

Thomas Eakins



Thomas Eakins, *Self-Portrait*, 1902, oil on canvas, 34 x 29 in., National Academy Museum, New York, 398-P

Once at home, Eakins painted genre scenes and portraits that broke with the prevailing idealized romanticism. In his portraits, Eakins rejected superficial appearance and effects of light and color popular with contemporary artists. By combining his Parisian training and his scientific knowledge with what he had learned from studying the Old Masters, Eakins represented humanity in a direct, modern, and psychologically penetrating manner. His uncompromising portraits, however, drew sharp criticism, and



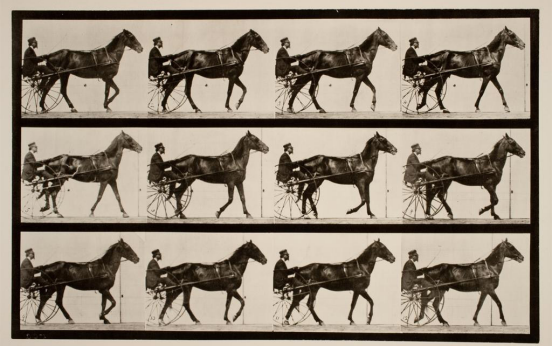
IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Thomas Eakins, *Professionals at Rehearsal*, 1883, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, The John D. McIlhenny Collection, 1943-40-39; Thomas Eakins, *Swimming*, 1885, oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 36 in., Amon Carter Museum

eventually his paintings were largely ignored by the American art establishment. Nevertheless, Eakins tenaciously continued to portray America's modern-day heroes, its thinkers and doers, in his dark subjective manner.

American students of painting generally worked from casts of antique sculpture. Eakins, who began teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1876, revolutionized this process, insisting that they paint instead from life. Many of his devoted students at the Academy served as his models. One of his favorite subjects was John Laurie Wallace, who assisted him in class as chief demonstrator of anatomy and whom he addressed as "Johnny" in several letters in the 1880s. In letters to another star pupil, Thomas P. Anshutz, Eakins often mentioned Wallace, suggesting that they were particularly good friends. Wallace posed for several figures in Eakins's paintings, such as the zither player in *Professionals at Rehearsal* (1883, Philadelphia Museum of Art).

Eakins used photography in his teaching and for his compositions. For *A May Morning in the Park* (*The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand*) (1879–1880, Philadelphia Museum of Art), he referred to Eadweard Muybridge's (1830–1904) photographic studies of horse locomotion, and this painting is considered to be the first composition derived specifically from photographically captured scientific information. As the camera became accessible to the general public, he expected his students to use this tool. He captured many of his students serving as models in these photographic figure studies – some of which can be seen in Eakins's paintings like *Swimming* – also known as *The Swimming Hole* (1885, Amon Carter Museum). Eventually his somewhat radical method of teaching and relationships with his students was no longer tolerated, and Eakins was forced to resign in 1886 for using nude male models in women's life drawing classes.

Near the turn of the century, he returned to his athletic roots and his early art career creating scenes of accurately depicted boxers, wrestlers, and rowers. In March 1902, Eakins was voted in as an Associate of the National Academy then painted a self-portrait, a requirement of this level of membership, and soon after elected to full membership. Portraiture with sitters in isolation and these athletic subjects comprised the work created at the end of his career. Eakins died on June 25, 1916, in Philadelphia.



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Thomas Eakins, *A May Morning in the Park* (*The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand*), 1879–1880, oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 36 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of William Alexander Dick, 1930-105-1; Eadweard J. Muybridge (English, 1830–1904), *Walking; sulky; bay horse, Reuben*, collotype print, George Eastman House, *Animal Locomotion*, © 1887 Eadweard Muybridge

Timeline

1840

1844 Thomas Cowperthwaite Eakins is born on July 25 in Philadelphia

1850

1853 Enters Zane Street Grammar School; produces first known art

1857 Enters Central High School - known for its emphasis on science

1860

1862 Studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

1864–65 Attends Jefferson Medical College anatomy classes

1866 Travels to Europe; studies at the École des Beaux Arts

1869 Travels to Spain

1870

1870 Returns to Philadelphia; establishes a studio

1873–74 Attends Jefferson Medical College anatomy classes

1876 Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross rejected for the 1876 Centennial Exposition; first teaches at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

1877 Leaves the Academy; organizes the Philadelphia Society of Artists

1878 Returns to teach at the Academy

1880

1881 Purchases first camera

1882 Becomes director of the Academy

1884–85 Works at University of Pennsylvania with Eadweard Muybridge on photography of motion

1886 Resigns from the Academy

1890

1900 Exhibits *Antiquated Music* (*Portrait of Sarah Sagehorn Frishmuth*) in Paris World's Fair

1902 Voted into the National Academy

1910

1916 Eakins dies on June 25 in Philadelphia

1920

IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Thomas Eakins, *Self-Portrait*, 1889–94, platinum print, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mimi and Ariel Halpern, 1985.1027.20, Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Thomas Eakins, *Taking Count*, 1898, oil on canvas, 99 x 87 in., Yale University Art Gallery

IMAGES (ABOVE & BACKGROUND): Thomas Eakins, *Girl in Shade*, n.d., oil on paper, 4 x 5 3/4 in., Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph L. Barker in memory of George Barker, 1966.132; Thomas Eakins, Detail, *The Concert Singer*, 1890–1892, oil on canvas, 75 1/8 x 54 1/4 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams, 1929-184-19



Thomas Eakins
American, 1844–1916

Professor John Laurie Wallace
1885

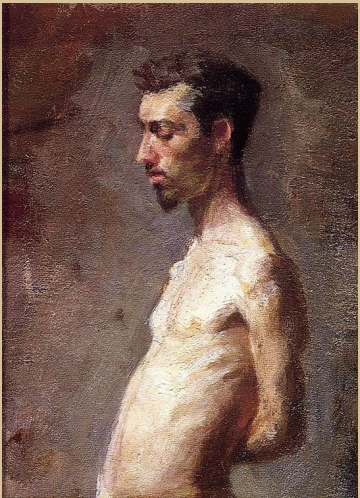
oil on canvas mounted on Masonite panel, 50 1/4 x 32 1/2 in.
Gift of the James A. Douglas Foundation, 1941.24

Revered today as one of America's greatest painters, Thomas Eakins was surrounded by controversy in his time, and his career was filled with contradictions. He championed science and scientific observation when American art patrons sought fashion and pleasures; he saw life's darker side when most Americans yearned for the brilliance of the seashore; he was loved by his students, yet his own academy rejected him.

From 1876, Eakins taught at the Pennsylvania Academy, revolutionizing the teaching process and building a following of devoted students. John Laurie Wallace was a favorite model of Eakins and appears in several paintings. Wallace himself worked in Chicago as an instructor at the Art Institute and Director of the Society of Artists before moving to Omaha.

Eakins portrait of Wallace is typical of the artist's realism in its sharp observation of character, which transcends merely accurate drawing. His use of raking light places emphasis on Wallace's striking facial features and large hands to create a quiet portrait of a sensitive man. Eakins set the professor in a somewhat awkward pose, holding his hat against a dark, spare background. Bold modeling stresses the subject's raw strength of character in a fashion strongly reminiscent of the work of the Spanish painters, particularly Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). The penetrating light and sensitive brushwork recall portraits by Rembrandt (1606–1669).

In the mid-1880s Eakins's portraits became increasingly contemplative, sober, and stoic. As a result he was slowly isolated from the fashionable contemporary art scene in Philadelphia, and he began to forge his original and insightful vision. The Wallace portrait stands at the beginning of this period. George Barker, one of Wallace's pupils in Omaha, has reported that Eakins painted this portrait in one eight- or nine-hour sitting, rather than letting the paint dry, which would have allowed the lines to harden. The result is a fluid and expressive portrait in which Eakins united subject and technique to capture the character of his student and valued friend.



Thomas Eakins, *Wallace Posing*, ca. 1883, oil on canvas, 8 x 6 in., Private Collection

Discussion Questions

- What does Thomas Eakins's portrait tell us about John Laurie Wallace?
- How do Eakins's subjects and techniques differ from popular artworks in the late 19th century?
- Why did Eakins study anatomy and teach his students with dissections?
- What role did photography play in Eakins career?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's academic standards and related lesson plans.



Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic*, 1875, oil on canvas, 96 x 78 in., Gift of the Alumni Association to Jefferson Medical College in 1878 and purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2007-1-1

became the assistant of Dr. W. W. Keen, first preparing cadavers, then eventually teaching art students in dissection. As director, added dissection to the curriculum. The anatomy department at the Academy was as rigorous with the instruction as a medical college.

Unfortunately the Centennial's art jury rejected *The Gross Clinic*, placing it in a US Army Post Hospital exhibit rather than the art building. It received mixed reviews from visitors – some who appreciated the color and detail while others could not accept the realism of the subject. A Jefferson alumni purchased the painting for \$200 and it remains on view at the institution where Eakins studied anatomy.

Eakins and Anatomy

Now regarded as one of America's greatest paintings, *The Gross Clinic* as well as its creator, Thomas Eakins, were at the center of artistic controversy in their time. His determined championship of science, especially the achievements coming out of his beloved Philadelphia, and scientific observation did not sit well with a public attuned to the natural splendors of landscape painting. Consequently, Eakins's work was consistently deplored for its excessive realism.

Eakins painted *The Gross Clinic* in 1875 for Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition with the goal to highlight scientific achievements. Dr. Samuel Gross, seen in the Jefferson Medical College's surgical amphitheater with a scalpel in his bloody hand, instructs five doctors as they operate on a patient's left thigh – akin to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulip* (1632, Mauritshuis). They are treating this patient with Gross's somewhat new surgical procedure to treat bone infections while the patient's frightened mother looks away shielding her view. Eakins included himself in the composition, to the right of the tunnel at the edge of the frame, taking notes.

Eakins's devotion to the scientific approach to creating figures led him to attend classes at Jefferson. Then at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he

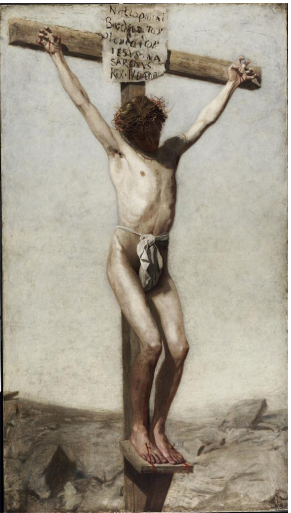


J. Laurie Wallace. Photo by Lear and Cotton, Omaha. Joslyn Art Museum, 1965.323

Bohemian. ... He looked the part of an artist, long curly black hair and full beard. We never knew his nationality, he was dark with black eyes and a mannered speech.

Wallace served as a model for Eakins as the teacher encouraged his students to save their money by modeling for each other. One of Eakins's notable canvases, *The Crucifixion* (1880, Philadelphia Museum of Art), features Wallace as Christ. To create this composition, legend says that Eakins strapped the young model on the roof just outside his Philadelphia studio.

With Eakins great interest in photography, a number of his photographs include Wallace and other students in nude figure studies for works such as *Arcadia* (ca. 1883, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Though these photographs served as a tool for Eakins, this practice proved to be controversial during this more conservative Victorian time.



Thomas Eakins, *The Crucifixion*, 1880, oil on canvas, 96 x 54 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams, 1929-184-24

Sitter then Professor: John Laurie Wallace

After two years traveling in the Southwest and Colorado painting portraits of cattle barons, Wallace went to Chicago to become the director of the Society of Artists and an instructor at the Art Institute. George Lininger, an early patron of art, invited Wallace to Omaha to establish the Omaha Academy of Fine Arts and it opened in May 1891 under the auspices of the Western Art Association. Unfortunately, this venture was not a financial success.

Wallace also taught art at the Omaha High School, and on October 1, 1900, with Art Workers Society of Omaha, opened the Omaha School of Art as the director. From the brochure: *The School affords facilities of the highest order to those who intend making painting or sculpture their life work, and extends the same benefits as a foundation for engraving, illustrating and decorative art. The course of study is believed to be as thorough as that of any other school and the accommodations are all that could be desired.* Tuition ranged from \$10/month for classes five days a week to \$5/month for classes two days a week.

Wallace remained in Omaha for the rest of his life maintaining a flourishing business as a portraitist for which he charged \$500 per portrait. His presence can be felt in many of Omaha's art endeavors. Wallace died in Omaha on June 30, 1953.



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): J. Laurie Wallace, *Woman in White*, 1895, oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 30 1/4 in., Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of George Barker, 1964; J. Laurie Wallace, *Instructing Western Art Association Art Class*, 1891, Photograph, Joslyn Art Museum



THOMAS EAKINS (AMERICAN, 1844–1916)
PROFESSOR JOHN LAURIE WALLACE
1885, OIL ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON MASONITE PANEL

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Gift of the James A. Douglas Foundation, 1941.24