

The Iconography of Gender in Thomas Eakins Portraiture

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Perhaps no American artist has received as much attention by scholars in recent years and certainly none is more highly regarded as a painter than Thomas Eakins (1844-1916). Beginning with Lloyd Goodrich's detailed biographical and critical studies, Eakins has been touted as the essential realist. "The basic thrust of Eakins' art," according to Jules David Prown, "and of his teaching was in the direction of heightened realism." Prown goes on to praise the artist's "accuracy in reproducing external reality . . . and in capturing internal reality as well."¹ The argument has been that Eakins painted what he saw with a detachment and precision that derived from his technical skill and training, and from his scientific interests, particularly anatomy and motion studies. This union of art and science, and his exceptional ability to penetrate the "characters" of his sitters have made him the virtual paradigm of realism for twentieth-century art historians and critics. These commentators are thus able to place him nicely at the center of the larger shift in world view, subject matter and style that occurred after the mid-nineteenth century in literature and the visual arts. Eakins joins the pantheon of realist writers like Twain, Wharton and James as a major exponent of the rejection of the Romantic sensibility and style in the art of the period.

Such "isms" are helpful if one wishes to trace the evolution of style or the breaks and influences in artistic movements, but they are of limited value if the purpose is to understand what Eakins' paintings signified to people in his time, or why they continue to speak to us today. These categories and tags cannot tell us why he chose the subjects he did, why he concentrated on the portrait, how he manipulated the images of his sitters, or why his patrons and the public at large should have responded as they did to his work. Nor do they account for the

continuing impact of this gallery of solitary figures on several generations of viewers.

In the last few years, Elizabeth Johns and others have opened up a new approach to Eakins' work that is, I think, promising. These scholars analyze the paintings as expressions of the artist's engaged response to the conditions of American society in the late-nineteenth century. Such an approach attempts to correlate the images on the canvas with the predominant ideas and values of the period, and proposes that the painter is transposing the person or object in front of him into a *culturally* charged emblem related to broader currents of thought and feeling in the society. Johns, for example, claims that Eakins' subject is "the heroism of modern life," that he—apparently like his contemporaries in France—celebrated the energy and expansive possibilities of modernity. Johns goes on to relate the subjects of the paintings, the rowers, scientists, singers and artists, to the interests and attitudes of the emerging middle class in the closing decades of the century.

Though Johns' study is comprehensive and very helpful in establishing an historical context for several of the major paintings, I have one strong reservation about her thesis: to assert that Thomas Eakins unqualifiedly accepted modernity simplifies the complex and in many cases ambivalent iconography and compositional strategies of the paintings themselves (Johns, in fact, does very little close analysis of individual works). The idea that Eakins depicts, as the subject for his portraits, "the person who in his full intellectual, aesthetic, and athletic power was definitive of the best of his time" can be qualified in two important respects.² Even in the paintings in which he celebrates male achievement, there are tensions present that question or qualify the values of the masculine world of action and progress. And these portraits of men stand, as a group, in sharp contrast to the equally numerous portrayals of women that contribute a poignant and pointed critique of woman's place in the "heroic" modern world that was coming into being in the painter's lifetime.

The subject of Eakins' work across the forty years of his career was indeed the heroism of modern life, but his achievement was at the same time to depict and to question this, to place before the viewer the complexities and contradictions of a period of rapid and often bewildering change, of widespread confidence and underlying anxiety, and of clashes between traditional values and emerging cultural imperatives. In 1914, his creative years behind him, the painter summarized his aim in art in writing to a friend that the "first desire" of an artist in this country should be "to peer deeper into the heart of American life."³ When he himself peered deeply into American life, what he saw, above all else, were the tensions involved in the male world of work and play, and the almost unrelieved isolation and ennui of middle and upper-class women's lives. What he painted, virtually exclusively, were men and women, always separately and never sharing either family life, work or leisure. Thus the contrasting experiences of men and women in Gilded Age America forms the explanatory framework by which Eakins makes sense of his world; and his psychological insights into personalities

and his unsparing “realism” in presenting unique individuals invariably serve this larger purpose. The portrait, while overtly the depiction of a unique individual, has always asserted as well the status of the sitter, his or her place in the social world. During the late-nineteenth century the portraits of Whistler and Sargent combined these artists’ dazzling techniques with the promotion of bourgeois manners and styles to support the cultural status quo. For Eakins, however, the portrait was an intellectually more complex form. His dedication to realism transcended aesthetics or method to become a way of simultaneously representing and criticizing dominant attitudes and values. The repetitions of motif, gesture, tone, even color schemes in his portraits of men, against those of women, as well as the fact that many of the commissioned paintings were rejected by those who had ordered them, suggest that Eakins consistently adopted a critical point of view toward the culture of his time.

Two of Eakins’ most famous portraits, *The Champion Single Sculls* (*Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*) of 1871 and *The Gross Clinic* of 1875, express the ambivalences that, even this early in his career, he detected in male activities and men’s lives. He had arrived back in Philadelphia the year before executing the portrait of Schmitt, after nearly four years in France and Spain. In Paris, he had concentrated on improving his painter’s skills, working hard to develop a personal style. He had received encouragement from Jean-Leon Gerome, his teacher at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and had thought a great deal about the nature and purpose of art. When he returned home, he was somewhat depressed—in his estimation he had failed to find a subject or to produce anything of exceptional quality in Europe—yet confident in his abilities and the direction of his career. Gordon Hendricks says of this moment in Eakins’ development that he “wanted to find himself anew, a new artist in the milieu he was going to make his own the rest of his life.”⁴

Almost immediately, he caught cogent aspects of that milieu in *The Champion Single Sculls*, a portrait of his longtime friend Max Schmitt rowing on an autumn afternoon on the Schuylkill River. The champion oarsman is, for Professor Johns, a “modern hero” and “model of excellence” who combines the virtues of an “enlightened leisure” with those of the strenuous life, an ideal widely promoted at the time as a remedy for what were conceived to be the dangers of too soft and overcivilized an existence among members of the growing bourgeoisie, particularly its achievement-oriented males.⁵ The painting, it has been noted, commemorates a particular victory, a race won by Schmitt on October 5, 1870, and thus was executed “to celebrate a champion.”⁶ However, the portrait itself does not depict a race, and the characterization of Schmitt catches a tension between action and stasis, between achievement and exertion, between the universal of progress and the particulars of space and time, suggesting an ambivalent attitude toward the central figure in the single scull.

Schmitt is presented in the context of the passing of time. The eighteenth-century stone house at the lower left becomes the mid-nineteenth century mansion on the hill to the right as we pass visually up the river to the modern

technological world of the bridges, one a railroad bridge, in the background. The strong horizontals of these bridges and their placement across the center of the picture space block the eye from further movement up the river and, more importantly, refer the viewer back to the objects and persons in the fore- and middle-ground, details which are then interpreted with the bridges in mind. The images of cultural change thus resonate back into the figure of the rower, and this motif of time passing is reinforced by the suggestion that the fall of the year represents the autumn of Schmitt's racing career as well. In 1871, he was twenty-eight years old, no longer in his prime as a sculler, as Eakins well knew; and he would, in fact, win his last race the following year.⁷

If the subject of this work is the strenuous life, there are odd ambivalences involved in the ideal of strenuosity as represented here. The implied activity of the rowers is undercut by a sense of stasis, even entropy in the inert figure of Schmitt suspended on the quiet surface of the water, as well as in the placement of Eakins' own boat, moving away from Schmitt's in the middle distance and perpendicular to the picture plane, a placement that all but eliminates any sense of movement. That the horizontal line of Schmitt's scull echoes the line of the bridges links the sportsman's streamlined, efficient, technologically perfected craft to these values of the modern world in an ironic way. Schmitt and Eakins are out for an afternoon's pleasure and exercise in a natural setting (which is itself located in the middle of a big city); at the same time, Schmitt is a sportsman, a "professional" oarsman, whose activity embodies the demands of an urban-industrial society, its dedication to technological progress, asceticism, efficiency and competition.

In coming down to the river, the champion asserts his physical prowess and rugged self-sufficiency, but at the moment caught in the painting, the cost of these virtues seems apparent in the haggard stare and stooped shoulders of the sculler. The man of action in nature pauses, suspended between two worlds as emblems of the modern—a steamboat in the left background and an approaching train to the right—close in. In the strenuous sport he pursues and the place in which he engages in it, the athlete has both escaped modernity and brought its values with him. Twain's image of Huck on the raft is prefigured here in that of the man in the scull, but Eakins' rower appears even less able to escape from culture and conformity into nature and individualism. Schmitt, the champion athlete, was during the work week a Philadelphia lawyer, and he found it difficult to balance his practice with the demands of a pastime that was also work. In 1874, he wrote that "our men cannot afford to neglect their business engagements for training. In order to be able to attain any distinction in open scull races nowadays, a man . . . must be able to give his entire and undivided attention to rowing for months before a race."⁸ Historian Daniel Rodgers sums up the problems that Schmitt here notes and that Eakins visualized in the attitudes toward male work and sport during the Gilded Age:

Some of the new sports that took hold after 1850...were often elevated into exaggerated paradigms of work. If one of the results of the revolution in recreation habits was to encourage the gentle arts of a summer's outing, another was to fasten the lessons of competitive striving more firmly to the rites by which most middle class youths passed into manhood.⁹

In the *Portrait of Professor Gross* (Fig. 1), as it was originally called, Eakins probes deeper into the cultural conflicts implicit in the period's attitudes toward male activity in the world. The painting's monumental scale (96" X 78"), the intensity and dedication of the assistants, the high seriousness of the subject (a surgical operation on a living patient), and the towering figure of the master surgeon and researcher, combine to communicate an image of the heroic scientist assaulting the barriers of superstition and mystery and revealing the truth accessible to the man of reason and courage. This is, however, the consensus interpretation of later critics; in its time, the painting was rejected by the art jury of the Centennial Exhibition to be held in Philadelphia in 1876 (for which exhibit Eakins specifically did the portrait), and even its eventual showing among the fair's medical exhibits elicited an outraged response from critics and the public alike. Comments in the local press on the inappropriateness of the subject to art, on what was regarded as the gratuitous and revolting splashes of blood on the hands of the otherwise dignified Dr. Gross and his assistants, and on the indecorous exposure of the left thigh and buttock of the patient have understandably led later art historians to attribute the virulence of the attacks on the painting to the philistinism of genteel Philadelphians. In another view, a significant cause of this reaction may lie in the ambiguous portrayal of Dr. Gross and in the conflicted public attitude toward surgery itself.

An ambivalence about the doctor's work is conveyed by the gesture of the patient's mother or other female relative in the lower left quadrant. She expresses pain and horror at the sight of the operation in progress before her. Yet, as E. C. Parry has pointed out, the position of her hands and her averted gaze evokes a modern version of the *apokopein*, a traditional representation of the sense of wonder experienced by a mortal in the presence of a deity.¹⁰ Dr. Gross is, to put it in its simplest terms, at once a butcher and a god. And the depiction of Gross himself reinforces this double vision. He occupies a commanding position in the painting and the overhead illumination lights his strong forehead, emphasizing the power of human reason to explain and order the physical world. He is a skilled scientist (the scalpel) and a brilliant researcher and teacher (the scribe recording the doctor's lecture and the audience of rapt students). There is, however, a somewhat sinister aura about this man as well: the flyaway shock of grey hair, the deep shadows concealing the eyes ("There is mystery in shadow," Eakins once wrote), the black suit and strong chiaroscuro all cast Gross as the Romantic hero exercising, through force of will, a power, perhaps benevolent, perhaps malevolent, over human life. And there is a further disjunction between the figure

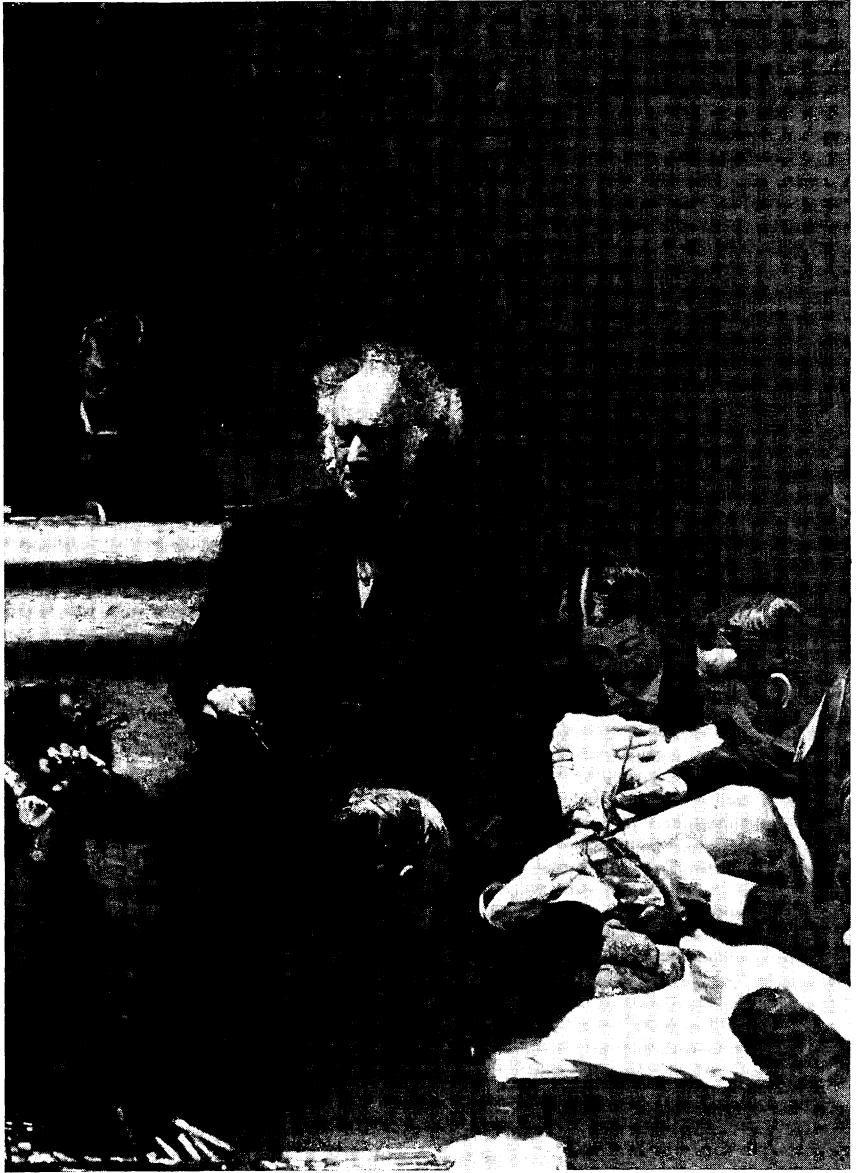


Figure 1. *Portrait of Professor Gross (The Gross Clinic)*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 96" x 78". Courtesy of the Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia.

of the surgeon, who fuses Enlightenment with Romantic values, and the naturalistic, even clinical treatment of the details of the operation in progress. Gross turns away from the patient, the only visual link between the two being the blood of the latter. While the renowned surgeon's intellectual involvement is clear, it is possible for a viewer to interpret his stance and position in the portrait as conveying either an admirable scientific detachment or a frightening moral insensitivity, or an unresolved admixture of the two.

These qualities of the image coincide with the ambivalent attitudes of Gilded Age Americans toward the medical profession. Johns states that during this period surgeons were promoting themselves as "the very embodiment of Enlightenment values and egalitarian opportunities . . . as heroes of modern life"; and there is no doubt that in selecting Samuel D. Gross as his subject, Eakins intended to exalt the ideal surgeon: "a man of humble origins, trained in the French clinical—the scientific—tradition, an untiring worker, and a brilliant researcher and writer."¹¹ The public conception of the surgeon and of medical science at this time was, however, more complex than these statements suggest. Historian of medicine Richard Shryock states that French medical practices and pedagogy were being condemned as inhumane in the United States, even as the idea that "science revealed the glory of God persisted."¹² This argument and the growing debate, even anxiety in some quarters, over Darwinism may, in part, explain why, as late as 1891, medical school endowments totalled \$500,000 while those of theological schools amounted to \$18,000,000.¹³ And at the moment when the *Gross Clinic* was shown to the public in Philadelphia, a bill was pending in the Pennsylvania legislature to outlaw vivisection—"murder in the name of science" to the law's supporters—and this move was, in turn, part of a widespread condemnation of what many considered the "blighting effects of utilitarianism" in the medical profession.¹⁴ In addition, late-nineteenth century business values mitigated against the "idle curiosity" of the researcher, and the image of the noble healer conflicted in the public mind with its antithesis: the cutter into human flesh as usurper of God's prerogatives over life and death.

The portrait of Professor Gross, like that of Max Schmitt, resonates with the cultural dilemmas of its period. Men's work in the world was becoming increasingly burdened with doubts about the nature of progress and achievement. The headlong rush to modernity could not obscure the conflicts between older moral and social values—the worth of the human individual, the spiritual nature of reality, self-reliance and one's place in the world—and newer developments in science and technology as well as new determinants of status in the social order. Schmitt achieved celebrity as a rower during a period that saw the professionalization of the boisterous and semi-organized games of the boy-men of earlier times, and, as his statement cited earlier attests, he felt the strains between the demands of work and the pleasures of play that colored Victorian attitudes toward leisure. And Dr. Gross experienced the contention within the culture between material and intellectual progress and the moral doubt that surrounded his own profession. He exulted over recent advances in surgery, over

what he claimed to be the “progress, rapid and brilliant, nay absolutely bewildering [that] literally stares us in the face.”¹⁵ Bewildering indeed—the great surgeon wrote to a former student not many years later that “surgery is . . . a most corroding, soul-disturbing profession.”¹⁶

Eakins’ other large surgical painting, *The Agnew Clinic* of 1889, eliminates many of these “soul-disturbing” aspects of the depiction of Professor Gross, while the gender dimension of its iconography suggests changes occurring between 1875 and 1890 as well as continuing tensions. The patient is now a female and, more significantly, a female nurse attends at the operation. The vertical of this nurse standing to the right balances, and therefore equals in some sense, the figure of Dr. Agnew to the left, even as she duplicates the (partially nude) female form on the operating table. She is the only figure in the light of the amphitheater (except, of course, for the patient) who is not overtly doing anything. Both women remain passive while the doctor lectures to the all-male audience of medical students and his three male assistants tend to the patient. David Lubin summarizes the painting’s “true story” as relating the “manner in which society’s superstructure (Law/Art/Medicine) masks its own devices, its repressing/sublimating/sterilizing of erotic, irrational, antijudicial, antiformal, and anti-antiseptic desire.”¹⁷ If all of these latter terms can be associated with the female in the Victorian mind, *The Agnew Clinic* may be seen to embody a typology of gender relations that admitted women into the world of science and medicine but within the parameters of an ideology of subordination. The great surgeon, as in the manner of Dr. Gross, asserts male rationality, but without the internal contradictions of the portrayal of Gross; and he here subsumes and controls female irrationality.

Conflicts in cultural perceptions and values continued to inform Eakins’ portrayal of male work and sport; but, as the *Agnew Clinic* attests, from about 1875 a larger theme, an outgrowth of the first, came to prominence in his art: the contrast between male activity and female passivity, between the expansive possibilities of male achievement in the urban-industrial world (though the doubts, the questioning of modernity, the tensions, remained) and the constricting emptiness and isolation of women’s lives. The men in these portraits are celebrated for their purpose, their dedication to an important task, almost always mental, and their achievement. In a letter to his sister, Eakins expressed his admiration for “living, thinking, active men”; and it is his enthusiasm for the life of thought that results in practical achievement which links his most characteristic portraits of men and sets them off sharply from those of women.

Benjamin Howard Rand was a chemist who served a term as secretary of the Academy of Sciences in Philadelphia, and who came to Central High School as Professor of chemistry and physics while Eakins was a student there. Professor Rand, an alumnus of Jefferson Medical College, may have sparked the young Eakins’ interest in science; certainly the boy’s precise drawings of gears and lathes done at Central express a desire to investigate the principles of science. Rand left Central in 1864 to join the faculty at Jefferson, where Eakins may have

kept in touch with him, and in 1874 the painter asked Rand to sit for him.¹⁸ Since the *Portrait of Professor Rand* (Fig. 2) was painted in preparation for undertaking that of Dr. Gross, and since this portrait was accepted by the Centennial Committee that rejected *The Gross Clinic*, it provides a useful contrast to the latter work. In the portrait of Rand, Eakins domesticates and humanizes the physician and researcher. Rand, seated behind the simple desk in his modestly elegant book-lined study, faces the viewer and is lighted from a window located out of frame to the right. The sunlight leaves the background of the room in partial obscurity but catches and converts to signs certain objects on and in front of the desk as well as the good doctor's slightly furrowed brow and the fingers of both hands. He is framed by a microscope on the desktop to the left and a crocheted shawl draped over the chair in front of his desk to the right.

The microscope, with its golden gleam and hard-edged precision of rendering, identifies the sitter as a champion of scientific truth, and contrasts sharply with the loosely-painted pink shawl, an emblem of domestic security. This symbolism is echoed and associated more directly with Dr. Rand in the gold edging and clean lines of the book before him and the hot pink of the carnation lying close beside this presumably scientific tome. The doctor's right hand rests on the book, marking his place, while the flower is positioned on the desk directly under his left hand. If these are the objects that through their careful placement in the painting Eakins tried to reconcile conflicting aspects of culture and the



**Figure 2. *Portrait of Benjamin Howard Rand*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 60" x 48".
Courtesy of the Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia.**

human personality, there is one other—the family’s cat has leaped to the desk top and the doctor pauses in his reading to pet the appreciative animal. These signs attribute to Rand a union of thought and feeling that is clinched by the placement of the doctor’s hands—hands are, as we shall see, expressive devices as important to Eakins as they were to John Singleton Copley. One hand marks the progress of science while the other acknowledges the gentle sensibility of the healer. Work and home are joined; the instruments of reason, all placed to the left of center in the painting, and the objects of the doctor’s domestic affections, all placed to the right, are reconciled by these hands and, ultimately, by the strong forehead and sympathetic gaze of the highlighted head of the sitter. Rand embodies in this portrait the progress of science purged of the disquieting ambiguities associated with the image of Dr. Gross.

The same process of cleansing the progressive attainments of modern men of their more troubling aspects occurs in the *Portrait of Dr. Horatio Wood* of 1889, where the cleansing agent is a diffuse and pervasive light. Eakins may have been personally indebted to Wood, a clinician and lecturer on nervous disorders at the University of Pennsylvania, for treatment or advice during a period of nervous exhaustion in the mid-1880s. Perhaps it was Wood, a part owner of a ranch in Dakota Territory, who encouraged the painter to go west in 1886 for a period of rest and rejuvenation.¹⁹ In any event, in this *portrait d'apparat*, the healer is thoughtful, accessible and benign. The doctor, seated casually at his desk, leans forward in his chair and looks with interest, even concern, into the eyes of the viewer. Wood’s intelligence and expertise are conveyed by the books scattered about on floor and desktop and are focused in the traditional hand to head gesture. Eakins eliminates the Romantic chiaroscuro of, say, the portrait of Dr. Gross, bathing Wood in an even luminescence that indicates the light of reason while dispelling any suggestion of the dark corners of the mind and imagination—it was Wood’s work in the world to bring light to such corners.

Two portraits of men done in the nineties, however, demonstrate especially well that the painter was not always capable of suppressing or reconciling his doubts about the headlong rush of progress as successfully as he seems to have been able to do in the representations of Rand and Wood. Henry A. Rowland, a physicist at Johns Hopkins, “inaugurated the modern study of spectroscopy as an exact science.” In the portrait of 1891, the noted scientist sits comfortably relaxed, right elbow on the armrest of his chair, left leg over right knee, holding his diffraction-grating apparatus while beside him is the large dividing machine capable of ruling up to 20,000 lines per inch, which he also invented.²⁰ This portrait is unusual in that Eakins includes another person, Professor Rowland’s assistant, in the background against the far right edge of the canvas. The assistant, in shirt sleeves and apron, is busy examining an instrument at his worktable. Eakins locates Rowland squarely in the center of the picture space and dramatically lights his distinguished features and elegant suit, then does not seem to know what to do with the bulky machine or the scientist’s assistant. The portraitist gives priority here to the mind that conceived the complicated apparatus over the hand

that apparently fashioned it; but he appears to wish to reveal and conceal the dividing machine at the same time, so that the viewer has difficulty getting any clear sense of its full size or construction though Eakins carefully details the parts shown. In a sketch for the Rowland portrait, squared off for enlarging, the assistant and dividing machine are absent. Their inclusion in the finished painting, squeezed as they are into the right half of the composition, complicates and makes problematic the otherwise straightforward presentation of the brilliant physicist. The presence of the machine and the assistant specify the practical nature of Rowland's intelligence and accomplishments; on the other hand, the scientist and his helper are separated by a space that signals the social distance between professional class and worker.

The wide wooden frame of the painting is etched with scientific scales, figures and formulas. These notations by Eakins himself are consistent with the aggrandizement of the theoretical physicist Rowland, yet the effect of this elaborately-marked frame is to mystify the image itself and to further obscure the purpose of including the machine and the assistant. Whereas the careful symmetrical placement of the objects in Professor Rand's study represents a reconciliation of the cultural polarities of work and home in the figure of the doctor, the radically-asymmetrical placement of workman and machine in the portrait of Professor Rowland creates an imbalance highly unusual in Eakins' work, one that may signify unresolved conflicts. The obscuring of the assistant and his placement far to the right edge of the canvas consigns this workman (albeit he is a highly-trained one) to a vague sort of nether world within the space of the painting; this during the period of widening class divisions and the most violent labor unrest in the country's history. And the severe cropping and unsure placement of the machine confer on this icon of technological progress a tenuous place in the work as well, a place (and manner of presentation) consonant with the mingled fascination and fear with which many Americans of Eakins' and Henry Adams' generation met the rise to dominance of machine technology during the last decades of the century.

The personal cost of such "progress" is the subject of the *Portrait of Frank Hamilton Cushing* of 1895 (Fig. 3). As a backdrop for this painting Eakins and Cushing recreated in the artist's Chestnut Street studio a Zuni sacred underground kiva and the painter made careful photographic and oil studies of his subject; careful preparation that testifies to Eakins' sympathetic response to Cushing and his cultural predicament. The anthropologist had gone to the southwest some years before to study the Zuni on a project that was to last several months. He ended up staying four and a half years, and in the process, according to William Truettner, ruined his health and afterward suffered from bouts of anxiety regarding his cultural identity.²¹ A scientist who became a tribal chief, Cushing was never able to reconcile his role as a scholar with his life among a native people, a life that he found in many ways more satisfying than his existence in the modern world; neither was he apparently ever successful in merging the scientific



Figure 3. *Portrait of Frank Hamilton Cushing, 1895.* Oil on canvas, 90" x 60". Courtesy of the Gilcrease Institute, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

point of view in which he had been trained with the spiritual world view that he had learned from the Zuni.

Eakins celebrates Cushing's accomplishments even as he sees the price the man has paid. The work is a tribute to Cushing's daring and contributions to social science, suggested by the faithful rendition of the Zuni War God on the shield, the war club and prayer plumes in Cushing's hands, and the various other artifacts that are carefully placed around the subject. But the artist also catches Cushing's unease in the contrast between the authentic albeit exotic costume and setting, and the doubt, frustration and ill-health evident in the drawn features and downcast gaze (unusual in Eakins' portraits of male achievers) of the figure. This is not a man who has happily bridged the gap between the pre-modern and the modern. From the *Portrait of Professor Rand*, then, through that of Cushing, over a period of twenty years, Eakins observed the headlong rush to incorporation and scientific-technological advancement that was, for him, the keynote of modernity. In most of these works he simultaneously extolls, analyzes and criticizes the world of thought and activity in which men lived and worked, and which they were expected to shape to progressive ends.

Women are almost totally excluded from this world in the art of Thomas Eakins; and his portraits of female friends and family members capture what one historian has called "the Victorian horror of women's lives."²² Thomas was close to his three sisters and, from Paris, encouraged them to row and to learn to swim. He spent as much time as he could spare relaxing at Frances' farm in Avondale, Pennsylvania (where he took photographs of family and landscape), and was shaken by the early deaths of another sister Margaret and a favorite niece. In Paris as a young art student he strongly disapproved of the empty idealizations of female sexuality in French painting. On this subject he wrote to his friend Earl Shinn back in the States that

it would be a godsend to see a fine man painted in a studio with bare walls, alongside of the smiling, smirking goddesses of many complexions, amidst the delicious arsenic green trees and gentle wax flowers and purling streams a-running up and down the hills—especially up. I hate affectation.

In response to the facile and fake depictions of women in the salon art of the French capital, he told Shinn that "when a man paints a naked woman he gives her less than poor Nature did. I can conceive of few circumstances wherein I would have to paint a woman naked, but if I did I would not mutilate her for double the money."²³ Back in Philadelphia he quickly expunged all such vapid conventions from his own portraits as he began a lifelong exploration of the personalities and lives of American women.

At the same time, Eakins' own experiences with and involving women were occasionally troubled and may well have cued him to the problems of women in Victorian America. In June 1872 his mother, Caroline Cowperthwaite Eakins, of

solid Philadelphia stock, died of “exhaustion from mania” after two years of suffering during which she was in need of constant care.²⁴ The “neurasthenic” woman of the late-nineteenth century has become a commonplace of historians in our time, but Eakins’ first-hand experience of the terrors of such decline may well have informed his recurrent images of women in a state of near-collapse. Thomas was later implicated in the death, referred to above, of his niece Ella Crowell, who, unstable all her life and released from a mental hospital in July 1897, shot and killed herself. Some members of the family, especially W. J. Crowell, Ella’s father, believed that Eakins had been sexually involved with her, and Frances broke off contact with her brother for three years following the girl’s suicide.²⁵ Whether or not Thomas was in any way responsible for Ella’s death, charges of unacceptable sexual behavior dogged him most of his life. He photographed nude young men romping in the woods, asked unattended young women to pose for him (though he claimed he always asked permission of their mothers), and in 1886 was fired from his prestigious post at the Pennsylvania Academy for, so the story goes, removing the loincloth from a male model during a ladies’ life class. Eakins’ determination to remove sham from his portrayals of women may have combined with his experience of Victorian “politeness”—which he once bitterly defined as “the string of ceremonies, generally used for concealing ill nature, and which have been found necessary to the existence of every society whose members are wanting in self-respect and morality,” a conviction that could only have been confirmed by the Ella Crowell imbroglio and the nude model controversy—to shape a pattern of presentation of the female form and character that exposed the contradictions of the prevailing ideology of womanhood.²⁶

The Portrait of Mrs. Letitia Wilson Jordan Bacon (1888) is characteristic of Eakins’ portrayal of women. Posed in the studio “with bare walls,” the sitter’s head tilts in a visual downward pull that continues through the shoulders and arms to the long verticals of the shawl draped over the right forearm and the outer edge of the downward-tilted fan. The gaze “offstage” to the right, used in the portrait of Professor Rowland to signify his visionary intelligence, is here abstracted, even glazed. Everything seems to droop, the shawl, the fan, the wrinkled gloves, the subject’s head, creating the impression that this woman is burdened by the conventions embodied in her clothing and accessories. The prominent scarlet ribbon at her throat and the faded golden fan lend an ironic touch, suggesting a pert coquetry that is belied, perhaps satirized, by the dark, empty space in which she stands, as well as by her distracted unconcern for her posture or how her “feminine” accoutrements are displayed to the public.

The iconographic aspects of this portrait are brought into sharper relief if we contrast it with the work of the most highly regarded portraitist of several generations earlier, John Singleton Copley. Copley’s women seem very much at ease in their world, relishing, as did the painter, the material well-being of their emerging bourgeois society. Whether they are linked to their husbands through such compositional devices as the placement of arms and hands or depicted by

themselves, their beaming faces affirm their existence amid the lustrous piles of fabric and gleaming woods and metals that shine from the canvases. The delight in material things that has perhaps always informed the portrait as a genre is reinforced in Copley by the post-Revolutionary confidence in the material possibilities of the young republic. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen have argued that by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, however, the plenitude of consumer goods figured by the Victorian woman's sartorial image had become oppressive for many a middle class lady.²⁷ The oversized fan and shawl and the bulky gloves falling off the arms of Letitia Bacon visualize the physical and psychological weight of fashion to which the Ewens refer, and express Eakins' insight into the strains and dissatisfactions attendant upon the good life by his time.

Amelia Van Buren was a student of Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy, a woman whom he knew fairly well. In the portrait of 1891 (Fig. 4), she sits in the big Victorian Elizabethan chair in which the painter had posed Professor Rand in his study; but in this case the chair all but engulfs the sitter and may serve as a symbol of the masculine Victorian culture in which she lives. The dissociation of this woman from the power structure of her world is signaled by the contrasts of color and texture—the pink and flower-print of her dress against the heavy mahogany and somber brownish-red velvet of the chair. If this chair is an emblem of Gilded Age standards of taste and status, its occupant is singularly uninterested, even despondent: she stares off to the right toward the source of light, presumably a window and a world beyond, from which she seems closed off. When a male subject in Eakins' art rests his hand against his head, as does Dr. Wood, the gesture signifies the force of practical intelligence; in the case of Miss Van Buren and other female subjects, it expresses a state of distracted ennui, a mood reinforced here by her slouched position and, again, the presence of the fan, here closed, useless, lying in her lap.

The character and qualities of an image such as this cannot be adequately explained by saying that the painter was a realist who depicted the physical reality before him, that he, in the words of Lloyd Goodrich, "accepted completely the realities of American life."²⁸ Eakins did several photographic studies of his sitter before beginning work on the Van Buren canvas (Fig. 5), and the difference between what the camera records and what the artist communicates is striking. These differences suggest that his purpose was a larger one than the accurate representation—physical, or even psychological—of an individual. In the photographs, Amelia is smooth-skinned and blond, pert and youthful; in the painting of the same year she is dark-haired with streaks of grey predominating, tight-lipped, wan and withdrawn.²⁹ Johns and others have noticed that Eakins ages his sitters, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the Van Buren portrait. But as here, this appears to be the case much more often with women than with men. The question remains as to why. This premature aging is certainly consonant with other visual clues in these works: the slouching postures, glazed stares, wearily drooping heads and hands, and rumpled clothing of many of the

sitters. The effect, achieved self-consciously or not, of this and other transformations of the female sitters in the portraits is, I believe, to communicate a sense of the burden of time, to serve as visual metaphors for the feeling of entropy and



Figure 4. *Portrait of Amelia Van Buren, c. 1891.* Oil on canvas, 45" x 32".
Courtesy of the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

boredom in the lives of many middle-class American women in the late-nineteenth century.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has detailed the psycho-physical decline of many women in Eakins' generation. "Frequently," she writes, "women complained of isolation, loneliness and depression."³⁰ Physicians, using the general term "hysteria" to cover a wide variety of symptoms, attested to the prevalence of this debilitating ailment among women under about age forty of the urban middle and upper-middle classes. The most common complaints were of "nervousness, depression, the tendency to tears and chronic fatigue." Smith-Rosenberg views these symptoms as comprising the outward manifestations of "a social role produced by and functional within a specific set of social circumstances": "the discontinuity between the roles of courted woman and pain-bearing, self-sacrificing wife and mother, the realities of an unhappy marriage, the loneliness and chagrin of spinsterhood."³¹ If Smith-Rosenberg reconstructs the social reality of a significant percentage of the middle-class female population of the period from the written records of the women, their physicians and spouses, Thomas Eakins is visually documenting the same social reality. The recurrent motif of genteel but faded clothing, gestures of dejection and ennui, and the aging of the sitters are visual signs that freeze the cultural condition of these Gilded Age women.

A notable example of the relation between the aging of the subject and other elements in Eakins' portraits of women is the depiction of Suzanne Santje, an actress whom Thomas apparently saw at the theatre on one of his infrequent nights out. Again, the difference between the woman as pictured in a photograph that appears to be a surviving publicity still of 1900 and Eakins' portrayal of her in 1903 suggests that he is painting a social condition as much as the person.³² In the photograph Suzanne is very young, wide-eyed, serious and confident. In the painting she is posed in a state of near-collapse, the earlier stages of which are seen in the previous portraits of Letitia Bacon and Amelia Van Buren. The actress is seated in the now-familiar masculine Victorian chair and all lines of her figure and dress exert a downward momentum—the long ringleet of dark hair down her neck, the lengthened arms, thin and ending in long, nearly emaciated fingers, and the lines and folds in the floor-length costume.

On the wall over Suzanne's left shoulder hangs a portrait of her husband Al Roth, a theatrical agent, and on the floor to her right lies a copy of *Camille* that she has presumably just put aside. She is thus placed between a representation of the man who determined the direction of her life *and* her career, and a classic text on the failure of romantic possibilities. These possibilities, associated with her status as an actress, are glaringly and ironically visualized in the brilliant pink and gold cocoon of the lounging dress that enfolds her from throat to toe and is the brightest passage of color I recall in any of Eakins' portraits. The dissonance between the subject's dress, and her limp posture and expression of boredom and sadness reminds us that Eakins repeatedly wraps the women in his paintings in great billows of Victorian clothing and accessories, and then undercuts or overtly

criticizes the materialism, thus represented, that threatens to swamp the person. Conventions of women's clothing in the period, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen explain, were the antithesis of men's: "While men's clothing displayed an



Figure 5. Eakins' photograph of Amelia Van Buren, c. 1891. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

imagistic presentation of economy and purpose, women's fashions were the repository of bourgeois conspicuous consumption."³³ And this contrast is emblematic of the central gender conflict in Eakins' work and in the culture of Victorian America—"in a patriarchal culture," as the art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock state the issue, "femininity is not an alternative to masculinity, but its negative."³⁴ The thrust of the patterns of representation in Eakins' portrayals of women, as here in the Santje portrait, is to cut through the sumptuous "feminine" surfaces of attire, status and representation (as embodied in, say, the art of John Singer Sargent) to expose the disturbing aspects of this negation. Eakins' Suzanne Santje is the visual equivalent of Kate Chopin's doomed heroine, Edna Pointellier, in *The Awakening*: the web of cultural choices that Edna faces—fulfillment of the promise envisioned by her romantic sensibility, her somewhat tenuous commitment to a life in art, and the dedication of a wife to the new social art of consumption—are signified in the painting by the linkage of the book, the gown and the portrait of her husband. And the perils of consumption and its relation to celebrity are also expressed in the painting as poignantly as they are in Dreiser's narrative of the rising actress Carrie Meeber; the image of the moderately popular Miss Santje in her brilliant dressing gown resting and brooding in her oversized chair is very close in tone and import to that of Sister Carrie pondering her place in the world from her rocker at the conclusion of this novel published just two years before Eakins began work on his portrait of Suzanne.

Eakins' identification of the central transformation that had affected women's lives in his time is suggested in the contrast between the message of *Seventy Years Ago* (1877) and that of a painting such as *Antiquated Music* of 1900. Though he appears not to have been especially nostalgic, he did several versions of the theme of the former: a middle-aged woman in a simple muslin dress and lace cap knitting in her parlor, a round tip-table behind her to the right, a spinning wheel in the background to the left. (In another of these works, a woman is at work at the spinning wheel.) This ancestor sits straight-backed and dignified, her hands and seemingly her mind occupied with work that she and her culture considered important. During the intervening seventy years, however, as Alan Trachtenberg characterizes the development, "domestic labor came to consist chiefly of budgeting and shopping rather than making. From place of labor for self-support, the home had become the place of consumption."³⁵ Whereas Whistler and Sargent typically make of woman an elegant emblem of consumption and ease, Eakins probes the withering of purpose and meaning that came in the wake of changes in work, home and patterns of consumption.

Again, as Smith-Rosenberg noted: "The commercial and industrial revolutions and the accompanying urbanization had transformed the economically productive farming and artisan women of the eighteenth century into economically and institutionally marginal figures."³⁶ Mrs. William D. Frismuth, the subject of *Antiquated Music*, was appointed *honorary* curator of musical instruments at the Pennsylvania Museum on the basis of the fine collection of these

instruments that her husband's successful investments had enabled her to amass. This is one of the few Eakins portraits not titled for the sitter, and we may take the term "antiquated" literally as meaning so old as to be useless. The composition of the painting reprises that of *Seventy Years Ago*: a Japanese barrel drum against the right edge of the canvas repeats the form of the tip-table and an object of use, here a late-eighteenth-century piano, flanks Mrs. Frismuth to the left. The central figure sits erect in a black dress that spreads out on the floor at her feet, surrounded by her collection of instruments, in a dimly lit, large but nondescript place that emphasizes her isolation. Mrs. Frismuth exists in the painting in a highly ambiguous time and space. Her marginality to her culture is embodied in the obsolete instruments, washed out into an all-but uniform brown tone on the canvas, as in the meaningless gesture she enacts. Recall Professor Wood's finger purposefully marking his place in the text before him; here Mrs. Frismuth's right index finger falls abstractedly on the keyboard of the old piano. She is marginal to the cultures of both past and present, the culture that produced and used the instruments that surround her as well as the culture that buys and exhibits them as relics—she is here reduced to an object among objects. In Eakins' portrayal, consumer and consumable object fuse. The purposeful hands of the knitter of seventy years ago are transposed into the empty, idle fingers of Mrs. Frismuth, or into the marvelously rendered, elongated open hand resting in the lap of Susan Macdowell Eakins in *Lady With a Setter Dog* (ca. 1885). This prominent hand focuses the dejection inscribed in the defeated posture and hollow-eyed stare of the figure. (Eakins' wife sat for the painting, but this is a generalized figure; when the painter wishes to present an individualized image of Susan, he gives her name as the title of the work.) The "woman's" idle hand rests on a book open to a reproduction of a Japanese print, like those that were then the height of fashion in Europe and the United States. The juxtaposition of hand and print visualizes the failure of modern styles of work and consumption to meet the emotional needs of half of even the middle class population.

Addie Williams was a longtime friend of the Eakins family. Young Tom and his father hunted on her parents' property near Fairton, New Jersey, and from Paris he praised "pretty little" Addie to his sister Frances back home. Growing up and growing older, they kept in touch and in later years, realizing that Addie was alone and probably lonely, Thomas and Susan invited her to come to live with them.³⁷ During the year after this spinster-lady moved into the Eakins home, Thomas did two portraits of her, two of the most remarkable paintings of his career. In both he eliminates all background detail and brings the viewer in so close to the subject as to violate the woman's space. One of these works depicts the public person that Addie presented to the world: the restrained, dignified Victorian lady, square-shouldered, head erect, in control. The straight creases and folds of her black dress and the high prim collar that pushes all the way up to her chin mirror the containment of feeling expressed in the sharp, clearly defined lines of the nose and lips. The second portrait (Fig. 6) is an intimate revelation of the pain beneath the surface: Addie's head is inclined as if in weariness, her



Figure 6. *Addie* (detail), c. 1900. Oil on canvas, 24" x 18". Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Adeline Williams.

lips are gripped tight, and her eyes are moist. Red is the dominant color here, around the eyes, brighter on the lips, and prominent in the restless swirls that cover the dress. Michael Fried postulates that "Eakins's exploitation of red in the paintings of young women . . . may have served as a vehicle for extremities of feeling." Later, in the paragraph following his reference to this second portrait of Addie, he clarifies this remark: the recurrence of the color red in these portraits is "a sign of conflictedness."³⁸ The "conflictedness" concentrated in this image of Addie Williams appears to be that of someone on the verge of "hysteria," one for whom the strain to which Smith-Rosenberg refers has become too much at last. These two portraits of the same woman regarded as a kind of psycho-cultural double exposure, are, for me, Eakins' most penetrating analysis of what has been described as "the repressed emotion, the regret, the ongoing anxiety . . . with which women met modern life."³⁹

There are, of course, exceptions to these portrayals of men and women: *The Concert Singer* of 1892, for instance, represents a woman displaying her talent in the world. And there are difficulties in reading the iconography of Eakins' images of women. Notably these women were not public figures as were most of the men, whose lives and public statements can enrich the reading of the images; and there are fewer visual clues, fewer emblematic objects and less variety of gesture than in the images of men. But this very obscurity and reduction in the field of representation in the case of the women subjects suggests a world of narrowing possibility and constricted hope. And ultimately it is the surprisingly consistent repetition of poses, gestures, attitudes and expressions in Eakins' work that defines a "structure of signification" that remains a constant in the paintings from the early 1870s through the first decade of this century. Such structures, according to Clifford Geertz, organize the data "of inference and implication that are part of any symbolic act"; they translate acts of perception and portrayal into acts of symbolic representation, and, in Eakins' case, carry both ideological import and a criticism of the prevailing ideology.⁴⁰ The figures of men holding or surrounded by the tools or products of their work signify their instrumentality in and linear movement through the world. The erect postures and steady gazes of these men indicate a confidence that they can escape the particulars of time into the universal of progress and achievement. The women, on the other hand, are trapped in the particulars of time. Their aging faces, great piles of Victorian clothes and empty, idle hands symbolize the constriction and aridity of their lives. They are neither archetypal mother figures nor sensuous objects of delectation, and their depiction represents what may be the earliest statement by a white male artist in America of the perils of patriarchy.

This survey of an admittedly limited number of works has been intended to suggest that gender was an important explanatory-symbolic structure for Eakins, that he analyzed and criticized his culture in terms of the separate experiences of men and women. Throughout his long career he concentrated on the portrait, and, like his great Philadelphia predecessors Peale, Neagle and Sully, he transmuted the genre into a cultural document, manipulating sitters and setting to expose and

question prevailing attitudes and values, and ultimately he caught on canvas the ideology of as well as the doubts about a modern world in the making in his lifetime. "What moves us in [Eakins'] great work," in the opinion of Sylvan Schendler, "is the emotionally perceived identity of his world, and not its objective reality."⁴¹ What Eakins perceived in the white middle to upper-middle class culture of late-nineteenth-century America were the strains and anxieties that characterized the differing responses of men and women to the advent of modernity. In France during these same years, the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists were celebrating the brightness and movement of city life and the new bourgeois leisure activities, in many of which the sexes shared. There was an acceptance of the modern—an assertion of its revitalizing potential—of which Homer and Eakins, in this country, were incapable. Eakins' vision, in particular, was darker, subtler, and shot through with ambiguities; and his life work represents a composite portrait of a society divided in consciousness between the realms and activities of men and women, between the values of individualism and self-reliance and those of efficiency and conformity, and between the ethos of scientific and technological progress and the fear of losing an older world of thought and feeling. His sensibility was probing and critical rather than prophetic, and his contribution was a visual record of the cultural tensions and dislocations that troubled his time and that continue, in many ways, to trouble ours.

Notes

1. Jules David Prown, *American Painting: From its Beginnings to the Armory Show* (New York, 1980), 96.
2. Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1983)
3. See also David M. Lubin, *Act of Portrayal* (New Haven, 1985) for a detailed analysis of the visual and cultural complexities of Eakins *The Agnew Clinic*.
3. Letter to Early Shinn quoted in Gordon Hendricks, *The Life and Work of Thomas Eakins* (New York, 1974), p. 271.
4. Hendricks, *Life and Work*, 64.
5. Johns, *Eakins*, 40.
6. *Ibid.*, 33.
7. *Ibid.*, 38, nt.
8. *Turf, Field and Farm*, May 8, 1874, 302.
9. Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1974), 109.
10. E. C. Parry III, "The Gross Clinic as Anatomy Lesson and Memorial Portrait," *Art Quarterly* (Winter 1969), 382.
11. *Ibid.*, 58, 63.
12. Richard H. Shryock, *Medicine in America: Historical Essays* (Baltimore, 1966), 77.
13. *Ibid.*, 78.
14. Gordon Hendricks, "Thomas Eakins's *Gross Clinic*," *Art Bulletin* 51 (March 1969), 64.
15. Samuel D. Gross, *Then and Now: A Discourse introductory to the 43rd course of lectures in the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1867), 4.
16. Quoted in John Janvier Black, *Forty Years in the Medical Profession, 1858-1898* (Philadelphia, 1900), 94.
17. David M. Lubin, *Act of Portrayal*, 72.
18. Johns, *Eakins*, 54.
19. See Hendricks, *Eakins* for what little information we have on the Wood-Eakins relationship and for details on Eakins' trip to Dakota Territory and the work that resulted from this extended vacation, 172-9.
20. Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins: His Life and Work* (New York, 1933), 184.

21. William H. Truettner, "Dressing the Part: Thomas Eakins' *Portrait of Frank Hamilton Cushing*," *American Art Journal* 17 (Spring 1984), 50-2. Truettner's interpretation of the painting, to which I am indebted, differs from that of Elizabeth Johns, who writes of its subject that "Cushing as anthropologist was no longer a representative of the 'superior' civilization studying the 'primitive' civilization: he existed equally in both words" (Johns, *Eakins*, 159).
22. Leonard Baskin, quoted in Goodrich, *Eakins*, 170.
23. Undated letter to Shinn, quoted by Hendricks in *Life and Work*, 39-40.
24. Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago, 1987), 41.
25. Gordon Hendricks thinks that if Eakins forced Ella, as one relative put it, to put her hands on his "private parts," "it was possibly no more than Eakins' freedom about the human body in his teaching at the Art Students' league, where Ella was a student." *Eakins*, 236. Hendricks blames the self-righteous father for forcing his wife to shun her brother.
26. Letter to Emily Sartain, November 16, 1866, quoted by Hendricks in *Eakins*, 35.
27. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York, 1982). The Ewens estimate that by the 1890s, including indoor and outdoor garments, the average middle to upper-middle class woman was wearing twenty-five to thirty pounds of clothing. 147-8.
28. Goodrich, *Eakins*, 29.
29. Photograph reproduced in Hendricks *Eakins*, 202. The original is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
30. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), 199.
31. *Ibid.*, 215.
32. Photograph reproduced in Hendricks *Eakins*, 257. The original is in the collection of the author.
33. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire*, 147.
34. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York, 1981), 132.
35. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in The Gilded Age* (New York, 1978), 129.
36. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 159.
37. Hendricks, *Life and Work*, 76.
38. Fried, *Realism*, 46, 87.
39. Johns, *Eakins*, 167.
40. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York, 1973), 7-9.
41. Sylvan Schendler, *Eakins* (Boston, 1967), 22.