
COOPER, HELEN A. *Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996. Pp. 140. Notes, illustrations, selected bibliography, list of works in exhibition. \$30.00 cb., \$20.95 pb.

In the early 1970s, artist Thomas Eakins, probably best known for his startlingly realistic portrait *The Gross Clinic* (1875), transformed his personal passion for the sport of rowing into an artistic subject. Over the course of four years, the young artist produced some thirty works depicting rowing scenes. Consisting of oil paintings, watercolors, and drawings, Eakins's rowing works were displayed together for the first time in 1996, under the curatorship of Helen A. Cooper of the Yale University Art Gallery. The catalogue for this exhibition, *Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures*, presents five scholarly essays dealing with this important collection. Although questions of artistic production and technique predominate among the essays, readers interested in sport history will also find historical information on rowing and a brief cultural analysis of Eakins's treatment of the sporting subjects. More importantly, however, the high quality reproductions of Eakins's works offer sport historians valuable evidence of this popular activity.

The volume opens with two essays by Cooper, the first presenting biographical information on Eakins. The second, "Rowing in the Art and Life of Thomas Eakins," addresses several major works—*The Champion Single Sculls* (1871), *The Pair-Oared Shell* (1872), *The Biglin Brothers Racing* (1872), *The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake* (1873), *The Oarsmen* (1873), *John Biglin in a Single Scull* (1873), *The Schreiber Brothers* (1874), and *Oarsmen on the Schuylkill* (1874). Drawing upon the work of sport historians and nineteenth-century newspaper accounts, the essay outlines the rise of rowing as a sport through the period. One widely publicized event, a three-day regatta held in June 1867 on the Schuylkill River in Eakins's native Pennsylvania, culminated in the triumph of his boyhood friend, Max Schmitt, in the single scull competition. Eakins took this win as the subject of his first rowing painting. For each picture, Cooper provides detailed background information on the subject depicted, such as an individual rower like John Biglin or a specific competition like the May 1872 pair-oared race that pitted John and Barney Biglin against the team of Henry Coulter and Lewis Cavitt for a \$2,000 purse. She interrogates the composition of each work, analyzing the placement and orientation of figures and the use of light, color, and perspective, and she assesses the critical response to each work. In closing, Cooper asserts that these depictions of athletic concentration and performance attest to Eakins's belief in a particularly American ethic—"in their pursuit of excellence, their drive to break old boundaries, and their commitment to hard work" (p. 78).

Essays by Amy B. Werbel, "Perspective in Thomas Eakins' Rowing Pictures," and Christina Currie, "Thomas Eakins Under the Microscope: A Technical Study of the Rowing Paintings," focus on technical aspects of the production of the paintings. Both ask how Eakins managed to create images of such intense realism—so intense, in fact, that art historians have identified the specific location, season, and time of day depicted in many of the works. Werbel explicates Eakins's painstaking use of mathematics and descriptive geometry to plot figures on

perspective grids while Currie uses microscopic analysis to reveal Eakins's methods for transferring the perspective drawings to canvas and applying paint.

The final essay, Martin A. Berger's "Painting Victorian Manhood," exemplifies how the rowing paintings can be interrogated as cultural texts, in this case asking how they participated in constructions and perceptions of manhood in the late 1870s. Berger argues that from Eakins's own self-doubts about his ability to achieve various "'milestones' of manhood," particularly self-support (his father supported him for many years), sprang subjects, choices, and compositional decisions replete with concerns about masculinity and attempts to identify with manly pursuits and attributes. While the rowing subjects celebrate male athleticism, the depictions, Berger continues, query the relationship between masculine intellectual and physical activity while paradoxically reinstating "feminine" attention to detailed realism. Although Berger's conjectures are intriguing, his locating of gender anxiety wholly in the personal realm and his reductionist model of polarized gender constructs obscure the critical cultural consequences of Eakins's (and others') negotiation of masculine power through demonstrations of athleticism.

Produced by art historians, these essays offer readers interested in sport history general information on the sport as well as expert guidance on how to visually appreciate the paintings. Such readers are left, however, with a number of questions: How did these representations of individual and team effort, athleticism, competition, and achievement contribute to developing ideas about these sports? How did they engage with and function within a society increasingly captivated by sporting events? For sport historians the most valuable aspect of *Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures* is likely to be the questions raised and the evidence provided by the illustrations themselves. All of the major paintings, details, technical drawings, and preliminary sketches are presented in half-page, full-color reproductions on high-quality glossy paper. A number of black and white contextualizing images appear also, including photographs of athletes and lithographs and engravings of events. Given Eakins's quest for realism and passion for sport, these illustrations offer abundant historical evidence of rowing as both an individual pastime and a social activity during the 1870s.

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