



## Eakins, Thomas (1844-1916)

by Carla Williams

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Although his personal sexual preference is an ongoing matter of discussion, painter and teacher Thomas Eakins is solidly aligned in the history of art with a homophile sensibility. Throughout his career Eakins sought to evoke a realistic classicism in his depictions and thus produced works that celebrated ideals of form, particularly the male figure.

Born on July 25, 1844 and educated in Philadelphia, Eakins attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1866 until 1870. It was there that the artist broadened his worldview and was introduced to photographic *académies*, or academic nude studies. He, in turn, introduced the genre to Philadelphia when he began teaching in 1873 at his alma mater, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Primarily a painter, Eakins soon also became an active maker of photographic nude studies to use as drawing aids in the classroom, a radically open policy that engendered loyalty from his students but harsh criticism from his academy colleagues.

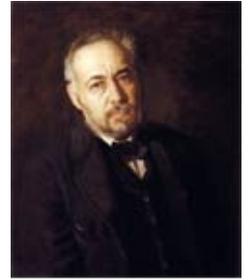
In 1884 Eakins married Susan Macdowell (1851-1938), a musician and painter who would become his frequent model and photographer.

Nearly forty percent of Eakins's photographic production was devoted to nude studies and the images are classified into three groups: the "Naked series," consisting of sequences of anatomical poses; the art historical *académies*; and motion studies after the work of Eadweard Muybridge.

Eakins never intended his photographs to be viewed as works of art; they are thus, perhaps, more intimate than his paintings. Like many artists who used photography as a visual aid, Eakins was uninhibited in the kinds of images he made for this private consumption.

In his paintings and photographs, Eakins approached the body with classical ideals of male form and friendship, "beauty, fitness, and camaraderie," derived from Greek antiquity. During one outdoor excursion to Mill Creek, Pennsylvania, Eakins and his students made numerous photographic studies of one another, which would eventually be used to create one of Eakins's most famous paintings, *The Swimming Hole* (ca 1883; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth). Photographic images from this excursion were also translated into his Arcadia series.

*The Swimming Hole*, which art historians believe to be a recreation of Plato's Academy, is widely cited as a prime example of homoeroticism in American art. In this seminal work, inspired by a section of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Eakins pictures himself submerged in the water observing from the fringes a group of nude young males frolicking in the water.



Four images by Thomas Eakins (top to bottom):  
1) A self-portrait.  
2) A photographic study of nude male art students (1883).  
3) *The Swimming Hole* (ca 1883).  
4) A portrait of Walt Whitman (1887).

That his most famous work should be inspired by Whitman is not coincidental, for Eakins's response to Whitman's work and, later, his relationship with the poet, were significant to his art. Eakins met Whitman in 1887; just weeks later he painted his portrait (1888, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts). What Eakins shared with Whitman was an exuberant celebration of the human body and the beauty of nature.

A photographic figure study Eakins made in 1891 of the elderly Whitman relates directly to the painted portrait of 1888. Legend maintains that an infamous "Naked series" group of a nude, elderly man depicts Whitman, but scholars still debate the claim.

According to Eakins, a naked woman "is the most beautiful thing there is--except a naked man." When he was promoted in 1876 to director of instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he gained control of the school's teaching curriculum and promptly based it on the nude figure, male and female. However, in 1886 Eakins lost his position because he promoted the nude image. More specifically, he was fired for allowing female students to view a nude male model in their life drawing classes.

Embittered by this devastating professional setback, but of independent means, Eakins continued to produce honest, uncompromising work and to teach in various institutions. However, he was not fully appreciated or understood. In his later years, he became somewhat withdrawn and his work failed to achieve its proper recognition during his lifetime.

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