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Thomas Eakins (artist)

American, 1844 - 1916

The Biglin Brothers Racing, 1872

oil on canvas

Overall: 61.2 x 91.6 cm (24 1/8 x 36 1/16 in.)

framed: 74.9 x 105.7 x 5.4 cm (29 1/2 x 41 5/8 x 2 1/8 in.)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney
1953.7.1

[On View](#)

From the Tour: Homer and Eakins: American Painters in the Late 1800s Object 2 of 8

In the decade following the Civil War, rowing became one of America's most popular spectator sports. When its champions, the Biglin brothers of New York, visited Philadelphia in the early 1870s, Thomas Eakins made numerous paintings and drawings of them and other racers. Here, the bank of the Schuylkill River divides the composition in two. The boatmen and the entering prow of a competing craft fill the lower half with their immediate, large-scale presence. The upper and distant half contains a four-man rowing crew, crowds on the shore, and spectators following in flagdecked steamboats.

Himself an amateur oarsman and a friend of the Biglins, Eakins portrays John with his blade still feathered, almost at the end of his return motion. Barney, a split-second ahead in his stroke, watches for his younger brother's oar to bite the water. Both ends of the Biglins' pair-oared boat project beyond the picture's edges, generating a sense of urgency, as does the other prow jutting suddenly into view.

The precision of Eakins' style reflects his upbringing as the son of a teacher of penmanship. He studied under academic artists in Paris and traveled in Europe from 1866 to 1870. To further his understanding of anatomy, Eakins participated in dissections at Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College in 1872-1874.

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Thomas Eakins

The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake-Boat - 1873



Dialogue by Mark:

Today's Masters' Gallery painting is also a boat...not a whitewater kayak for Karl, but a long rowing boat called a racing scull. This great American masterpiece was painted over 100 years ago by Thomas Eakins. Our Crew Coach of art

history, Kim at KidsArt, discovered this painting for us at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The artist Thomas Eakins was born in Philadelphia in 1844. His father was a writing master who made beautiful hand-lettered documents like deeds and diplomas. When young Tom showed talent and interest in art, his Dad encouraged him and helped send him to special art schools.

Eakins learned many skills in order to become a great artist. He was especially interested in anatomy - the way human and animal bodies are put together. He did research on muscles and movement. He even studied at medical schools to learn more.

Eakins was a very careful artist. His pictures were put together slowly, with many sketches and test paintings. A model was placed in the exact pose each day, and Eakin's drawings could go on for many days. The Biglin brothers, who were famous racers of the time, may have modeled themselves for this portrait...sitting bent over as if they were pulling on the long oars of a boat while Eakins carefully painted. It must have been hard work for both the artist and the model, but it sure was worth it!

Text © Kim Solga, KidsArt 1999
Image courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

 [Masters' Gallery List](#)

 [KidsArt Home Page](#)

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WebMuseum, Paris



Eakins, Thomas

Eakins, Thomas (1844-1916). American painter. Eakins is regarded by most critics as the outstanding American painter of the 19th century and by many as the greatest his country has yet produced.

Photographs by [Mark Harden](#) and [Carol Gerten-Jackson](#).



- *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*
1871 (110 Kb); Oil on canvas, 82.6 x 117.5 cm (32 1/2 x 46 1/4 in); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



- *The Biglen Brothers Racing*
1873 (60 Kb); National Gallery of Art at Washington D.C.



- *Miss Van Buren*
c. 1886-90 (130 Kb); Oil on canvas, 113.1 x 81.3 cm (44 1/2 x 32 in); The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



- *Mary Adeline Williams*
1899 (10 Kb); Oil on canvas; The Art Institute of Chicago
-

Born in Philadelphia, he passed the major part of his life there with the exception of a period of training in Europe, 1866-70. He studied in Paris with [Gérôme](#), but learnt most from the Spanish painters [Velázquez](#) and Ribera, absorbing a precise and uncompromising sense for actuality which he applied to portraiture and genre pictures of the life of his native city (boating and bathing were favorite themes).

He began teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1876 and was attacked for his radical ideas, particularly his insistence on working from nude models. In 1886 he was forced to resign after allowing a mixed class to draw from a completely nude male model. Eakins's quest for realism led him to study anatomy and make full use of Muybridge's photographic researches, but the scientific bent in his work is of less importance than his honesty and depth of characterization. His portraits are often compared to [Rembrandt](#)'s because of their dramatic play of sombre lighting and sense of inner truth. The most famous of his paintings is *The Gross Clinic* (Jefferson Medical Coll., Philadelphia, 1875), which aroused controversy because of its unsparing depiction of surgery, an experience that was repeated with *The Agnew Clinic* (University of Pennsylvania, 1889).

Because of financial support from his father, Eakins could continue on his chosen course despite public abuse, but much of his later career was spent working in bitter isolation. It was only near the end of his life that he achieved recognition as a great master, and in the first two decades of the 20th century his desire to 'peer deeper into the heart of American life' was reflected in the work of the Ash-can School and other [Realist](#) painters.

As well as being a painter and photographer, Eakins also made a few sculptures. His wife, **Susan Hannah Macdowell Eakins** (1851-1938), whom he married in 1884, was also a painter and photographer, as well as an accomplished pianist.

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Thomas Eakins

American Artist

1844 - 1916: Birth – Philadelphia, PA - USA

- He was the most powerful figure painter of his time in America. [1870's]
- He was a leading painter of outdoor life scenes - REALISM.
- He was a great teacher.

His first **American paintings** were scenes of outdoor life in and around the city--**rowing on the Schuylkill River**, sailing and fishing on the Delaware River, **hunting** in the New Jersey marshes...

He had a great connection to his community and its people.

ROWING was a growing sport in America. Thomas loved the sport. He decided to sketch a series of 24 rowing paintings and finished in 4 years. [these were painted about 130 years ago]

The race between the **Biglin brothers** and **Coulter/Cavitt** turned into a sort of world championship of rowing.

The Biglins got a poor start in the race but swiftly surpassed the competitors and won.

Two paintings of that race were produced, ***The Biglin Brothers Racing*** and ***The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake***.



Thomas Eakins, The Biglin Brothers Racing, 1874



Thomas Eakins, The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake, 1873

The rowing pictures introduced Thomas Eakins to the artistic community.

WebMuseum, Paris



Realism

In the arts, the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life. Realism rejects imaginative idealization in favour of a close observation of outward appearances. As such, realism in its broad sense has comprised many artistic currents in different civilizations. In the visual arts, for example, realism can be found in ancient Hellenistic Greek sculptures accurately portraying boxers and decrepit old women. The works of such 17th-century painters as [Caravaggio](#), the Dutch genre painters, the Spanish painters José de Ribera, [Diego Velázquez](#), and [Francisco de Zurbarán](#), and the Le Nain brothers in France are realist in approach. The works of the 18th-century English novelists Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett may also be called realistic.

(1833). Conception de l'art, de la littérature, selon laquelle l'artiste ne doit pas chercher à idéaliser, à modifier le réel ou à en donner une image volontairement incomplète. --- REM. Le mot peut être soit péj. (reproduction morne et plate du réel, faite sans choix), soit laudatif (fidélité à la richesse du monde extérieur, opposée aux conventions et au formalisme; dévoilement du réel).

(En littérature). Le réalisme d'un récit, d'une description, d'un personnage. Réalisme psychologique, social. Réalisme et vérité, réalisme et vraisemblance. Le réalisme de Flaubert. --- Spécialt. (Hist. littér.). École littéraire française (Champfleury, Duranty, les Goncourt...) qui, vers 1850, préconisa (surtout dans le roman) la description minutieuse et objective de faits et de personnages tirés du réel, la mise en oeuvre d'une réalité banale et quotidienne.--- (En parlant d'autres écoles et tendances). Le réalisme naturaliste. cf Naturalisme. Le réalisme italien (cf VÉRISME), anglais, russe, du XIXe siècle. Réalisme critique, populiste.

"Cette opposition entre le dogme même du réalisme --- l'attention au banal --- et la volonté d'exister en tant qu'exception et personnalité précieuse eut pour effet d'exciter les réalistes au soin et aux recherches du style. Ils créèrent le style artiste. Ils employèrent à décrire les objets les plus ordinaires, parfois les plus vils, des raffinements, des égards, un travail, une vertu assez admirables; mais sans s'apercevoir qu'ils entreprenaient par là hors de leur principe, et qu'ils inventaient un autre «vrai», une vérité de leur fabrication, toute fantastique."

-- Valéry, *Variété, OE., Pl., t. I.*

"Le vrai réalisme consiste à montrer les choses surprenantes que l'habitude cache sous une housse et nous empêche de voir."

-- Cocteau, *Essai de critique indirecte.*

"Au sens où tout réalisme pictural naît contre une idéalisation, le réalisme littéraire, le naturalisme plus encore, étaient nés contre le personnage théâtral. Pas seulement

romantique ou classique; au coeur de l'homme, l'appel de tout réalisme était destructeur de celui du théâtre, aboutissait au roman. D'où le constant échec de ces réalismes au théâtre, à commencer par celui de Balzac et continuer par celui de Flaubert; alors que celui de Tchekhov, dépendance de la poésie, y réussit à merveille. Le théâtre contraignait à son réel le réalisme, qui vivait de son propre imaginaire."
-- Malraux, *L'Homme précaire et la Littérature*.

(En arts). Recherche d'une ressemblance entre l'oeuvre plastique et l'apparence du modèle qu'elle entend représenter; cette ressemblance (cf Hyperréalisme). Réalisme des contours, des couleurs, de la représentation spatiale (perspective). Le réalisme opposé à l'idéalisation, au formalisme, à l'abstraction (...) à l'[expressionnisme](#). --- Spécialt. École de peinture qui, en France, s'est opposée au [romantisme](#) et a précédé l'[impressionnisme](#). Le réalisme de [Courbet](#). --- Le réalisme au cinéma. Le réalisme dans le cinéma français (réalisme poétique des années trente), dans le cinéma italien (Néo-réalisme)...

"[...] les traits bien connus du ministre de Louis XIII, mais avec une intensité de vie, une affirmation de vérité, et, comme on dirait aujourd'hui, un réalisme bien rare dans les portraits de grands personnages, dont on reproduit plutôt le type officiel que l'expression intime."

-- Th. Gautier, *Souvenirs de théâtre, Collection d'Espagnac*.

"Il semble que tout art commence par la lutte contre le chaos, par l'abstrait ou le divin, jamais par la représentation de l'individuel; or tout réalisme conséquent se fonde sur l'individuel, et sa relation avec l'art qui le précède n'est pas équivoque : en tant qu'art, tout réalisme est une rectification."

-- Malraux, *les Voix du silence*, p. 299.

(1933). Réalisme socialiste : doctrine artistique faisant de l'art un instrument d'éducation et de propagande, fondé sur des normes de représentation «fidèle» de la réalité et (notamment en peinture) sur des techniques académiques. «En vérité, nous ne connaissons pas d'exemple historique de réussite artistique --- je veux dire de chef-d'oeuvre --- née du seul impératif politique. Le réalisme socialiste soviétique est le dernier exemple de l'échec patent de la formule» (Arts, juil. 1981).

(1960, P. Restany). Nouveau réalisme : mouvement artistique, influencé par les positions [dadaïstes](#), qui préconise la manifestation de la réalité moderne par des moyens transposés --- assemblages d'objets (Pop art); art cinétique --- et sans revenir à la représentation figurative.

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Thomas Eakins

American Artist	Realism	Race	Italy	Schuylkill River [skool-kill]
Biglin brothers	Rowing	Renaissance	24 in 4 years	1870's
Realism	24 in 4 years	FREE	Teacher	Dutch Netherlands
Rowing	Connection	Schuylkill River [skool-kill]	Realism	American Artist
1870's	Teacher	24 in 4 years	Race	Cut off his own ear



Thomas Eakins, The Biglin Brothers Racing, 1879