



THOMAS EAKINS: SCENES FROM MODERN LIFE

Background Information

Background Information on Thomas Eakins

During Eakins' lifetime, the world experienced remarkable advances in science, industry, and technology. America was a place of new discoveries and new frontiers. Eakins embodied many of the ideals of the period, yet he collided with the moral boundaries of the Victorian era. In the end, Eakins was a brilliant, complicate painter whose ambitious drive towards his art and his visions of perfection left him scorned, disillusioned and alienated.

Eakins was not a hero in his time, but his legacy and his impact on both the American art world and society far outlived those who condemned his art. He was an artist who strove to capture scenes from modern life at a time when modern life was evolving at a breathtaking pace. He established a tradition of portraiture that was both distinctly American and distinctly personal. He was an astute observer of the world around him, chronicling his family, friends, and his environment. He pioneered the use of photography in art-making and realized the merits and power the photograph as an art form in itself. His influence has grown dramatically since his death, and his works hang in galleries throughout the world.

A Philadelphia native, Eakins graduated from Central High School for Boys, enrolled in drawing classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and also took classes in anatomy at Jefferson Medical College (now Thomas Jefferson University). In 1866, Eakins became one of the first of four generations of American artists to travel to Europe for art training in the period between the end of the U.S. Civil War and World War II. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts studio of Jean-Louis Gerome and was fascinated by the study of the human image as the measure of creation, the noblest subject of the artist. When Eakins returned to Philadelphia, he created paintings that reflected both his European and American experiences. He was inspired by his city and incorporated it and its inhabitants into many of his works.

The subject matter of Eakins portraiture varied, from domestic scenes of family and friends, to accurately proportioned paintings of sailing, rowing, and riding. His artwork was not limited to casual pastimes: he created several large and powerful canvases of hospital scenes, most notably *The Gross Clinic* (1875, Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia)--a startling and graphic depictions of a surgical operation in progress.

Eakins was particularly interested in anatomy; his scientific, almost architectural knowledge of the human body allowed him to create a sense of naturalism in his

paintings/artwork. As director for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he introduced the use of anatomy as an observational tool to his students, both through photographs of nudes, plaster casts of cadavers, as well as live models - an innovative but controversial technique at the time, and one that was not readily accepted by the school's authorities.

At this time, amateur photography was exploding in America as portable, inexpensive cameras and development processes were made available to the general public. Philadelphia was at the forefront of this wave, with a photographic society and how-to journal. Eakins – an expert in mathematics, technical science, and anatomy – explored photography in his quest for anatomical accuracy in his work. He pioneered the use of photography in his investigation of the human form at rest and in motion. In 1882, Eakins was appointed head of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Perhaps the most innovative and controversial aspect of Eakins' teaching and photographic work was his emphasis on the nude. Highlighting the human form in this way (although an appreciated method in French art) was not warmly received by Philadelphia's society and, amidst scandal, Eakins was removed from his position at the Academy in 1886. After Eakins' dismissal and concentrated on portraiture, the trademark style of the end of his career.

Eakins' art has been critically scrutinized by many scholars through the years but, until the 1985 acquisition of Bregler Collection by PAFA, his photography and its role in his art remained little known and relatively ignored. The collection – art objects, manuscripts, photographs, and memorabilia related to Eakins, his wife Susan Macdowell Eakins, and his student Charles Bregler – was a landmark event in Eakins scholarship. Until then, no extensive assessment of Eakins work in and contribution to the medium of photography could have been undertaken.

Background Information on the Documentary

Thomas Eakins: Scenes From Modern Life is a one-hour public television documentary on the life and work of the late-19th century realist painter Thomas Eakins. Born in Philadelphia, Eakins is one of the greatest and most influential of American painters, and is often called the father of modern realism in the country.

Thomas Eakins: Scenes from Modern Life takes an exciting, inventive approach to the visualization of Eakins' story. The program incorporates the latest in high definition digital technology to evoke the mood and beauty of Eakins' time, and to explain his scientific approach to the world of painting.

Much of the story is told through interviews with a variety of dynamic scholars, historians and curators, many of whom are invigorated by exciting new scholarship about Eakins. The interviews will be filmed at sites significant to Eakins' life -- his home in Philadelphia, the grounds of the Centennial Exhibition, the Louvre. As an additional narrative device, the program employs many of Eakins' writings, documenting his sense

of hope, confidence and ambition in a mid-1800 America occupied "with science and the modern."

Many of the locations depicted in Eakins' paintings and photographs remain visually intact as they were in the artist's lifetime, 100 years ago. The documentary features original cinematography showing "scenes from modern life" in the year 2001 and conversations with people at these locations today -- students in painting classes at PAFA and the Ecole des Beaux Arts, rowers along the Schuylkill River, and modern day cowboys in the American West.

Throughout his career, Eakins incorporated new technology into his process of making art. More than 100 years later, Thomas Eakins: Scenes from Modern Life embraces the latest technology available for storytelling. The documentary explores the potential of DVD and Internet technology as well as utilize digital editing techniques, permitting the wealth of material found in the Bregler Collection to be seen in ways only possible on television. Sound effects accompany original music, creating a world of sound that enlivens the illustrations and photographs from pre-moving picture days and create a sense of place and time.

Please Note

In addition to various drawings and painting of nudes, the program contains several scenes featuring black and white archival photographs of nude male and female models, including some photographs of Eakins himself. It also contains brief sequence depicting an art class in modern times, in which a nude male model poses for a workshop full of students.