

Amy Werbel, *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-300-11655-7

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Philadelphia painter Thomas Eakins remains a puzzling figure in American art. He often seemed unwilling or unable to make the concessions necessary to establish a thoroughly successful career. As a charismatic teacher, he could inspire hatred as well as devotion in his students. His artwork captured what some critics considered the ugly side of American life. Although Eakins's failures can be overstated, his career is indeed littered with dissatisfied patrons, unhappy sitters, and scathing critical reviews of works that the artist considered his best. His infamous ouster in 1886 from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts rounds out the story of a highly self-destructive personality. Eakins's willful tone-deafness to the mores of late nineteenth-century society caused him great personal and professional pain and has helped make him one of the most studied American artists. In the past few years alone three biographical studies have appeared, each offering a different explanation to account for the artist's troubled persona.¹ Amy Werbel's new book, *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*, takes a fresh look at Eakins's losing streak and situates it within Philadelphia's rich history in the fields of scientific inquiry and medicine.

Scholars have long established Eakins's predilection for science, but Werbel delves yet further into the primary literature, moving beyond the artist's interest in anatomy and dissection to a broader re-conceptualizing of Eakins's career and motives. Werbel specifically explores how Eakins's unusually strong sympathies with the medical community shaped his view of the human body, which she aptly notes "was far more acute than his gaze at the body politic" (35). At the center of her study is what she calls Eakins's "anatomist's eye," a fundamentally different world-view from that of his peers, patrons, and many of his own students. According to Werbel, Eakins's personality, so ill-suited to a Gilded Age portraitist, would have found greater acceptance among the medical men who often figured among his subjects. Additionally, Werbel finds that the artist's "Discussions with the many world-renowned medical professors Eakins painted at Jefferson and the University of Pennsylvania Medical Colleges infused him with medical attitudes toward the body, and with clinical culture generally" (31). It is Eakins's unrelenting desire to know the body and (more controversially) his insistence on presenting this unidealized medical view to the public that Werbel places at the heart of the artist's professional failures.

The Gross Clinic of 1875 might be considered Eakins's first professional miscalculation relating to his "anatomist's eye." Here, Eakins presents a nearly nude patient being operated upon by Dr. Samuel D. Gross in the surgical amphitheater of Jefferson Medical College. Eakins painted his masterpiece with the upcoming Centennial Exposition in mind, but the exhibition jury famously rejected it for display in the fine arts section. They relegated the canvas to an Army medical exhibit so that those with more refined sensibilities might avoid the blood and gore of a painting some contemporary critics considered "repulsive." The subject of *The Gross Clinic*, a tour-de-force of painting, is *sui generis* in American art, with its nude buttocks and bloody flesh offering a new and clinical conception of the human body for which most nineteenth-century observers were unprepared. While some critics found Eakins's bodies markedly unartistic, Werbel observes that "to have an anatomist's view of the body was not a diminished vision, it was an expanded one—Eakins saw, because he had not only felt but delved into the inner core, the biological and pathological fact, of human existence" (51). This anatomical notion of the body dominated Eakins's artistic output, whether he was depicting surgery or the sagging skin of an elderly matron.

Werbel examines Eakins's intense desire to comprehend the human body, tracing its origins to his early training at Philadelphia's Central High School under chemist (and later portrait subject) Benjamin Howard Rand. In 1864 the artist began his immersion in human anatomy when he enrolled in a course at Jefferson Medical College, a practice he resumed after his studies in Paris from 1866 through 1869. Later, as the director of instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Eakins oversaw a program that included both anatomical lectures, given by Dr. William Williams Keen, and human and animal dissections, which could consume "fully one-tenth of an academy student's time" (62). In Eakins's view, a student could not successfully paint the human figure without fully understanding how that body was put together.

Of course, the true foundation of the Academy's program was life study from the nude human model. The time-honored practice of painting from life notwithstanding, the Pennsylvania Academicians found obsessive, and eventually deviant, Eakins's insistence on fully nude models and his expansion of the number of program hours

devoted to working from the nude. Werbel refocuses the discussion of Eakins's fascination with the nude bodies, including his own, away from the recent discourse of sexuality, considering it, rather, as part of the artist's medical sensibilities. Eakins believed, perhaps innocently, that bodies could be studied, photographed, dissected, and touched, without the arousal of any sexual feelings. His clinical approach to human anatomy dovetailed with the professionalization of medicine. Yet most Victorian Americans did not understand the body in this way—and, in spite of the profusion of medical dramas on television, most still do not. Eakins's removal of his trousers before his student Amelia Van Buren on the grounds of demonstrating the action of the pelvis would seem as provocative today as it did to his contemporaries.

Rather than speculating on Eakins's sexual predilections, Werbel suggests that the artist's true transgressions revolved around his expansion of equal education for men and women—particularly insofar as anatomy is concerned. By examining nearly parallel developments in Philadelphia's medical community, Werbel persuasively demonstrates that Eakins pursued an untenable course of study at the Academy. Eakins sought to professionalize the Academy on the medical school model by expanding the curriculum and requesting that faculty receive a regular salary. Yet Eakins was decades in advance of the medical schools in one notable area—his belief that women should have access to the same program of study as men. As Werbel notes, "Pioneering improved anatomy training for art students generally was a far less dangerous course than making that education available to men and women more than thirty years before any accredited Philadelphia medical school would agree to do so" (68). While Eakins steadfastly insisted that his female students dissect unaltered male bodies, many male physicians still believed that women pursuing a medical education should be spared the gore and "unveiled genitalia" of the dissection room. Women in medicine were banned from clinics and dissection, whereas women at the Academy faced the realities of human anatomy head-on. Clearly, this was not to last—especially when Eakins asked these same women to bare their own bodies for his camera.

Werbel's study also addresses Eakins's countless photographs of nude bodies from the perspective of the scientific culture in which he was steeped. Comparing the works to medical photos of deformities as well as commercial pornographic images, Werbel suggests that Eakins's offenses here were not strictly sexual. She finds that Eakins's posed studio and outdoor nudes, while at times sensual, do not usually employ the same conventions seen in pornographic images of the time. Examining the forty-odd photographs that constitute the "naked series"—images showing a single model in seven standing poses—Werbel suggests that Eakins adopted the "non-style" of medical photography. Yet here, she points out, his use of healthy bodies deviated from the prototype. Eakins's photographs more generally defied conventional societal norms by depicting middle-class models, such as his own students. Nude freaks, prostitutes, and medical oddities could be justified, but when Eakins turned his "anatomist's eye" on respectable people he could expect censure.

Some readers might be disappointed that Werbel does not engage in the revisionist mode that has dominated Eakins scholarship for the past decade. To her credit, however, she counters these important and influential arguments by contextualizing the artist's life and work in new and important ways. Without engaging in hagiography, Werbel insists that "our historical subjects deserve the same common courtesies we hope for the living—the privilege of self-definition to the extent feasible, an effort to understand context and point of view, a presumption of innocence, and finally, not to be neutered, outed, demonized, or similarly categorized to suit the intellectual fashion of our own times" (161). Werbel's approach proves fruitful in situating Eakins's familiar story in a new framework, offering fresh observations on his rich artistic output.

¹Henry Adams, *Eakins Revealed: The Secret Life of an American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Sidney Kirkpatrick, *The Revenge of Thomas Eakins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); William S. McFeely, *Portrait: The Life of Thomas Eakins* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).