on the floors. Heaps of correspondence, photographs, sketches, and unfinished oil paintings were piled alongside shattered fragments of plaster casts, paintbrushes, and picture frames. Certain that Eakins' heirs did not appreciate the artist's genius, and outraged by what he considered yet another undeserved injury to the memory of his former teacher, Bregler helped himself to everything he could haul away.

This was Bregler's explanation for how he came into possession of some five hundred photographs, three hundred sketches, two hundred letters, stacks of personal and professional papers, a dozen or more paintings, and the equivalent of a steamer trunk full of Eakins' clothing and effects. Bregler's account might well be true; it also deserves scrutiny. Handwritten notes attached to the correspondence and personal papers indicate that Susan Macdowell Eakins intended to have these items destroyed. "They are to be burned," read one such note. "Do not read, just destroy," read another.

Bregler stashed the trove of Eakins findings in his basement and under his bed and didn't reveal the full extent of the collection to anyone except the woman who became his wife. He eventually sold off various paintings, sketches, and other materials. The rest remained hidden until Kathleen Foster and Elizabeth Milroy tracked them to a run-down South Philadelphia townhouse in 1983, forty-five years after their removal by Bregler from the Eakins estate. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the institution where Eakins first exposed a male model to the city's female students, is now home to an archive that provides a uniquely full and intimate glimpse of Eakins himself.

The Bregler documents do not disappoint. Eakins emerges as both a maligned innocent and a daredevil exhibitionist at odds with the status-driven and

monopolistic Philadelphia elite who built the museums where his art is now displayed. In an age much like our own, one of spiritual exhaustion, distrust, fear of commitment, and stupendous scientific and technological advancements, Eakins struggled to break new ground, setting remarkably high standards for himself while trying to earn his living doing it. He doggedly followed the path less traveled by his contemporaries, and suffered the consequences. Judging from the evidence now brought to light, added to the record of his paintings, all that sustained him was his impassioned and obsessive love of beauty in everything he saw, whether it was sunlight reflecting off a rower's muscles, an old woman's wrinkles, or blood on a surgeon's scalpel.

However dramatic certain facets of his life appear, Eakins was much more than just a swashbuckler, a paint-smearing Lothario, or an Easy Rider with an easel, as the Bregler papers also make clear. "Big artists," one critic has aptly said, "have big problems." Indications of insanity, as well as genius, ran in Eakins' family. The "secret conspirators" seeking to undermine his career were not only professional colleagues: they included his siblings, in-laws, nieces and nephews, along with art students and the father of a spurned lover.

The incident that eventually triggered Eakins' outright exile from the Philadelphia art establishment occurred when his brother-in-law Frank Stephens accused the artist of bestiality and incest. It was Stephens who worked to have Eakins barred from Philadelphia's premier art club. Another highly charged intrigue stemmed from Eakins' tutoring of his eldest niece, Ella Crowell, who, after several months of being confined to a mental hospital, returned home and shot herself. A third scandal involved another Eakins student, Lillian Hammitt, who was found wandering the streets of Philadelphia in a state of delirium, dressed only in a bathing suit. She too suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. In letters to Eakins, Lillian Hammitt identifies herself as "Mrs. Eakins" and asks her teacher whether she should turn to prostitution to support him and herself after his supposed divorce from Susan Macdowell, to whom the artist was in truth married.

Eakins responded to his brother-in-law's accusations with a formal affidavit in which he categorically maintained his innocence. "I never in my life seduced a girl, nor tried to," Eakins said. His statements may well have been true. Frank Stephens, who had been one of his "less remarkable" students at

the Pennsylvania Academy and had married Eakins' sister Caroline, provided no documentary or first-person evidence to the morality committee that passed judgment on Eakins. Moreover, Eakins' sister Margaret, whom the artist allegedly had violated, was no longer alive to bear witness when Stephens made the accusations. It is clear from family records that Margaret was on friendly terms with her brother all her life. But the committee judged Eakins on allegations and innuendo alone. Polite society didn't repeat, print, or try to verify the stories. People simply rejected the artist and his work.

Beyond Stephens' accusation of transgressions with Margaret, little evidence exists to suggest Eakins was a premeditated sex offender. He maintained close and lasting relationships with forty or more of his students from the Pennsylvania Academy. None of the extant nude photographs Eakins took of his students are overtly sexual in nature. If Eakins made a mistake in judgment by taking the photographs, it could have been more a result of his unstinting commitment to the study of the human body, his passion for beauty in all its forms, and his means of choice for stripping his students of what he believed to be prudish inhibition and shame. To Eakins' way of thinking, he committed no crime.

At an institution considered the nation's finest art school, however, where he was the sole painting instructor and a student's highest honor was the capital "E" that Eakins inscribed in the margin of a successful painting, it is conceivable that the opportunity for "conduct unbecoming of a gentleman" was present. Putting aside such issues as his encouragement of nude modeling, at least part of the reason the Pennsylvania Academy dismissed him appears to have been the rigorous academic demands Eakins placed on his students. He urged his pupils to study anatomy by attending autopsies and dissecting cadavers. Classes in such highly popular subjects as aesthetic theory, art history, and outdoor sketching were omitted altogether from Eakins' curriculum. Parents who sent their sons and daughters to art school so they might grow in refinement were naturally appalled by the curriculum. The incident with the loincloth precipitated a crisis that had been building for months if not years.

The recently discovered papers give new insights about Eakins' uncompromising and deliberate defiance of the conventions of nineteenth-century painting. His decision to focus on portraiture, his choice of whom to paint,

and the circumstances he posed his subjects in were decidedly not commercially driven; he rarely gained compensation for his paintings, and some of them took years to complete. Neither critics nor patrons provided him much encouragement. Eakins turned to portraiture out of a psychological need that lay at the deepest core of his artistic vision.

It is now clearer than ever that Eakins put himself to great lengths and personal expense to paint examples of achievement and character: people he admired or considered highly skilled professionals like himself. He furthermore repeatedly sought to picture his subjects in settings that presented a narrative synthesis: people in relation to striking objects and events as important to the artist as they were to the subjects. His portraits, perhaps more than for any other nineteenth-century painter, thus become an autobiographical tool, proving timelessly invaluable in viewing the artist and his environment. As the art historian David Lubin has said, Eakins' paintings, like the fiction of Henry James, can be understood as a finely tuned register of the social and professional values and discontents of a generation and a nation breaking new ground and defining a uniquely "modern" identity. Another art historian has insightfully described these tensions and rich evocations in equally elegant terms: "Each of [Eakins'] paintings represents a struggle between logic and emotion, with line, mathematics and perspective standing for the logical component, and . . . pigment standing for the erratic, unpredictable pattern of emotion."

Indeed, among the most intriguing disclosures to be explored about Eakins' work is just how he was able to achieve such technical truth in his portraits. Forensic studies of his major paintings reveal that Eakins relied not only on his own meticulous and superb skills as a draftsman to solve exacting perspective challenges—he made extensive use of photographs as well in preparing his paintings, sometimes shooting as many as forty or more pictures of a subject.

This practice has long been known to curators and scholars. The revelation is that he went further, projecting the images onto canvas and tracing from them, incising scratch marks to guide his brush, then camouflaging the incisions with layers of paint. Eakins carried out such work in the privacy of his home studio, and his wife took great care to keep the projection stage along with the source photographs a secret. She may even have sought to destroy

them, believing that knowledge of his working method could detract from his accomplishment. Her directive on family letters might as well have applied to evidence of his photo projections: “Just burn.”

Yet all in all, in view of Eakins’ power as an artist, as with his alleged indiscretions and scandals, such secrets and ciphers do not detract from a viewer’s appreciation of his paintings. Instead, they put them in a fascinating new context. Eakins was a century ahead of his time. Photography-assisted painting techniques that he pioneered in his Philadelphia studio are now as commonplace at Parsons and Cooper Union as the use of fully nude models in teaching drawing. “Painters can’t cheat,” as David Hockney is fond of saying, “because the medium gives them no rules to break.”

Eakins’ paintings are now universally known and admired precisely because they appear to us as thoroughly modern. His works are celebrated not because he was a photo-realist, but because they are moody, and brilliantly nuanced. They are alive with conflict, complexity, contrast, and truth. His handling of paint, one brushstroke at a time, infused into his creations a highly distinctive narrative far beyond mere simulation of reality. Each painting is its own motion picture, revealing its insights in sequence and in whole. The paintings tell stories that allow a viewer to appreciate them even without a catalogue or a punch-in-the-number audio guide. Eakins’ masterpiece, his portrait of Dr. Gross performing surgery, has been described by David Lubin, in the *Art Bulletin*, in these terms: “[Eakins’ painting] furnishes a melodrama of life and death, light and darkness, knowledge and despair. . . . Its towering, bloody Mephistopheles looming out of the black shadows in the dark illumination from above . . . combines Mary Shelley with Caravaggio to put forth a scene that might later have been filmed by the German Expressionists.” Paintings with such vivid revelations and themes appeared together in room after room during a touring retrospective of work by Eakins that set attendance records in 2001. The exhibition first opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art—overlooking the river so enlivened in Eakins’ first paintings—and then went to Paris, where Eakins’ art appeared alongside that of other great master realists, among them Courbet, Degas, and Manet. From there the exhibition traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

That Eakins’ personal narrative was driven by contradictory impulses

and obsessions, and at times the possibility of psychological illness, only adds dimension to our perception of him as a neglected and tortured genius. He was a product of America in the staid Victorian age, and yet he was also one of the creators of the changing new world he devoted himself to picturing. Only in the twenty-first century can his achievements, along with his failures, his dedication to art, and his close and conceivably exploitive relationships with art students, be more clearly understood. People on both sides of the Atlantic finally got the message: Philadelphians' eyes were opened to the depth of Eakins' fidelity, tenderness, and force, and the French recognized his art with new insight too.