

Josh Lehne

(Department of Art and Art History)

The Question of the Homoerotic in Thomas Eakins' *The Swimming Hole*



Fig. 1, Thomas Eakins, *The Swimming Hole*, c. 1883-85. Oil on Panel.

In 1885 Thomas Eakins painted *The Swimming Hole* (Fig. 1) for one his colleagues at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts where Eakins himself was an instructor. The painting depicts six naked men, accompanied by a red setter, in a pyramidal arrangement. The men are gathered on a rocky pier overlooking a lake outside of Eakins' hometown of Philadelphia. The clear water brilliantly reflects the scene of the convening men above, and the lake is set amid the dark foliage beyond the water's edge. Eakins accentuates the swimmers' bodies with his use of stark lighting, creating a sharp contrast between their flesh and their surroundings. The men in the

scene dive, sunbathe, and swim on a sunny day in the man-made reservoir of Dove Lake on Mill Creek. The central group of five men convenes on a pier, with each man seemingly in his own world. In fact, no one in the scene seems to acknowledge the presence the others, except for the lone swimmer in the lower right corner, identified as Eakins. Watching the scene from his place in the water, Eakins is the only participant who seems aware of the activity in the foreground and the only man who may know exactly what is happening before us.

Over the last sixty years, Thomas Eakins' work has been revisited and interpreted as having homoerotic and homosexual undertones. Many of these arguments stem from the analysis of *The Swimming Hole*. Most scholars addressing, or in some instances avoiding, this subject present their arguments in somewhat of a selective manner, often addressing only aspects of the artist's life and career that best fit their own arguments. In order to begin to understand the conscious and unconscious elements of Eakins' work, it is important to know something about the controversial life of the artist. Throughout Thomas Eakins' career, he often challenged the prudery of Victorian propriety. He stood out often as a problematic figure in both his personal and artistic life. His insistence on using the nude model in his classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts would eventually lead to his forced resignation (Goodrich, 1982, p.25). The famed "loin cloth scandal" was the last straw in Eakins' academic career, filled with sexual harassment accusations and controversies over his common ritual of disrobing before his students and badgering them to do the same¹ (Goodrich, 1982, p. 24). To understand Eakins' feelings about the nude, we must look at his background and training in art and how in his academic career in America, he was seldom allowed to study from the naked body.

Born in 1844 in Pennsylvania, Thomas was the eldest of four in an upper-middle class family. His father Benjamin was an accomplished teacher and later made his wealth as a land owner, supporting Thomas through most of his career (Goodrich, 1982, p.7). His father went so far as to let Thomas

¹ In 1886 when using a male model with female students Eakins removed the model's loin cloth to show the students the genitalia in relation to the pelvic girdle.

live in the old family house, where he paid for his room and board, a gesture that always seemed to leave Thomas on the anxious side. After high school he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1861, while simultaneously studying anatomy at the Jefferson Medical College. In the American academies of Eakins' time the nude model was scarcely used. The students instead studied the human body from reproductions of sculptures from classical antiquity. On the rare occasions when the students were allowed to study from a naked model, it was required that the models wear masks to conceal their faces and identities identities (Goodrich, 1982, p.8). Upon graduation from the Academy, Eakins, under pressure from his father, headed to Paris and entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where he began studying under Jean-Léon Gérôme in September, 1866 (Goodrich, 1982, p. 10). During his time in Paris, Eakins was able to study the unmasked naked body free of guilt. While in Paris he attended the Salons and was disenchanted with the French academy's treatment of the female nude. In a letter home to his father Eakins writes;

I can conceive of few circumstances wherein I would paint a naked woman, but if I did I would not mutilate her for double the money. She is the most beautiful thing there is except a naked man, but I never saw one exhibited. It would be a godsend to see a fine man painted in a studio with bare walls...I hate affectation (Homer, 2002, p.36).

The mutilation Eakins was describing was how the academy recast the display of nudity through the omission of the woman's genitalia and body hair. Being a strict realist Eakins believed this "castration" created a lie that was made more offensive by an allegorical veil that excused the painting and exhibition of nude women.

After some time in Spain studying the Spanish naturalists and developing a love for the works of Velazquez, Eakins returned to America in 1870. When the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts opened its new building in 1876, Eakins signed on as a professor teaching courses in life drawing and painting (Goodrich, 1982, p.20). His interest in anatomy and



Fig. 2. Studies of locomotion, in collaboration with Edward Muybridge.

science is reflected in his anatomical lectures at the Pennsylvania Academy, wherein his students took part in dissections as Eakins had when he was a student. Being a man of science, he also developed an intense interest in photography, and he worked with Edward Muybridge in photographing the naked body in studies of locomotion (Fig. 2) (Goodrich, 1982, p.21). After accepting the position at the Academy, Eakins used nude models as the basis of his teachings (Goodrich, 1982, p.19). He believed the study from the naked body was a critical component in art education and that the American academies and Victorian society were wrong to deny their future artists. Using male and female models in coed classes was considered outrageous as much by his colleagues as by the more conservative public. Rumors and exaggerations of exploits among models, students and himself in class led to accusations of sodomy² and his nude photographs of his ventures with students led to an ultimatum that called for his forced resignation in 1886 (Doyle, 2006, p.25).

In the year prior to his resignation, Eakins was approached by Edward Coates a committee member and art collector, about the commission of a painting. The result of this commission was *The Swimming Hole*, originally entitled *Swimming* by Eakins (Adams, 2005, p.306). The painting's original title, *Swimming*, and Eakins being the only figure actually swimming may suggest this image is about Eakins and his experience. In any case, the image expresses Eakins' feelings about manhood and masculinity generating many different explanations about what this male nakedness was meant to signify and whether the artist was aware of it or not. Having some knowledge of the artist's training and academic practices, the circumstances under which *The Swimming Hole* was painted must be examined in order to

analyze the extent of the sexual undercurrents in this painting.

In preparing *The Swimming Hole*, Eakins made several photographic studies of his friends and students, whom he used as models in the painting. Some of the photographs were taken at the dilapidated pier at Dove Lake where the painting is set (Berger, 2000, p.92). Some of the more provocative photographs were taken in the area around Dove Lake where Eakins photographed the men wrestling, playing tug of war and engaged in other outdoor activities in the nearby woods (figs. 3-8). These photographic studies become troublesome for some scholars attempting to decode Eakins' work. The photographs have been interpreted by various researchers as transcending the boundary of study and crossing into the realm of exhibitionism and voyeurism, saturated with latent homosexual desires. The "horseplay scenes" that show the men engaged in various hands-on activities have been read as coupling images in which Eakins, or someone else, has paired up the men in each image (Adams, 2005, p.315-318).

In the photographs at the scene of the painting the men interact and engage one another; this involvement with each other is also evident in his preliminary oil sketch (fig.9). Yet in the final painting of the *Swimming Hole* the figures no longer seem to interact or even look at each other, except for Eakins watching from the corner. For whatever reason, Eakins' photograph and oil studies of the men, not only aware of one another but physically interacting with each other, were abandoned. In the end, the image is of the men disengaged, if not unaware of each other's presence, that is, except for Eakins alone in the water.



Fig. 3. Photo study at Dove Lake for *The Swimming Hole*, 1883.



Fig. 4., Photo study at Dove Lake for *The Swimming Hole*, 1883.



Fig. 5. *Seven Males, Nude, Two Boxing at Center*, 1883



Fig. 6. Photo study at Dove Lake for the *Swimming Hole*, 1883.



Fig. 7. *Six Males, Nude, Wrestling*, 1883.



Fig. 8. *Males Nudes in a Seated Tug-of-War*, 1883.



Fig. 9. Oil Study for *The Swimming Hole*, 1883.

The painting shows all the male figures with no trace of clothing and yet, for whatever reason, Eakins has not painted any genitals. The central figure atop the pier becomes androgynous, if not more effeminate in posture, and the protrusion of the figure's buttocks is the focal point of the painting. The men

that populate the composition would have been identifiable by the painting's main viewing audience at the Academy for which it was intended (Berger, 2000, p.92). However, Eakins included photographs of some of his subjects alongside the painting when he exhibited it, negating the idea of his sitters' ambiguity and androgyny (Adams, 2005, p.321). Sexual readings into *The Swimming Hole* also stem from its unusual reception and the name changes it has undergone. The painting was commissioned by Edward Coates, a colleague of Eakins and a member of the Academy's Board of Directors. Coates had wanted a painting he could later dedicate to the school as a symbol of the caliber of artists the Academy would produce. However when presented with Eakins' final painting, Coates reluctantly accepted it only to later ask if Eakins would exchange it for an alternate work (Adams, 2005, p.323). Coates rejected the painting on the grounds of it being too aggressive in its display of naked men. The easily identifiable men – Eakins and his students from the Academy – further complicated matters for Coates. Coates probably feared that the other patrons at the Academy would associate him with Eakins' interest in the nude and the same conflicts that led to Eakins' expulsion from the academy less than a year after painting this image (Berger, 2000, p.90; Doyle, 2006, p.15). However, sources do not show any indication that the problematic elements of Eakins' work in his own time were centered on notions of homosexuality among his contemporaries.

Scholars interested in trying to decipher any homoerotic content or undertones in Eakins' work today face a number of problems. For a long time there was a lack of critical analysis of the place of homoeroticism in his work, until the last thirty years when scholars used psychoanalytical tools in decoding elements of Eakins' work as having homoerotic meanings. Whitney Davis uses a Freudian perspective to discuss the sexual nature of Eakins' creative processes for *The Swimming Hole*. Davis believes that the suppression of Eakins' homosexuality is a hidden subject of his preparatory photographs and paintings (Davis, 1994, p.301-341). Davis and other researchers draw on Eakins' friendship with Walt Whitman, an open homosexual and admirer of Eakins' work, as an indicator of his sexuality. During Eakins' and Whitman's friendship, Eakins had photographed

Whitman with his younger male companion William Duckett, as well as painted one of many portraits of Whitman (figs.10, 11) (Homer, 2002, p.213). However, all sources discussing the nature of Whitman and Eakins' relationship define their friendship as one of mutual respect and admiration for one another's work and character. Jennifer Doyle asserts in *Sex Objects* that Eakins should be placed at the beginning of a homosexual visual tradition in American Art, linking his work to the portraits of Robert Mapplethorpe, and to the films and photographs of Andy Warhol (Doyle, 2006, p.22). Comparing Eakins nude photographs to Robert Mapplethorpe's naked African-American men and Andy Warhol's genital Polaroids, Doyle believes the link to be self evident. Doyle goes on to state that the spirit of play in the photographs for *The Swimming Hole* was direct inspiration for the homoerotic films *Lonesome Cowboy* and *My Hustler*, also by Andy Warhol (Doyle, 2006, p.22). This is problematic in that Doyle's argument looks back from the present. Eakins in all likelihood was not attempting to establish this visual tradition nor was he aware that he was taking part in the creation of one. The correlations that Warhol and Mapplethorpe may draw from Eakins' work were strictly by the former's study of the latter.

Eakins and his images of nudity become more complicated when we consider again how Eakins does not show any genitals in his final painting of *The Swimming Hole*. The resulting androgynous figures can be seen throughout his work and only further confuse matters when we consider the letter to his father stating his distaste for French castration of the female nude. In his 1883 painting *Arcadia* (fig. 12), we again are presented with naked figures, all of whom conceal their gender. The middle and right figures are both males, while the seated figure to the right is female.

We know their gender and identity because the setting is Eakins' sister's farm and the models were his niece and nephew, as well as one of his students (figs. 13, 14, 15) (Homer, 2002, p.146). Ironically, Eakins concealed the genders of the figures and yet depicted the boys with pipes. The pipes can be read as the phallic instrument often attributed to the Arcadian god Pan, associated with eroticism, echoed by the title *Arcadia*.



Fig. 10. Walt Whitman and Bill Duckett, 1886.

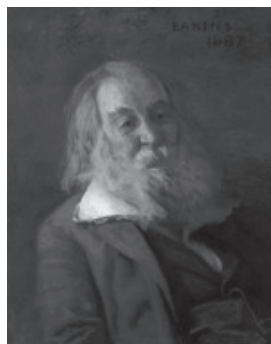


Fig. 11. Thomas Eakins, *Walt Whitman*, 1887-88.



Fig. 12. Thomas Eakins, *Arcadia*, 1883.

The androgynous body is shown in several of Eakins' nude photographic studies for this image, as well as others done in and out of his studio. One particular image is of the artist himself in a feminine, Odalisque-like pose in which Eakins' gender is not discernable (fig. 16). Henry Adams makes note of Eakins becoming the androgynous other in his photograph of himself. These images of the castrated androgynous figures, both male and female, seem to only further blur the sexual connotations in Eakins' work.

The profusion of issues surrounding gender and sexual identity in Eakins' work only grows more complicated when we consider any one of his individual works in relation to others as I discussed above. Eakins scholars, early on and up until the present, remain sharply divided as to the meanings and underlying subjects of his work. Doyle and Davis, among others, still explore the homoerotic nature of Eakins' work arguing in Davis' case, that Eakins' paintings are "not not homosexual" (Adams, 2005, p.310). Davis believes that while Eakins' paintings and photographs may not convey any direct indicators of homosexuality, one cannot deny that there are elements of Eakins' work with latent homosexual undertones. Davis employs Freudian psychoanalysis and points to Whitman and Eakins' relationship as the basis of his theory. He argues that Eakins was drawn to Whitman's character as a great exhibitionist and, more significantly, as an open homosexual (Johns, 1983, p.145).



Fig. 13. Photographic male study for *Arcadia*.



Fig. 14. Photographic male study for *Arcadia*.



Fig. 15. Photographic male study for *Arcadia*.



Fig. 16. Thomas Eakins nude, 1883.

Whitman, for Eakins, was the unconscious complement to Eakins' suppressed desires that Davis sees emulated in *The Swimming Hole* (Davis, 1994, p.309). The desires appear overtly in the preparatory images with the "coupled" pairs of boys that Eakins had staged in his photographs. The final painting marks a heavy revision and omissions when compared to the photographs and oil study's sentiments and acts as a visual marker to Eakins' suppression of his homosexual desires (Davis, 1994, p.328). In opposition to theories such as those put forth by Davis, there remains a large scholarly group that rejects ideas of homosexual or homoerotic tendencies in Eakins' work. Eakins' major biographers beginning with the pioneer of Eakins' biography, Lloyd Goodrich, and the contemporary scholars William Innes Homer and Martin Berger define Eakins' work with terms like "homo-social" to describe this painting. The homosocial reading of *The Swimming Hole* stems from the argument that the image is a celebration of the bonds between student and teacher and manhood and masculinity (Berger, 2000, p.96-98). Lloyd Goodrich is quick to dismiss any gay tendencies and addresses the men's naked interactions: "Eakins was always entirely natural about nudity, and preferred bathing without the benefit of bathing suits" (Goodrich, 1982, p.23).

The contemporary scholars opposed to the theories of homoeroticism in Eakins' paintings and photographs argue that these images are reflective of the artist's meditations on manhood, meant to convey an inspiring image of the modern man in Eakins' time. Berger and others maintain that the painting was to celebrate the success of local men while being an image that confirms the personal ties to the patron Coates (Adams, 2005, p.113; Berger, 2000, p.92). The setting of Dove Lake was a known manmade reservoir created by a local industrialist for his copper mine. The lake, created for the use of a nearby copper mill, both fulfilled the factories industrial requirements while intentionally creating a recreational area for local boating and swimming. According to Berger, the success of American industry thus led to the creation of the lake and afforded new opportunities for men to indulge in more leisurely activities. The connection becomes intimate to the patron who made his wealth in industrial speculation which permitted his

patronage of art and Eakins (Berger, 2000, p.92). For Berger, *The Swimming Hole* addresses gender through a promotion of masculinity that is affirmed in Eakins through his students' dedication to their professor. The students stand at the edge of the pier and on the metaphorical edge of success and manhood before joining their mentor in the lake. This sentiment is shared by William Innes Homer, who in protest against homosexual allegations describes *The Swimming Hole* as a: relaxing moment of male companionship away from the cares, and the women of the city. The young men, and Eakins himself, are free to frolic in the nude. The painting expresses Eakins' own relaxed openness about the human body exposed fully and without embarrassment...there is no evidence that Eakins was gay, but he encouraged a closeness among his male students and young artist friends that recalls the kind of bonding enjoyed in the Whitman circle (Homer, 2002, p. 116).

Homer's view is a traditional one that is shared by many of the scholars who believe that Eakins' paintings were realistic images that celebrated a growing cult of the masculine in the forefront of the gilded age. Everyone seems to define the motivations at play in *The Swimming Hole* in a slightly different manner. There are some scholars who remain safely in the middle and cannot say one way or the other what exactly is going on in Thomas Eakins' paintings. It seems that most of these arguments are based on the omission and/or the embellishment of details that could disprove any one argument. I believe these different interpretations and often conflicting explanations are indications that there is something unexplainable beneath the surface of the artist's work. The question of Eakins' intentions or unconscious desires or fears that permeate these images is a question that, asked only so recently, is far from being answered. Most likely the sexual nature of the issues at play in Eakins' work was something not wholly known or understood to the artist himself. In any event, the continued work on the artist's amazing career and often troubled and controversial life puts us closer to understanding the complex nature of the work of one of America's greatest masters.

References

- Adams, Henry. (2005). *Eakins Revealed: The Secret Life of an American Artist*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berger, Martin A. (2000). *Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Manhood in the Gilded Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davis, Whitney. (1994). "Erotic Revisions in Thomas Eakins's Narratives of Male Nudity." *Art History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (September). pp. 301-341.
- Doyle, Jennifer. (2006). *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Fried, Michael. (1987). *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: on Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goodrich, Lloyd. (1982). *Thomas Eakins*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Homer, William I. (2002). *Thomas Eakins: His Life and Art*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- Johns, Elizabeth. (1983). *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Images

- Fig. 1, Eakins, Thomas. *The Swimming Hole*. 1884-85. Oil on canvas, 27 3/8 x 36 3/8 in. (69.5 x 92.4 cm), Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth. <http://www.cartermuseum.org/works-of-art/1990-19-1>. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 2, Muybridge, Eadweard. *Motion Study: Thomas Eakins Nude, Running to the Left*, ca. 1885. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Pbs.org; Thomas Eakins: Scenes from Modern Life, http://www.pbs.org/eakins/img_1882.htm. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 3, Eakins, Thomas. Study for 'Swimming', Albumen Print, 1883, 6 1/16 X 7 13/16 inches, Hirschhorn Museum and Gallery, Washington D.C. <http://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/record.asp?Artist=eakins&hasImage=1&ViewMode=&Record=85>. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 4, Unidentified Photographer: Thomas Eakins and Students, *Swimming Nude*, ca. 1883, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Pbs.org; *Thomas Eakins: Scenes from Modern Life*, http://www.pbs.org/eakins/img_1881.htm. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 5, Eakins, Thomas. *Seven Males, Nude, Two Boxing at Center*, Dry-Plate Negative, ca. 1883, 4 x 5 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. "Erotic Revisions in Thomas Eakins's Narratives of Male Nudity", By Whitney Davis. *Art History*, Vol. 17, No.3 (September, 1994). 320.
- Fig. 6, Eakins, Thomas. *Eakins' Students at the Swimming Hole*, Albumen Print, 1884, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA. <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=66570>. (accessed November 8, 2006).
- Fig. 7, Eakins, Thomas. *Six Males, Nude, Wrestling*, 1883. *Eakins Revealed: The Secret Life of An American Artist*. By Henry Adams. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 314.
- Fig. 8, Eakins, Thomas. Male Nudes in a Seated Tug-of-War, Albumen Print, 1883, 3 3/4 x 4 3/4 in. (9.5 x 12.1 cm), Detroit Institute of Arts. http://www.metmuseum.org/special/Thomas_Eakins/22.L.htm. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 9, Eakins, Thomas. Oil Study for the 'Swimming Hole', Oil on fiberboard, 1883, 8 3/4 X 10 3/4 inches (22.1 X 27 cm), Hirschhorn Museum and Gallery, Washington D.C. <http://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/record.asp?Artist=eakins&hasImage=1&ViewMode=&Record=83>. (accessed November 8, 2006).
- Fig. 10, Walt Whitman and Bill Duckett, 1886, Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection. <http://www.pafa.org/paintingPopUp.jsp?booyaa=images/artwork/test/large/1017.jpg>. (accessed November 4, 2006).

- Fig. 11, Eakins, Thomas. *Portrait of Walt Whitman*, 1887-88, Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 24 1/4 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Artchive.com, http://www.artchive.com/artchive/E/eakins/eakins_whitman.jpg.html. (accessed November 8, 2006).
- Fig. 12, Eakins, Thomas. *Arcadia*, 1883, Oil on Canvas, 38 5/8 x 45 in. (98.1 x 114.3 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art. http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_of_Art/viewOne.asp?dep=2&viewmode=1&item=67.187.125. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 13, Eakins, Thomas. *Standing Piper (Study for 'Arcadia')*, c. 1883, Albumen Print, 3 x 7/16 x 3 3/8 inches, Hirschhorn Museum and Gallery, Washington D.C. <http://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/record.asp?Artist=eakins&hasImage=1&ViewMode=&Record=79>. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 14, Eakins, Thomas. *Ben Crowell (Study for 'Arcadia')*, c. 1883, Platinum print, 4 1/2 X 5 13/16 inches, Hirschhorn Museum and Gallery, Washington D.C. <http://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/record.asp?Artist=eakins&hasImage=1&ViewMode=&Record=15>. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 15, Eakins, Thomas. Susan Macdowell Eakins nude, reclining on elbow, from rear, c. 1883, Platinum Print, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Pbs.org; *Thomas Eakins: Scenes from Modern Life*, http://www.pbs.org/eakins/img_1883.htm. (accessed November 4, 2006).
- Fig. 16, Thomas Eakins nude, semireclining on couch, from rear, ca. 1883, Platinum Print, 5 3/8 x 7 1/4 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Pbs.org; *Thomas Eakins: Scenes from Modern Life*, http://www.pbs.org/eakins/img_1884.htm. (accessed November 4, 2006).