

## EXHIBITS

# A Yearning for the Classical

*'Looking is never enough.  
Intelligence is mandatory.'*  
—Thomas Eakins

In 1880, the Philadelphia artist Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) painted a Crucifixion, the only religious subject he ever painted. It is a shocking work: The face of Christ is in deep shadow. A bright light falls on His right side. Blood trickles from the wounds in his hands and feet. He is naked, but for a loincloth. There is only a bare white sky

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**'Thomas Eakins: American Realist'  
The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art, New York  
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behind him, and a rocky landscape suggested below. None of the grieving figures, often found in Renaissance versions of the scene, are there to offer human comfort. The painting's harshness is startling. But something else seems to be awry, something missing. What is it?

Eakins, departing from more familiar renderings of the Crucifixion, has chosen to portray the precise moment when Christ is *suspended between life and death*, as he "gives up the ghost." How do we know this? *There is no wound in his right side*, the side illuminated by the bright light coming from somewhere beyond the painting. The Roman soldier pierced Christ's side with his sword *after* he had expired. So, this is the moment just before the soldier struck—that is, the moment Christ's soul left his body.

### A Painter of Paradox

Eakins is not an easy painter to love. Many of his works are difficult to access, while others draw you in immediately. Many have a melancholy aspect. Yet, each of Eakins' major works, like the "Crucifixion," is completely original and truthful; each has a



Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams, 1929

*"The Crucifixion," 1880.*

quality of ambiguity, of paradox, that defines Eakins as a great artist. The people he paints are serious, thoughtful, intelligent; they create music, science, ideas. From the "Baby at Play," to the "Cello Player," to the "Portrait of Professor Henry A. Rowland," the inventor of the spectroscopy machine, each individual is rendered as a cognitive human being. In fact, Eakins himself chose most of the subjects for his portraits, rather than the more usual custom of accepting commissions. Those he chose were people who interested him because of their work as musicians, scientists, physicians, and so forth. For example, he wrote about the portrait of

Professor Rowland, a physicist at Johns Hopkins University, that he was pleased he had "got an understanding" of his invention, by drawing an extremely refined perspective study of it. "The directness and simplicity of that engine has affected me, and I shall be a better mechanic and a better artist."

Eakins is nothing if not contrary. Everything he did was a deliberate affront to the prevailing artistic and cultural currents of the day. He studied in Paris, but rejected the wave of Romanticism that overtook the arts in the second half of the Nineteenth century, with the Modernists. He was ridiculed for upholding the principles of Classical Greece and of the Italian Renaissance: He demanded that students paint from life, introducing the nude figure into his classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art; he went back to the rigorous study of linear perspective, first developed in the

Renaissance, to render more realistic his famous rowing pictures. He spent months working out the compositions for his water colors, doing oil sketches as studies for them—a complete reversal of the usual method.

His portrait of his brother-in-law Louis N. Kenton, a young working-class fellow, becomes "The Thinker" [SEE front cover, this issue], a typically Eakins-like surprise—that among all his highly accomplished friends and acquaintances, he would chose to paint a worker as a thinker. His "Gross Clinic"—a scientific study, presenting a surgical procedure (which, among other things, celebrates the infant science of

anaesthesiology), in the tradition of Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp"—was scorned by the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition Committee, which rejected it as "unsightly," and relegated it to the U.S. Army Hospital. Ironically, this painting is now viewed by many as his greatest masterpiece. (Later, at the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, ten of Eakins' paintings, including the controversial "Gross Clinic" and "Agnew Clinic," were featured in the Art Gallery, together with those of other leading American painters, such as Winslow Homer and George Innes.)

### Philadelphia's Franklin Networks

Thomas Eakins was fortunate to be born in Philadelphia in the 1840's, where the legacy of Benjamin Franklin, who had died only fifty years before, was a still-powerful influence, especially through the work of Franklin's famous great-grandson, the scientist Alexander Dallas Bache (1806-67), a West Point graduate who headed the U.S. Coastal Survey from 1843 to 1861, and served as the principal scientific adviser to President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. Through Bache's leadership at the Franklin Institute for Scientific and Technological Research in Philadelphia, the city became a beacon for the scientific networks of the nation, including those of Thomas Edison in New Jersey.

One of the leading centers for disseminating the ideas of the Renaissance genius Franklin, and of the American Revolution, was Philadelphia's Central High School, where Bache, who served as its principal for a number of years, introduced a curriculum based on the Classical education reforms of the outstanding German educator Wilhelm von Humboldt. Bache had spent some time in Germany, where he met the great scientist Carl Gauss, and studied the Classical curriculum of the German secondary schools, which was based on Humboldt's education reforms.

Modelled on the Boston Latin School, and on a similar institution in Edinburgh, Scotland, Central High—

only the second public high school in America after Boston Latin, established 200 years earlier!—set out to educate young men, regardless of the social standing or financial means of their families, provided they passed the entrance examination. The curriculum was founded on both the Classics and on modern science. Bache and his co-thinkers believed that such an education would prepare the student to become a productive citizen, qualified to succeed in any future occupation, and the student body, not surprisingly, came largely from the middle and working classes.

### Classical Curriculum

Eakins attended Central High, and in his four years there, he studied Greek and Latin, French, and English; Classi-

commitment to educate citizens from all social classes, the school published a list of the occupations of the parents of the students. The roster included masons, cordwainers, grocers, widows, teachers, carpenters, clerks, and occasionally, professionals. The year Thomas Eakins entered the school, it included carpenters, printers, blacksmiths, music teachers, stonemasons, and four physicians.

This was the intellectual milieu in which Eakins was schooled. Some of his earliest perspective drawings, done in mechanical drawing classes at Central High, are included in a small companion exhibit at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where Eakins studied, and later taught classes. The arts program at Central High School required



"Baby at Play," 1876.

cal and modern history; literature, mathematics, writing (script) and drawing; moral philosophy; and the natural sciences—botany and natural history (biology), physics, and chemistry.

The stated objective of such an education was to come to know the great works of Western civilization, such that the tradition would become their own, to use or question; to make their own observations, and form their own conclusions. In other words, to learn to think for themselves, based on sound principles.

Every few years, to illustrate its

proficiency in mechanical drawing for graduation, exemplifying the idea that art and science are one, a key concept of the Renaissance and Classical periods. (Think of Leonardo's scientific drawings, for example.)

After high school, Eakins worked with his father, a successful writing teacher, and enrolled in drawing classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Soon after, he also enrolled in anatomy instruction at Jefferson Medical College, the beginning of a lifelong pursuit of perfection in rendering the human form.

This background was decisive in shaping Eakins' outlook as an artist.

### Eakins in Europe

In 1866, five years after high-school graduation, Eakins went to Paris to study painting. He was extremely fortunate that his father fully supported him in his decision to become an artist, and provided him with the necessary financial support. In fact, the income he derived from his father's investments gave Eakins, throughout his life, the kind of independence that allowed him to decide what and how he would paint, rather than being dependent on commissions from patrons.

Eakins studied in Paris with the popular painter Jean-Léon Gérôme; he also travelled briefly throughout Europe, including to Italy, where he visited Genoa, Naples, Rome, and Florence; and also to Germany and Belgium. He would have seen some of the greatest works of the Italian and Northern Renaissances; he later travelled to Madrid and Seville, where he was profoundly influenced by the work of the great Spanish painter Diego Velasquez.

### Love of Music

There is no substitute for seeing an exhibit of this kind, since looking at reproductions is like viewing the shadows on the wall of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. Yet, here, we must content ourselves with selecting a small number of works which illuminate some aspect of the artist's work, such that the reader will be inspired to get out and see the works for him- or herself. Surveying the majority of Eakins' work reveals that



"The Gross Clinic," 1875.

there was one subject he returned to again and again: music.

According to Elizabeth Johns (*Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*, Princeton University Press, 1983), "Eakins' attention to the parlor and concert singer had virtually a national bias. In America, the voice, earnestly cultivated, was seen as the most democratic, the most modern of 'instruments.'" After 1850, more Americans studied the voice than any other musical instrument.

There were various reasons for this, including economic ones. While everyone has a voice, a piano required a sizable investment. Even smaller instruments could be expensive; a violin, for example, might cost as much as a keyboard. Moreover, you could bring your voice anywhere, without special equipment or expense.

lessons, especially for their daughters, like Thomas's three sisters, Frances, Margaret, and Caroline. Although the leading professional pianists of the time were men, women provided music in the home, and were often portrayed at the keyboard, a compliment to the cultural attainments of the family.

Because Eakins was profoundly interested in exploring the relationship of cognition to physical motion and activity—the problem addressed in the great works of Classical Greek sculpture—portraits of music-makers were a natural subject for him. One of his earliest paintings is of his sister Frances at the piano (1870) at about age 16. She bends slightly forward toward the music; her concentration is intense, even nervous, as she struggles to get the fingering right. The intensity is played off against her youthful appearance, which

The greatest praise a pianist could receive, according to Johns, "was to say that he made his instrument sing." In fact, Felix Mendelssohn, whose works were often performed in America at that time, called many of his piano compositions "Songs Without Words," while concert violinists and 'cellists were praised for the "singing" tone of their playing. Other instrumentalists, as well, worked to achieve this singing tone of the human voice.

Eakins' knowledge of music was grounded in his family life. Like those of many mid-Nineteenth-century American families, the Eakins parlor boasted a piano, which provided the social center of the home. Families sacrificed not only to buy an instrument, but to provide

is enhanced by the girlish white dress she wears.

Two years earlier, when Eakins was still in Paris, Frances had written to him about her frustration over the development of her piano technique. Eakins advised her not to worry so much about technical exercises, except as they helped her to play specific musical passages. He even drew her a graph to show that, while perfection in every detail was humanly impossible, she should aim for a *higher level of mastery of the music*.

Two years later, Eakins would paint Frances again, and the improvement she had made, perhaps as a result of her brother's encouragement, is evident in the second portrait, where Frances appears relaxed, and the master of the instrument.

Similarly, "Elizabeth at the Piano" (1875) [SEE inside back cover, this issue] is one of Eakins' most poetic early paintings, another in his series of family portraits, this time of Elizabeth Crowell, his sister-in-law. The painting captures the precise moment at which the pianist is poised between two actions: She leans forward ever so slightly, her fingers hovering above the keyboard, as she is about to begin the next phrase in the piece. Although her face is in deep shadow, a light from behind, which illuminates her right cheek, is reflected off the page of music back toward her face, revealing a state of total concentration. A tension is created by the counterpoint between her motion at the keyboard, and the stability of the powerful triangular shape created between the small red flower in her hair, the bright light on the sheet music, and the bright white of the keyboard below her raised fingers. The entire composition is organized to emphasize the power of the creative

artist: Elizabeth does not look at the score, but rather into her own mind, where she has memorized the music. Finally, Eakins has painted the dark shadow which Elizabeth's head casts on the musical score, as a metaphor for the musician's mastery over the process of music-making.

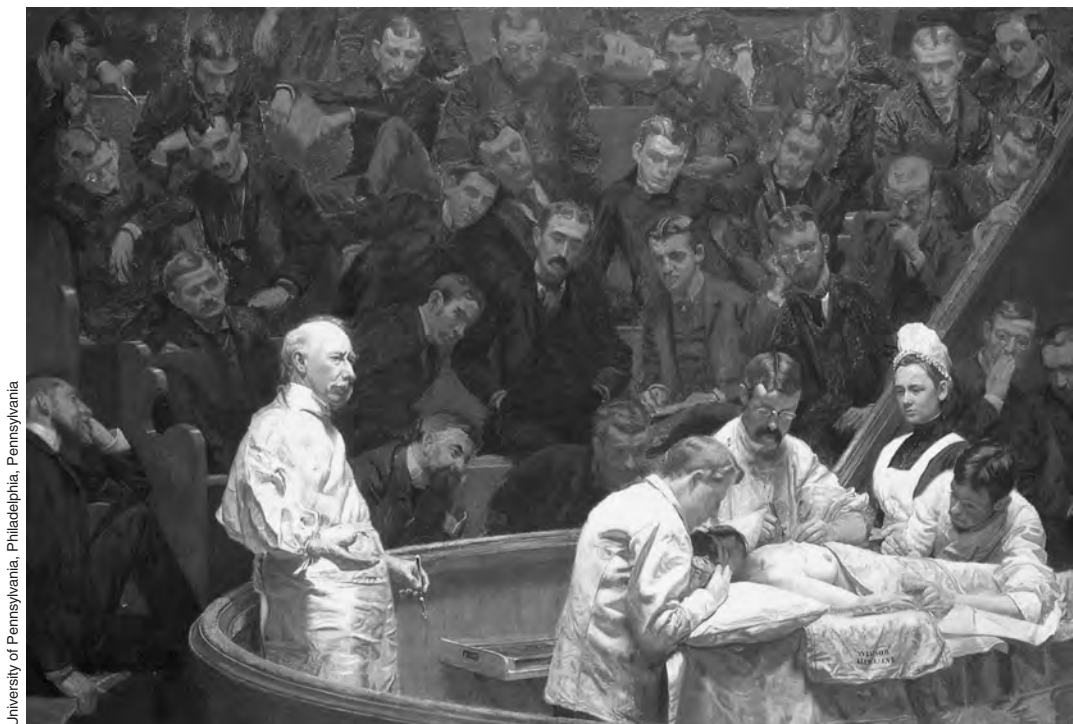
### The 'Sublime'

In "Singing a Pathetic Song" (1881) [SEE inside back cover, this issue], Eakins succeeds in elevating a popular musical genre to the level of the Sublime, through the refined expression of the soloist, and through the dialogue he creates among the three musicians. The singer, Margaret Harrison (one of Eakins' art students), stands slightly off-center in the large composition, and turns in a three-quarter pose, facing an unseen audience, whose space we, the viewers, share. A soft light illuminates the right side of her face, and falls on a lavender-blue dress, a subtle color, which exists somewhere between the warm and cool ranges, adding a quality of ambiguity. The pianist—also Eakins' student, later wife, Susan Macdowell—turns her head slightly toward the

soloist, whom she accompanies, and follows musically. (According to one author, Eakins' observation of the pianist's turn of the head, establishing her connection to the singer, is reminiscent of a drawing by Adolf von Menzel of Clara Schumann accompanying the violinist Joseph Joachim.) The third figure is the 'cellist C.F. Stolte, who concentrates intently on the score in front of him.

While the figure of the singer is rendered in high relief—the highlights and shadows of the fabric of her dress, and its details, reinforce her central role—the two musicians are almost submerged in the background; they exist only to support the singer. Eakins has employed the method of *chiaroscuro*, the play between light and shadow, to express the poetic idea of the painting.

Ten years later, Eakins executed one of his most engaging music-portraits, *The Concert Singer* (1890-92), of the Philadelphia contralto Weda Cook. The accurate rendering of the Classical *bel canto* singing technique is a testament to Eakins' deep knowledge of the art, and of his attention to those details which make a picture come alive, which make



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"The Agnew Clinic," 1889.

it “true.” It is reliably reported that for each sitting, Eakins would have Miss Cook sing a section of Mendelssohn’s oratorio, *Elijah*, which begins “O rest in the Lord.” (Perhaps to reinforce the idea of the music, or maybe as a little joke, the artist carved the opening bars of this song into the frame.) Miss Cook’s mouth is perfectly formed to sing in the *bel canto* style, and her chin is slightly raised, so that her voice will project out into the room; one can almost see her throat quiver with the *vibrato* of her vocal chords.

The “Cello Player” (1896) is a portrait of Rudolf Hennig [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. By the late Nineteenth century, the ’cello had come into its own as a solo instrument, and Hennig was born into a family active in the influential German school of virtuoso ’cello playing. After training in the late 1850’s and early 1860’s, Hennig emigrated to Philadelphia. For more than thirty years, he was a leader in the musical life of the city: as a teacher, ensemble performer, orchestra member, as well as soloist. In Eakins’ portrait, man and instrument have become one, and both are subsumed by the music. The act of concentration by the musician is reinforced by the strong light which falls on the right side of his face, where the vein in his forehead stands out to emphasize the intensity of absorption in the music. Hennig sits on the edge of his chair and draws his bow across the D string, which visibly vibrates, so that you can almost hear the rich sound of the ’cello.

Eakins would return many times to the subject of music; clearly for him, it was the highest expression of the intellectual life he esteemed so highly, and perhaps represented that link to Classical art which began to slip away in the opening years of

the Twentieth century. In fact, the tragedy of America’s failure to live up to its promise following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the economic and moral revolution he wrought, is the tragedy of Thomas Eakins, and those like him who strove to bring a Classical renaissance to this nation. The element of melancholy which seems to infuse many of his subjects, may reflect Eakins’ awareness that the way had been lost.

By the beginning of the Twentieth century, the republican forces whose American intellectual tradition Eakins upheld, were overtaken by the ascendancy of the Tory faction, culminating in the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley, and the subsequent Tory Presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. These events—all of which took place within Eakins’ lifetime—ushered in the disas-

ter known as the Twentieth century. In the arts as well, the Renaissance (republican) idea—given expression in Eakins’ portrait of “The Thinker,” for example—was buried under waves of Modernist *schtick*s: Impressionism, Pointillism, Cubism, etc. In opposition to Eakins’ observation that “intelligence is mandatory” in art—an observation made in opposition to the Impressionists’ emphasis on mere surface appearance—the Modernists promoted an aesthetic based on “looking” as everything, in which *thinking* is replaced by *feeling*.

As if in answer to the question, why America failed to produce a cultural renaissance to complement our world-historical political revolution, Lyndon LaRouche recently wrote the following:

“As art references an history-related process in mankind, so the lessons of art which is truthful, respecting its own historical

setting, are the basis for the best quality of statecraft. As a corollary, art which is not historically truthful, will inform a bad practice in statecraft, and suffering for the nation and its people. Thus, the issue of truthfulness in art is posed; art which self-consciously accepts that moral requirement, is rightly termed Classical.”<sup>1</sup>

There is no better epitaph for Thomas Eakins.

—Bonnie James

1. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “Brzezinski and September 11th,” *Executive Intelligence Review*, Jan. 11, 2002 (Vol. 29, No. 1).

“Thomas Eakins: American Realist” appeared at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Oct. 4, 2001-Jan. 6, 2002. It is currently showing at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, Feb. 5-May 12, 2002; and will return to the U.S., at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, June 18-Sept. 15, 2002.



“The Concert Singer,” 1890-92.

Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams, 1929