

## Joslyn Art Museum Comprehensive Study Lesson Plan

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### OMAHA ART HISTORY

**Focus:** Thomas Eakins, *Professor John Laurie Wallace*

#### Objectives – Students will:

- Create portraits either from a live model or with geometric shapes.
- **Respond** to a contradiction and understand more about their aesthetic preference in the process.
- **Present** their thoughts on how artists influenced Eakins's growth as a painter.
- **Connect** with Eakins's scientific approach to drawing.

**Suggested Materials:** Thomas Eakins teaching poster, see detailed lesson plans for additional materials.

**Vocabulary:** academic, anatomy, dissection, expressive, geometric, naturalist, scientific see detailed lesson plans for additional vocabulary.

#### Procedure:

- **Engage:** Ask students: are you a naturalist or expressive person? To help them decide, show them Thomas Eakins's *Professor John Laurie Wallace* and *The Grief of the Pasha* by Jean-Léon Gérôme and ask them which they relate to most. You can do a "this or that" type exercise.
- **Art Talk 1:** An Undoubted Master. Who was John Laurie Wallace? What is his connection to Eakins and Omaha? Refer to the talk presented by Jeffrey Spencer at Thursdays for Teachers.
- **Art Talk 2:** Compare and contrast Eakins's scientific, mathematical approach with other artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci.
- **History:** Who was Thomas Eakins? Refer to resources in the **Teacher Support Materials** for additional information. <http://goo.gl/BTkzcF>
- **Aesthetics:** Eakins's traveled to Europe and studied under academic artists such as Gerome, and then when he traveled to Spain discovered 17<sup>th</sup> century painter Diego Velázquez. What did he learn from these and other artists, and how did it affect his technique?
- **Production 1:** Following Eakins's lead, have students draw from a live model (students can take turns being the model). Keep it simple and have them construct and block in the figure to understand its structure. Refer to the lesson plan presented by Rachel Mindrup at Thursdays for Teachers.



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

- **Production 2:** Portrait Painting with Simple Shapes. Introduce younger students to simple geometric and free-form shapes that make up people and the environment. Refer to the lesson plan presented by Kimberly Stroberg at Thursdays for Teachers.
- **Close:** Naturalist vs. expressive. Is one better than the other? Is it right or wrong to believe in one over the other?

**Extensions:**

- **Cultural Connections 1:** Mapping Omaha in Color. Learn about Omaha history using old maps as a tool. As students study and understand how Omaha was established and grew, have students present that visually. Refer to the lesson plan presented by Caitlin Kolb at Thursdays for Teachers.
- **Cultural Connections 2:** In Eakins's portrait of Wallace, the sitter holds a hat. Have students find portraits of people holding one object from various cultures. What does that object tell us about the person or culture? It is important to stress cultural awareness and sensitivity.
- **Fine Arts:** Eakins used photography as a tool to study figures before he created his compositions. Research the various photographs Eakins may have used for his paintings (note: use Eadweard Muybridge's animal locomotion for younger students). Have students create portraits from photographs of each other.
- **Language Arts:** If you could hold one thing in a portrait to represent you, what would it be? Write an expository essay.
- **Math:** Scale is critical when creating compositions – Eakins was a master draftsman. Take the artworks created in **Production** and determine how close it is to real size.
- **Science:** Eakins studied the human form even took classes at the local medical college. Why is it important to understand the body's make up before drawing it? Older students can use Eakins's photographs to study anatomy or study dissection as Eakins's students did.

**Academic Standards & additional resources:**

Available on online version at [www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/thursdays-for-teachers](http://www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/thursdays-for-teachers)  
[select Lesson Plans, then American]

**About the Artwork:**

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 pleasantries; 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).