



m: History in the Art of

THOMAS EAKINS.



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# Beyond Realism: History in the Art of Thomas Eakins



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Abstract

Art historians often associate Thomas Eakins's realist depictions of modern life with the artist's most rational tendencies. In these images, Eakins's scrutiny of his subjects seems to verge on the scientific. Consequently, many of these works have been studied in terms of Eakins's devotion to understanding and replicating the tangible world around him, marshalling as evidence the artist's meticulous methods of preparation, his scrupulous study of anatomy, and his literal use of photographs. The sense that Eakins's creativity was always bounded by reason has contributed to the canonization of these modern life subjects. While

these images reinforce the notion of Eakins's almost scientific faith in the real, they do not include many of the works that the artist deemed most important. Concurrent with these modern life subjects, Eakins also completed works that engage with historical subject matter. Although these images have often been dismissed as unimportant to Eakins's career, the artist numbered many of them among his best. Ranging from his colonial revival subjects of the 1870s and 80s to his reprisal of William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River in 1908, the historical works span the length of his career and engage in a dialogue with his more familiar realist images. This dissertation examines how in each decade of his career, Eakins used historical subject matter to assert his most deeply-held professional beliefs. A complex amalgam of tradition and modernity, each of these historical themes relates to Eakins's creation of a professional identity as an artist. I explore how Eakins's consciousness of the art historical tradition specifically influenced these works as well as guided the trajectory of his career. With respect to this tradition, Eakins believed that life study and hard work bound all great artists together past, present, and future. Eakins advanced this notion by his insistent placement of the historical works in major venues alongside his powerful images of doctors and rowers. In his desire to become part of the art historical tradition himself, Eakins hoped that his historical subjects would continue to speak for him after his death.

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