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The Paris Letters of Thomas Eakins

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Introduction

Thomas Eakins: *The Artist and His Letters*

I HAVE ALWAYS CONSIDERED THOMAS EAKINS (1844-1916) one of our greatest American artists. He skillfully captured the essence of the human image, placed it within a convincing space, and made it seem tangible in its reality. His best portraits are extraordinary not only because he mastered the conceptual and technical skills needed to make inert paint and canvas come alive but also because he discovered the sitter's most worthy personal traits, and recorded them vividly and in persuasive detail.

In his genre paintings, Eakins concentrated on life in the United States rather than rehashing worn-out European myths and allegories. His hunting, sailing, and rowing scenes reflect the pleasure he took in these commonplace sports while elevating them to a higher, more universal plane. The pictorial language he used was not particularly original, yet it differed from what he had been taught at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts during his student years in Paris. It was also allied to, but separate from, the American genre tradition of George Caleb Bingham, Winslow Homer, Eastman Johnson, and William Sidney Mount. His work often resembles theirs in subject, but more than any of them he derived his visual information directly and faithfully from nature.

For Eakins the nude human figure became a symbol of freedom, intellectual and sexual liberty, and opposition to narrow-minded prudery. His experiences as an art student in Paris reinforced this view. The French, especially within the high-spirited art community, were far less puritanical than the Americans back home. Eakins saw the nude not as a transcendent image, nor as an allegorical or traditional one: it was a marvel of nature, the superb end product of centuries of evolution. To see and study the body in this way, Eakins had to invoke all the authority of science, drawing endless analogies between medical and artistic practice.

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Eakins pursued his goals in art and life with unswerving determination. Not only did he work diligently to become an accomplished painter himself; as a teacher and administrator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he forcefully imposed his credo on his students. For some of them this was the right path, but for others, especially women, his teaching seemed unduly confined to the workings of the nude human body and little else.

Caring far less about his public reputation than about his freedom to paint and teach as he pleased, Eakins tenaciously held to his principles, no matter what the cost. His candor in regard to the nude led to his expulsion in 1886 from his position at the Pennsylvania Academy. This prevented him from having a beneficial influence in art education, tarnished his personal reputation, and exiled him from the social and art-political circles in Philadelphia where he had exerted considerable leadership. His uninhibited, often vulgar speech was considered boorish, and his stubborn, self-righteous behavior caused him to become an outcast. It is as though he thoroughly enjoyed offending the Philadelphia commercial aristocracy and the philistines who appreciated neither his ideas nor his art.

His masterful paintings and his creative process in producing them have become the subject of informative books and catalogs by art historians, biographers, and critics. Noteworthy are the writings of Lloyd Goodrich, Margaret McHenry, Elizabeth Johns, Sylvan Schendler, Kathleen Foster, Cheryl Leibold, Gordon Hendricks, Henry Adams, Sidney D. Kirkpatrick, and William McFeely. Through these volumes, and the present author's *Thomas Eakins, His Life and Art*, the artist's contributions became well-known to a wide audience. Indeed, it would seem that by now every facet of Eakins had been appropriately covered. But there is still a large body of Eakins material that has not been fully mined. I am referring to his personal correspondence, especially the voluminous letters to his family and friends written while he was an art student in Paris. I believe these student letters will prove to be an endless source of fascination to scholars and laypersons alike.

Abroad for nearly four years, 1866–70, Eakins wrote long, detailed letters. These provide full accounts of his daily life and artistic development. Perhaps his father, Benjamin Eakins, had asked this of him, just as he had required his son to write home once a week; or possibly the young Eakins found his new experiences so compelling that he felt a need to capture

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everything in words. Whatever the reason, his letters from Paris and Spain are wonderfully informative; they are a treasure trove of information, revealing much about his training, growth as an artist, and opinions of France and the French. He continued this kind of writing while living in Spain in 1869–70, and there also recorded trenchant observations in a pocket notebook that serves as a rare summary of his opinions on art and artists.

Eakins's letters are filled with narrative detail. His descriptions often go on for page after page, frequently without much focus or emphasis. These impressions are particularly fresh, bordering on wonderment, because they come from an American art student who was experiencing the pleasures of Paris for the first time. The city was teeming with activity; Napoleon III was emperor and brought the trappings of regal splendor to the office. The French nation was at the height of its power, and many of its citizens enjoyed unparalleled prosperity. Paris of the Second Empire presented Eakins with an astonishing panoply of cultural experiences.

Eakins's letters offer much besides biographical information and insight into the formation of his art. They answer fundamental questions about his psychological drives that have puzzled and challenged scholars in recent years. For some, like Michael Fried, David Lubin, and Henry Adams, Eakins seems to have been motivated by dark forces, tumultuous urges that he himself was unable to acknowledge. Others, like Foster and, most recently, Kirkpatrick, have taken a more objective position and sidestepped the riddles of Eakins's psyche. Read carefully, I think Eakins's letters, particularly those in the Charles Bregler collection in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, will help to settle many of the debates that have circulated around the artist's inner life and thus serve a useful purpose by telling us who Eakins was.

His father and Caroline, his mother, were the primary recipients of his correspondence. While Eakins was growing up they provided a normal, respectable, middle-class environment for him in Philadelphia, and he suffered no particular boyhood traumas or scars.

He seems to have loved and gotten along with his mother, a Quaker from southern New Jersey, but we have few details about their relationship. His father was a respected penman and writing master, steady and quietly successful in his work. Benjamin loved hunting, fishing, and outdoor sports, and through his father Eakins was indoctrinated into these activities, which he apparently enjoyed as much as Benjamin did. There

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seems to have been an undercurrent of Quaker rectitude and morality in the Eakins clan. Achievement and hard work were valued by both the parents and children, of which there were three besides Thomas, all girls: Fanny, Maggie, and Caddy. He wrote to them regularly, especially Fanny.

A close relationship existed between Eakins and Fanny, who seemed to be his intellectual equal—and that is saying a great deal. His letters to her were filled with such things as linguistic analysis, the art and science of music, and the fine points of Dante’s poetry. Eakins wrote that Fanny was “superior to any girl I know” (April 1, 1869). From all we can gather, she was, like her brother, both intelligent and artistic. She did not take up painting but rather found her niche in playing the piano, an instrument she took seriously, not as a dilettante.

Eakins enjoyed his companionship with all of his sisters, but Maggie was a particular favorite because she shared so many of his interests. Like her brother, she engaged in sports, and apparently was quite good at sailing and ice skating. Goodrich points out that “temperamentally she was like [Eakins] in independence, hardiness, and mental vigor.”¹

Another object of Eakins’s affection was Emily Sartain, daughter of the noted engraver John Sartain, a family friend. She was three years older than Thomas, and like him, was an artist, read Dante in the original with him, and could correspond with him in Italian. For reasons that are unclear, their romantic relationship cooled while Eakins was a student in Paris, though they did remain friends in later years.

Eakins frequently corresponded with Emily’s brother, William, who also studied art in Paris. They were close friends and lived together during their student days. Another major correspondent was William Crowell, a classmate of Thomas’s at Central High School, and a friend and future husband of Eakins’s sister Fanny.

There were others—family and friends—who received letters from Eakins, but they were fewer in number than those just enumerated. Wherever possible, these lesser figures will be identified in an introductory note or footnote to the letter in question.

In regard to the publication of his letters, Eakins has been shortchanged when compared to other American artists. For example, we have editions of letters by George Inness, J. Alden Weir, and John Marin, as well as the correspondence between John Sloan and Robert Henri. Eakins certainly ranks with these artists, but an edition of his letters has not yet appeared. Fortunately, the publication of excerpts from Eakins’s letters as integral

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parts of the books by Goodrich, McHenry, Hendricks, and Kirkpatrick has in part addressed the situation—but not enough. This volume will hopefully fill the gap.

A major step toward this publication was Foster and Leibold's *Writing about Eakins*, issued in 1989. Their volume is concerned with the Eakins manuscript material in the Charles Bregler collection, acquired by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1985, as noted above. This remarkable collection gathered by one of Eakins's former students includes not only paintings, drawings, and photographs but also numerous letters and manuscripts. Some of the written material was published by Foster and Leibold in 1989; some was not. (A limited microform edition of letters and related manuscripts, now out of print, was issued in connection with their book.)

Although the Bregler collection is important, it does not tell the full story. There are other repositories of letters that round out the picture, among them the regular (non-Bregler) collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Archives of American Art, and the Dietrich Collection. Other institutions, dealers, and collectors hold significant numbers of letters, too.

One of the most interesting discoveries in recent years has been the lost "halves" of a group of Eakins letters in the Archives of American Art. When the original letters were divided between two different Crowell family members, some of them were physically separated about halfway through each letter. The remaining portions came to light and fortunately were photocopied before they were lost.

My goal has been to publish all of Eakins's letters and collateral writings, major and minor, from the years 1866 through 1870. This involved a decision to print not only the long letters but also the brief ones. At first glance, the latter type of material might seem irrelevant and not worth including. Nevertheless, I believe even the slightest written expression may tell us something intriguing or unexpected about its author.

A choice had to be made as to whether to print Eakins's occasional misspellings and omissions of words. I decided to leave the idiosyncrasies just as they were, without changes, because they, too, reveal something about the writer.

Where information about the recipient of an Eakins letter is needed, I have provided it in an introductory sentence or brief paragraph or two. Whenever a personality, place, or event cited in the letters is not gener-

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ally known, I have offered more information in brackets and/or a footnote keyed to the subject matter of the letter. Birth and death dates are provided where relevant.

I have been involved in research, writing, and lecturing on Eakins and his work for more than forty years. My first public remarks on the artist date from the early 1960s and focused on his contribution to the scientific method, particularly the photography of motion. Eakins was the subject of journal articles and scholarly papers that I presented over the years, and I taught graduate seminars on Eakins on a regular basis at the University of Delaware. My 1976 seminar contributed materially to the exhibition of the Thomas Eakins Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC. My graduate students and I became deeply involved in this project, and a considerable portion of the research for the catalog was done by the Delaware group working under the joint direction of myself and Phyllis Rosenzweig of the Hirshhorn Museum. During the fall semester of 1979, I repeated my Eakins seminar. This time, the research that my students and I did led to a 1980 exhibition, with a catalog titled *Eakins at Avondale and Thomas Eakins: A Personal Collection*, for the Brandywine River Museum.

The concept for a book of Eakins's early correspondence developed as I was conducting research for the Brandywine River Museum exhibition. Studying Eakins material in this connection convinced me that such a publication was long overdue. Thus, in 1979 I started to assemble photocopies and transcriptions of the artist's letters and other writings, and began research on many of the personalities mentioned therein.

The partial fruits of this labor came to light in my essay "Eakins as a Writer," published in the exhibition catalog *Thomas Eakins* issued in 2001 by the Philadelphia Museum of Art for its exhibition of that same name.

During the ensuing years I have worked diligently to complete this project. Originally my plan was to include all of Eakins's letters, but as I labored it became clear that this would need to be a two-volume effort. I chose for the present edition all of Eakins's student letters. These are the most numerous, interesting, and revealing documents from his hand. A smaller future edition will cover letters from 1870, the year of his return to Philadelphia, to the last letter penned by him in 1915, the year before his death. It will also include the few letters dictated by him to his wife, Susan, during his terminal illness.

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It is my hope that scholars and lay readers alike will share my enthusiasm for these insightful and illuminating writings. It has been my pleasure to assemble this edition for publication, and I look forward to producing the companion volume in the coming years.

1. Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins, His Life and Work* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1933), 38.