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‘Consummatum est . . .’: A Reassessment of Thomas Eakins’s Crucifixion of 1880

Elizabeth Milroy

When Thomas Eakins first exhibited his Crucifixion in 1882, critics condemned the painting’s startling realism as wholly inappropriate to the sacred subject. But Eakins obviously considered the painting to be important and persisted in sending it to public exhibitions throughout the United States until his death in 1916. Since then, Eakins’s biographers have treated the painting as an anomaly. Echoing comments of the nineteenth-century popular press, they have dismissed it as an objective study with no religious connotation. But, in fact, Eakins’s Crucifixion is an informed adaptation of important European sources. It was with The Crucifixion, his largest narrative canvas, that Eakins proved his ability to produce a major history painting in the European tradition, specifically the academic French tradition in which he had trained for three years. This painting is the nexus of Eakins’s oeuvre, the “reception piece” with which he demonstrated a mature academician’s high level of technical expertise and sophisticated understanding of literary and artistic sources.

At exhibitions in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia in 1882, Thomas Eakins shocked audiences with a new and puzzling painting: The Crucifixion (Fig. 1). Exhibition reviewers in all three cities recognized Eakins’s masterly rendering of the male nude but judged his realism more suitable to an art-school classroom than a religious subject. Yet such criticism in the popular press did not discourage Eakins, or his colleagues among exhibition organizers, who continued to accept The Crucifixion for public display.1 As late as 1915, the year before his death, Eakins sent The Crucifixion to the Panama-Pacific Exposition at San Francisco. And in 1927, the artist’s widow, Susan Eakins, stipulated in her bequest to the Philadelphia Museum of Art that this painting and over sixty of Eakins’s other works be made permanently accessible to a public audience.2

Though Eakins obviously regarded this painting highly, modern biographers have given The Crucifixion only cursory treatment. In his 1933 monograph — the first book-length study of Eakins’s career — Lloyd Goodrich noted that Eakins may have wanted to attempt a subject painted “by all the old masters,” but he also stated that Eakins was probably motivated to paint The Crucifixion primarily for pedagogical reasons. Goodrich claimed that Eakins was an agnostic; and he described The Crucifixion as simply “an objective study of a human being in his last moments; the irony is probably conscious; of religious feeling there is hardly a trace.”3 Subsequent writers, including Goodrich himself in his 1983 revision of the Eakins biography, have echoed this statement. The Crucifixion is called an academic exercise warranting only superficial analysis: “. . . far from having a religious connotation, [it] merely afforded [Eakins] the opportunity to paint a male nude made respectable by its old master references and religious symbolism.”4 Because modern biographers characterize Eakins’s work and career in general as independent of, even antagonistic to the European “old master” tradition, they have treated The Crucifixion as an anomaly. No attempt has been made to integrate The Crucifixion into Eakins’s oeuvre. Indeed, the painting was omitted altogether from the major retrospective exhibition of Eakins’s work organized at Philadelphia in 1982.5

The Crucifixion is Eakins’s only religious piece. It is also

I am especially grateful to Joseph W. Reed, who generously gave his time and wise counsel during the critical late stages of manuscript preparation. Many thanks also to Ellen G. D’Oench, Elizabeth Johns, Phoebe Lloyd, John Paolletti, Darrel Sewell, and Paul F. Watson. This article is dedicated to the late Lloyd Goodrich.

1 During the thirty-six years between the painting’s creation in 1880 and Eakins’s death, he sent it to exhibitions in New York (1882), Philadelphia (1882), Chicago (1882 and the Columbian Exposition), Detroit (1883), New Orleans (1884), Louisville (1886), Pittsburgh (1900), St. Louis (1904 Louisiana Purchase), and San Francisco (1915 Panama-Pacific). In 1910, after hearing that the Metropolitan Museum was buying American pictures, Eakins wrote to Bryson Burroughs, Curator of Painting at the museum. Stating that he had always felt “inadequately represented in the Metropolitan,” Eakins offered The Crucifixion as his “representative” work. The offer was declined. Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives; Goodrich, ii, 265.

2 Susan Eakins specified her wishes in correspondence with Fiske Kimball and Henri Marceau. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

3 L. Goodrich, Thomas Eakins: His Life and Works, New York, 1933, 105.


his largest narrative canvas. In composition as well as scale, *The Crucifixion* relates more closely to Eakins's portraits than to his narrative pieces. But his very specific description of the dead Christ is more forthright and disconcerting than any of his portraits. Eakins portrayed the uncompromisingly naked Christ at life-size and set the figure immediately at the picture plane to confront the viewer. Christ is alone, suspended on a cross set diagonally into a narrow gray-brown strip of landscape, the cross rising against a lime-white sky. Christ's head falls forward into deep shadow; his hands clench in rigor mortis around the nails driven into his palms. His distended torso is bleached by the acrid light emanating from the upper left and by the efflux of blood into his legs, which have turned purple and raw. No wonder exhibition-goers turned away from the image in horror.

But Eakins's *Crucifixion* should not be judged according to popular reaction or the comments of contemporary critics. Rather, we should search for the artist's intention in Eakins's own statement — the work itself. We must ask why Eakins selected so powerful a subject as the Crucifixion of Christ if his intention were only to paint the strictly "objective study of a human being in his last moments."

Of all his major works, *The Crucifixion* advertises most pointedly that Thomas Eakins did not work independent of the European tradition. He was a product of the teaching ateliers of Paris and he maintained allegiance to this training even after returning to the United States. *The Crucifixion* was his most emphatic declaration of that allegiance and, as such, it occupies a significant place in Eakins's early career.

Paintings of the solitary Christ on the Cross silhouetted against the sky were a common type, one that was especially popular in Catholic Europe during the seventeenth century. Among the most celebrated examples of the type of the expired Christ, his head fallen forward into the shadow of death, was Velázquez's canvas of 1632. Eakins studied it when he visited the Prado in 1869 (Fig. 2). Even closer to Eakins's composition, however, is Rubens's small *Christ on the Cross* of 1612-15 in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. Eakins would have seen this painting when he stopped in the German city while touring Europe in the summer of 1868 (Fig. 3). In contrast to the iconic frontality of the Velázquez, Rubens turned the crucifix on a diagonal to pull the viewer toward the solitary Christ, here adapting a narrative device more commonly used in wider views of Golgotha that incorporated the figures of the two Maries, Saint John, and other attendants. Rubens's composition was in turn an important source for countless subsequent treatments of the solitary Christ. In Paris Eakins could have seen many examples of this Crucifixion type, most notably one of the most celebrated nineteenth-century paintings of the Crucifixion, Delacroix's *Christ on the Cross* of 1846 (Fig. 4).

But Eakins's informed adaptation of European sources did not produce a painting acceptable to the majority of Americans. His *Crucifixion* sparked controversy wherever it was exhibited. The forward-thinking Society of American Artists at first rejected the painting for their Fifth Annual exhibition in New York, but this and other decisions by the Society's hanging committee prompted several artists to protest, and *The Crucifixion* was included in the supplementary exhibition that followed. Eakins then sent the picture to Chicago to be exhibited at the annual Industrial Fair in the autumn of 1882. After this the painting returned to Philadelphia where (again after some discussion), it was hung in the 53rd Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy.

Critics called Eakins's painting too real and too stark. "Nobody, so far as we can learn, is moved by [the painting] to do more than comment on the artist's technical skill, or to criticize some of his details," wrote a reviewer for *The

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7 Eakins's visit to Madrid and the Prado in early December of 1869 is recounted in letters to his father and in a personal diary, now known as the "First Spanish Sketchbook"; see Charles Bregler's *Thomas Eakins Collection*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (hereafter Bregler, PAFA). On the theme of Christ "with no place to rest his head," see J. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*, Kortrijk, 1979, 167-170.

8 Eakins was accompanied on this tour by his father and younger sister Frances (or "Fanny"). In her travel diary, Frances records that the trio spent two days in Munich where they visited "the fine picture gallery containing Rembrandt, Rubens & Murillo & other fine paintings." And in a letter of 24 August 1868 to his mother from Munich, Thomas Eakins wrote that: "We went to see pictures here and we found some Spanish pictures here that I never knew of & which were very beautiful." But he thought the German pictures and statues "not much compared with those of other nations."

9 Nineteenth-century examples of this diagonal format, both for representations of the living Christ crucified and the dead Christ, are innumerable. Eakins's teacher Leon Bonnat owned a small *Crucifixion* incorrectly attributed to Rembrandt that depicts Christ on the Cross at a diagonal. The painting is now in the Musée Bonnat at Bayonne. Eakins may also have known of Prud'hon's late *Le Christ expirant sur la Croix* of 1822, painted for the cathedral of Metz and later acquired by the Louvre. And though by 1880 the Delacroix was still in a French private collection, Eakins could have known the picture through photographs made as early as 1853. See L. Johnson, *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix*, Oxford, 1986, 111, 220-221.

10 According to the hanging committee of the Society, Eakins's painting and several others were rejected because there was insufficient space to hang them in the American Art Gallery spaces. See "Art Notes. The Society of American Artists," *Art Journal*, viii, 1882, 190.

11 Eakins's painting was received by the Academy for deposit on 25 October 1882, two days after the 53rd Annual opened. The painting remained on deposit there until July 1886, when Susan Eakins asked that the painting she called *Ecce Homo* be forwarded for exhibition in Louisville. This was six months after Eakins's resignation as Director of Schools. See the letter from Susan Eakins to George Corliss, 14 July 1886. PAFA.
Art Amateur, who then asked:

Should the legs and feet be so full of blood while the rest of the body is so vacated? Should the hand be so constricted? Could the face in nature be so concealed? Is the shadow on the left shoulder darker than it should be? These and other such questions one hears, but such questions belong to the studio or to the class-room, not to the presence of a completed work of art.12

Eakins's commitment to a realist idiom and his obsessive attention to detail were generally applauded by the American critical press. But he was also known as a daring innovator who was notorious for testing the limits of propriety in his art and in his teaching. Eakins created images that no critic could condone, yet which no critic could ignore. Critics often found themselves at a loss simply to explain why Eakins painted his pictures.

Long before he sent The Crucifixion to exhibition, Eakins was known as "an artist who is apt to astonish and to irritate by his assertion of a very unique individuality."13 He had courted controversy as early as 1876, when his Gross Clinic was rejected by the Fine Arts Committee of the Centennial Exhibition as too brutal a subject for public display. In 1879, he sent the portrait of the surgeon to the Society of American Artists. Again, critics and public reviled "one of the most powerful, horrible and yet fascinating pictures that has been painted anywhere in this century."14 A reviewer in The New York Times called it "a violent and bloody scene," and suggested that Eakins "had no conception of where to stop in art, of how to hint a horrible thing if it must be said, of what the limits are between the beauty

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of the nude and the indecency of the naked." 15 Many critics explained The Gross Clinic away by calling it a clinical study.

Even the placid study of William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill disconcerted visitors to the Society of American Artists Annual in 1878. They called it an ugly picture. A bemused William Clark, who thought Eakins's canvas a superior work, recounts the debate among exhibition-goers:

One person objects to the subject; another allows the subject, but thinks that the artist might, with advantage, have treated it in a different manner; a third permits that

the workmanship is clever, very clever, but suggests that it lacks refinement; a fourth concedes the refinement, but disputes the color-quality; and so on and so forth. 16

By 1882, American critics and the public were not accustomed to Eakins's controversial images. But again he caught them unprepared. When confronted with The Crucifixion, reviewers searched for meaning in Eakins's well-known commitment to life study in his teaching. A writer for The Art Journal welcomed the "discussion" provoked by Eakins's painting, but regretted the artist's choice of subject. Suggesting that "Mr. Eakins' studies in anatomy probably led him to undertake the work," this writer urged, "in deference to a large part of the public, that the artist who undertakes anything of the kind should endeavor to present it in a reverential light. . . . Mr. Eakins, on the other hand, paints as a student of the human body." 17

A reviewer for The Chicago Tribune was blunter:

. . . Thomas Eakins's Crucifixion is a large canvas representing a horrible form of death in a most ghastly and horrible manner, and it may well be doubted whether such a picture serves any good purpose outside of the classroom of an art school. The only emotion inspired is one of horror at so grim and pitiless a representation of torture and death. Whether the work is well done technically or not is hardly worth considering; one does not care to examine it closely enough to find out. 18

"We are told," wrote The Art Amateur reviewer, "that Mr. Eakins painted his picture out of doors, his model having been suspended on a cross erected on the roof of the artist's house in Philadelphia." Eakins's model was J. Laurie Wallace, a senior student at the Pennsylvania Academy and a close friend of the artist, who appears in several of Eakins's paintings and photographs from the late 1870's and early 1880's (Fig. 5). 19 Wallace later recalled that he accompanied Eakins to a secluded spot in the New Jersey countryside where they set up a mock cross against which Wallace posed while Eakins made sketches. Eakins subsequently set up the cross again on the roof of his Philadelphia row house and strapped Wallace to the cross while working on the final canvas. 20

Emory Albright recalled the story of Wallace's posing "all but nailed to the cross during the operation," in "Memories of Thomas Eakins," Harper's Bazaar, LXXXI, August 1947, 184.

Later in the century, many European and American photographers used live models to compose episodes from Christ's Passion: best known was F. Holland Day, who himself posed for the figure of Christ for photographs of the Crucifixion, Entombment, and his celebrated Seven Last Words of Christ. Controversy similar to that which had greeted Eakins's Crucifixion twenty years earlier erupted when Day exhibited these photographs at the Philadelphia Photographic Salons of 1898, 1899, and 1900. One critic called Day's Christ on the Cross an "intolerably silly" departure from good taste. See C. Caffin, "The Philadelphia Photographic Salon," Harper's Weekly, 4 November 1899, 118; cited in E. Jussim, Slave to Beauty: The Eccentric Life and Controversial Career of F. Holland Day, Boston, 1981, 120-135. Even if Day had not seen Eakins's painting, he must have heard the story of Wallace's posing, for he was a frequent visitor to Philadelphia and his aesthetic interests paralleled those of Eakins.
A full-scale oil sketch of the head and shoulders of Christ now at the Hirshhorn Museum may well document the men's initial trek into the New Jersey countryside, for the features of the face, rendered in sharp foreshortening, resemble those of Wallace (Fig. 6). The emphatic contrast of light and shadow suggests that the sketch was made under direct sunlight and that Eakins was endeavoring to record the quality of light across the body at a particular time of day. Even so, Eakins arranged his model with head bowed and in deep shadow to accord with a traditional format.21

Such allusions to tradition did not relieve the apprehensions of contemporary critics and public, many of whom were as much (if not more) disconcerted by Eakins's choice of subject matter. "No doubt Mr. Eakins would spare no pains to be correct," the writer continued, "and no doubt we may trust implicitly to what he tells us about a body so suspended as we see this one, but there is nothing artistic in this realism because it does not stir any noble emotion."22 This writer and most of his peers saw only the simple and explicit study of a male nude, unleavened by the moral sentiment expected of any religious theme.

The reactions of Eakins's critics were typical of Protestants confronted by the explicitness of a Catholic image. If religious subjects were to be attempted at all, they should be idealized, "the physical aspect of the case sunk; [because] the mere presentation of a human body suspended from a cross and dying a slow death under an Eastern sun cannot do anybody any good, nor awaken thoughts that elevate the mind." Eakins's explicitly rendered male nude in the guise of Christ communicated nothing to his audience.23

Even sympathetic reviewers were disturbed by Eakins's portrayal. The noted critic Mariana van Rensselaer, reviewing the Fifth Annual of the Society of American Artists for The American Architect & Building News in 1882, praised it:

... knowing Mr. Eakins's love for the actual rather than the imaginative side of art and his consummate anatomical science, one expected in a Crucifixion from his hand a sombre though perhaps forcibly-illuminated picture, and a realistic study of death and agony. This last we have found; but combined with it not little unexpected pathos.

But she also admitted to some difficulty in articulating the suitability of Eakins's interpretation, "so strong, so repulsive in some ways, yet so deeply pathetic, partly by reason, perhaps, of that very repulsiveness."24

Six months later, when the painting was on view at the Pennsylvania Academy, William Clark, a personal friend of Eakins, praised the painting but qualified his support of the artist's uncompromising realism:

... Whether or no Mr. Eakins's picture is not approved, in comparison with other treatments of the subject, would appear to depend upon whether the spectator has ever conceived, or is willing to conceive, of the Crucifixion as an event which actually occurred under certain understood conditions. Certainly, if that event meant all that Christendom believes and has for centuries believed it to mean, it would seem that, if it is to be represented

21 Rosenzweig, 91-92. It is more than likely that Eakins also photographed Wallace during the exterior posing sessions. At this point in his career, Eakins had begun to rely increasingly on the camera's eye to assist him in the placement of figures within the picture plane. Recently discovered photographic studies for The Pathetic Song, a work of 1880 exhibited at many of the same exhibitions as The Crucifixion, document that in this case Eakins in fact copied the painted composition directly from his photographs. Unfortunately, no such studies relating to The Crucifixion have been found.

22 Ibid.

23 The Art Amateur, June 1882, 2.

in their church interiors and so there was little call for devotional painting and sculpture. Art works with a religious intent were produced in America, but these typically were external to the church proper (as in the case of gravestones) or were generalized biblical narratives or allegorical pieces intended for a secular setting, such as Edward Hicks's numerous versions of *The Peaceable Kingdom.*

American writers frequently invoked the powerful symbolism of the Cross in prose and poetry, but nineteenth-century American artists seldom portrayed it. When it did appear, the Cross functioned as an emblem, not a devotional object. Thomas Cole was almost alone in his repeated use of the Cross set within a landscape to denote the contrast between the eternity of the spirit and temporality of nature. Indeed, Cole's frequent depictions of the Cross were so unusual that the authors of memorial landscape paintings dedicated to Cole after his premature death included a cross as a symbol of Cole himself. But Thomas Eakins painted the Cross as the specific instrument of Christ's execution.

Even rarer were representations of the history of Christ's Passion. Singular examples produced by Jacob Haidt during the eighteenth century describe the particular devotion to the Passion practiced by the pietist Moravian Brethren group to which Haidt belonged. And though the painter William Dunlap exhibited three episodes from the Passion in the 1820's, by his own admission Dunlap kept the crucified Christ far in the background. In general, American artists were disinclined to treat the imagery of Christ's Passion. Again, this tendency was not shared by American poets and novelists, who frequently included Passion imagery in their works. Thomas Eakins need have gone no further than the poetry of Walt Whitman, who used the Crucifixion to embody love and tenderness.

It is true that during the 1870's many Episcopal congregations commissioned complex and sometimes quite Catholic decoration of their churches. By 1878, Clarence levels of Christ's nature - lover, comforter, redeemer, philosopher - corresponded with levels within the poet's own character, as he saw it.

In *Democratic Vistas,* Whitman identified Christ "with bent head, brooding love and peace like a dove," as a type of the true artist who could create works of art that reached at the ultimate moral purpose of existence: the consciousness of the soul and comprehension of eternity. America's artists were superficial, said Whitman, because, like her people, they shuddered at the thought of death. The poet set them a challenge then, when he declared that the future of America would rest in her ability to produce poets who could surpass their predecessors in composing great poems of death. Was Eakins's painting of Christ crucified, rendered with painstaking science and love, a response to Whitman's call for an American poetry of death? For Whitman's treatment of the Crucifixion, see J.E. Miller, "'Song of Myself' as Inverted Mystical Experience," *Publications of the Modern Language Association,* lxx, 1955, 636-661, and R. Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman...*, 2 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1960, ii, 133-135.

Although Eakins's close friendship with Whitman dates from the later 1880's, he certainly was aware of the poet's work prior to this. For Whitman's memories of meeting Eakins, and sitting for his portrait, see H. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden,* 5 vols., New York, 1914, v, 155-156. For a discussion of Eakins's artistic indebtedness to Whitman, see Johns, 144-169.
Cook celebrated the fact that art was finally being “restored to her rightful place and allowed to take her ancient part in the adornment of the temple.”\(^{31}\) But the images produced for these new decorative projects were of a generalized, nondenominational character. This was especially the case in representations of Christ, wherein artists preferred to treat themes abstracted from Christ’s teaching rather than more anecdotal episodes from his ministry.\(^{32}\) Any references to the Crucifixion typically took the form of decorative crucifixes, designed as embellishment of the environment within which one worshipped, not as devotional images through which doctrine was made explicit to the viewer.\(^{33}\)

In Protestant theology, especially among evangelicals, the greatest emphasis is placed on personal experience of faith. In the absence of a formal liturgy, each believer turns inward to confront his or her own sins and redemption. Devotional images are considered unnecessary. And though many nineteenth-century Protestants recognized the simple cross as a powerful symbol for conversion, they also regarded Christ as too holy a subject for artistic treatment. Some thought it sacrilege even to attempt to recreate Christ’s physical appearance, much less his final suffering.\(^{34}\) They would also have discouraged even distant reference to the doctrine of transubstantiation, which Roman Catholics saw in the sacrifice of the Mass.

It was this prevailing attitude that the suffering of Christ was not appropriate for pictures that prompted the admonition from reviewers as they wrote about Eakins’s Crucifixion. They pointed to the typical (read “Protestant”) American’s ignorance of the Crucifixion and its symbolism. The unfortunate result was that most exhibition-goers read Eakins’s picture as reportage. So reviewers elected to call the closely rendered figure only an expert anatomical study. However accomplished Eakins’s technique, these critics insisted, as a religious subject his painting was neither comprehensible nor relevant to them. The otherwise sympathetic William Clark had to admit: “... It is undoubtedly the case . . . that many who believe themselves to be good Christians fail altogether to appreciate their religion or the events upon which it is based as realistic; and to such, a picture like this has no message to deliver.”\(^{35}\) Eakins’s Christ was unconditionally naked. Moreover, he was unambiguously male, clad only in an abbreviated loincloth. Such blatant physicality was far outside the norm.

But Eakins’s startling Christ figure is not unusual when put in its proper context. What was a rare and controversial subject in American art exhibitions had become a common sight at the annual Salon exhibition in Paris. By the late nineteenth century, official ecclesiastical commissions in France had become scarce, forcing artists to turn to the government-sponsored Salons for exhibition of their religious works. And in order to gain admission to the Salon, artists were being brought to conform to the same aesthetic standards applied to secular history paintings. Scrupulous “science and archeology, elaborate fidelity in the portrayal of events which had occurred in the Holy Land, [and] a positivist interpretation of the life of Christ,” predominated in these modern renditions of sacred history.\(^{36}\) Artists were also encouraged by a desire for novelty and originality to

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\(^{31}\) In particular, Cook applauded the Catholic artist John LaFarge’s decorations for Boston’s Trinity Church as a sign that art finally was being put to “tasks worthy of her”; C. Cook, “Recent Church Decoration,” Scribner’s Monthly, xv, February, 1878, 570. For a discussion of the “legitimization” of art by the Protestant American clergy, see N. Harris, The Artist in American Society, New York, 1966, 300-316.

\(^{32}\) In 1906, Homer Saint-Gaudens surveyed ten paintings of Christ by various American artists in which he approvingly noted the emphasis on expressing the Savior’s “mental existence” rather than dramatic incident, in keeping with what he considered the prevailing feeling toward Christ, “... a feeling which, in simplicity and elemental directness, contrasts with the paintings of artists of the past who depicted the Saviour in the midst of violent emotions or dramatic incidents.” See “Ten American Paintings of Christ,” Putnam’s Monthly, 1, December 1906, 257-272. According to Leo Steinberg, the figure of Christ becomes increasingly one-dimensional and enameled in American painting and sculpture during the course of the 19th century. So pervasive was this “progressive emaculation of Christ” that the Christ image ultimately diverged altogether from the stereotypical ideal of American manhood. See “Objectivity and the Shrinking Self,” in Other Criteria, New York, 1972, 317-318.

\(^{33}\) The pervasive secularization of the Crucifixion theme explains its inclusion by John Singer Sargent in his 1903 murals, The Dogma of Redemption, which appear not in an ecclesiastical setting, but in the Boston Public Library; see Dillenberger, 152-155. Ironically for Eakins, in 1888, John Wanamaker acquired the Hungarian painter Michael Munkácsy’s two large-scale canvases of Christ Before Pilate and Christ on Calvary and exhibited them in the Grand Court of his Philadelphia department store during Lent and Easter. This became a popular tradition and has continued to the present.

\(^{34}\) Dillenberger, 141-144. Even popular interest in biblical history did not mitigate Protestant distaste for pictorial renderings of Christ’s suffering.

\(^{35}\) Clark (as in n. 25).

\(^{36}\) M. Proprzecka, “Le Sacrè au Salon,” in Saloni, gallerie, musei e loro influenza sullo sviluppo dell’arte dei secoli XIX e XX (Atti del XXIV Congresso Internazionale di Storia dell’Arte, 15), Bologna, 1979, 51. This scientific approach often was ascribed to Renan’s influence. Ironically, however, Renan was one of the most vocal critics of this tendency and wrote that “toute ce qui tend à donner une réalité historique ou anecdotique à ces sortes de scènes convenues, doit être banni”; Proprzecka, 51. See also G. Weisberg, “From the Real to the Unreal: Religious Painting and Photography at the Salons of the Third Republic,” Arts, lxx, December 1985, 58-63.
paint increasingly obscure episodes from the Bible and sacred history. Even scenes of violent martyrdom were treated with a clinical specificity mirroring the "Naturalist" idiom in French literature championed by Emile Zola.

Not surprisingly, it was an American reviewer who deplored the particular prevalence and success of "horrible and repulsive" religious subjects at the Salon of 1883. His comments strike a familiar chord:

The Crucifixions of this year, not less numerous than usual, mark also with pregnant emphasis this characteristic of to-day's French art. Not one of them, vital point of the religious life of millions though the scene is, would awake a single heavenward-aspiring thought, or even tender earthly emotion. . . . In all these pictures, the showy, colorful, and color-focused blood is always scientifically arranged, and largely en evidence, while the anatomical and muscular expression of the mortal leaves no place for suggestion of the divine agony.

One of the most controversial religious pictures produced in France during this period was by Eakins's own former teacher and the acknowledged leader of the "Naturalist" movement, Léon Bonnat (Fig. 7). Commissioned for a courtroom in the Palais de Justice in Paris, Bonnat's monumental Christ en croix was first exhibited to great acclaim, and censure, at the Salon of 1874. Some observers called the painting a triumph of naturalist art, ideally suited to the somber precincts of a hall of justice; others thought it too human, totally lacking in any sense of the divine. The painting was widely reproduced in the international art press as the debate flourished throughout subsequent years. Although Bonnat's living Christ is of a different iconographic type from Eakins's (though also indebted to Rubens), the stark realism that made this painting notorious paralleled Eakins's later approach. Moreover, it was public knowledge that Bonnat actually had nailed a cadaver in Paris when preparing his picture. Not only did Eakins borrow the agonized hands from Bonnat's description of the impaled cadaver, but he also imitated, as closely as was practical, Bonnat's method when he strapped the compliant J. Laurie Wallace to a cross in the New Jersey countryside.

Eakins's interest in the Crucifixion theme may also have been prompted by a second French picture. At the Salon of 1875, the young French painter George Becker submitted a gruesome variation on the Crucifixion theme called Rizpah Protecting the Bodies of Her Sons from Birds of Prey (Fig. 8). Becker took the story from the Old Testament Book of Samuel (2 Sam. 21:9–10), which reports God's instruction to David to surrender seven of the sons of Saul to the enemy Gibeonites for sacrifice to relieve a three-year drought. Rizpah, one of Saul's wives and mother of two of the slain men, stood vigil atop the hill where the men were hung from gibbets and protected their bodies from disfigurement by marauding birds. Becker's composition was praised by French critics who noted in particular that the mass execution had enabled Becker to display his rendering of the male nude. The Salon jury concurred with the critics. Becker's painting was awarded the gold medal.

A year later, when Becker's Rizpah was sent as part of the French Fine Arts exhibit to the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, it was again remarked by critics and public. Eakins, who had known Becker when both were students in Gérôme's atelier ten years before, certainly studied it. The American critic Earl Shinn, Eakins's friend and a veteran of the Paris ateliers, echoed French critics in his praise of Becker's picture, calling the attitudes of the dead youths "supine, with a languid and oriental grace even in death . . . tender, elegant and helpless, [forming] the strongest contradiction to the direct, rigid, as it were virile force of the woman." Evidently Americans were not necessarily repelled by a Crucifixion scene when it came from the Old Testament and the victims were anonymous.

Though he copied the basic format of his Crucifixion from European examples, Eakins made several important changes. He set his composition in broad daylight, while European artists typically placed the Cross against a darkening sky, in order to distance the viewer and incidentally the action of the muscles. Some of the students, hearing what was up, crowded in; this attracted Bonnat's attention, and he got the gendarme to close the door and lock it. We went back to the lecture room where we drew the bones, and while sitting there we heard the nails driven in. We finished; Mr. Lenoir and myself went out together after all had gone. At the door we met a guardian and bribed him to let us see the subject, which he did, and standing up against the wall was the large cross with the subject crucified on it, a horrid sight; but it shows how these French artists believe in truth.


to allude to the darkness over Judea during the Crucifixion. This convention, so effective in the examples by Rubens, Velázquez, and others, was still current in the nineteenth century, as shown in the paintings of Delacroix. According to contemporary exhibition reviews, the sky in Eakins’s Crucifixion originally was brilliant blue. Eakins then reworked the sky with an impasto of gray and white to intensify the sensation of light and heat. This lightness serves to emphasize the proximity of Christ’s body to the picture plane, reemphasizing for any viewer the detailed realism of Eakins’s rendering.

Eakins’s Crucifixion differs in another important detail: the diagonal arrangement of the Cross brings the right side of Christ’s torso into highest relief, lit from the upper left. Where then is the wound made by the lance, the humiliating wound Christ suffered at the hands of a Roman executioner?

It was the rule in Western art from the Early Christian era to include the side wound in any representation of the dead Christ and to locate that wound on Christ’s right side.43

41 The darkening sky is described in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all of which state that the sky was thrown into darkness for a period of three hours, from the sixth to the ninth hour of the Crucifixion. At the ninth hour Christ called out to Heaven: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Then, bowing his head, he died. But these Gospels go on to state that the sky cleared at the ninth hour. There is some question therefore as to whether the sky was still dark at the exact moment of Christ’s death. Note that the darkening of the sky is not mentioned at all in the Gospel of Saint John, the only Apostle who, according to tradition, was an eyewitness to Christ’s death.

42 Remnants of the blue underpainting can be detected above Christ’s right hand; T. Siegl, The Thomas Eakins Collection. Philadelphia, 1978, 90. Mariana van Rensselaer mentions “the palpitating blue sky” in her review of the New York exhibition. But by November of that year, when the painting was on view in Philadelphia, Eakins had repainted the sky. In his review of the Pennsylvania Academy exhibition, Leslie Miller called Eakins’s painting “weak rather than spiritual, deluded rather than divine,” and confessed “that to me it only seems to say ‘Come away and leave him alone in the white sunshine; it was all nonsense that we have heard about the darkness and the heavens themselves being moved.” See “Art in Philadelphia: The Fiftieth Annual Exhibition at the Academy,” The American Architect and Building News, xii, 25 November 1882, 253.

But whether located on the left or right side of Christ's breast, the wound was mandatory in Crucifixion iconography. By omitting the side wound, Eakins locked the image into a specific instant of narrative time. At the ninth hour, Christ called out to God; he then surrendered his spirit; his head fell forward and he died. Because the Sanhedrin requested that the bodies of the crucified not be left on Golgotha during the Sabbath, the Roman executioners were ordered to break the legs of Christ and the two thieves with whom he was executed to hasten their deaths. When the soldiers approached Christ, they saw that he was already dead and did not break his legs: "But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side and forthwith came there out blood and water" (John 19:34).

Only the Gospel of Saint John describes the transfixion. And this Gospel also omits any reference to the darkening sky. In fact, Eakins's painting corresponds exactly with the image evoked in John 19:30: "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished ['Consummatum est . . .']: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost." For a literal reader of this Gospel, the moment of the "consummatum" was the most powerful instant in Christ's Passion.

The dramatic power of the "consummatum" would have been confirmed for Eakins in a second literary source: the popular, and controversial, secular retelling of the Vie de Jésus by the French historian of religion Ernst Renan. First published in 1863, Renan's text was a scientific exegesis of the New Testament based on modern archaeological research. Frequently republished and translated into several languages, Renan's Vie de Jésus became one of the most widely read works of the later nineteenth century. Readers were either fascinated or incensed by Renan's clinical retelling. So assiduous a student of scientific method as Thomas Eakins would have been among the former. He was an admiring student of Jean-Léon Gérôme and Léon Bonnat, both of whom subscribed to Renan's approach in their own work and were also among his close friends and associates.

Renan's text was a ready source for a clinical account of the exact causes and pathology of Christ's death, so carefully rendered by Eakins. "The haemorrhage from the hands quickly stopped, and was not mortal. The true cause of death [from crucifixion] was the unnatural position of the body, which brought on a frightful disturbance of the circulation, terrible pains of the head and heart, and, at length, rigidity of the limbs. . . ."46

Furthermore, in a striking prose image, Renan interrupts his very straightforward narrative account at the exact moment of Christ's death:

"Rest now in thy glory, noble initiator. Thy work is completed; thy divinity is established. Fear no more to see the edifice of thy efforts crumble through a flaw. . . . Between thee and God, men will no longer distinguish. Complete conqueror of death, take possession of thy kingdom, whither, by the royal road thou hast traced, ages of adorers will follow thee."47

In his painting, Eakins records that same moment of the "consummatum" that Renan contemplates. Indeed, in the illustrated edition of Renan's Vie de Jésus, published in 1870, Godefroy Durand's engraving accompanying this passage closely anticipates Eakins's composition — Christ, with head bowed and breast uninjured, hangs on an isolated cross set diagonally into the landscape (Fig. 9).47

Renan's text provided Eakins with a very modern supplement to Gospel, but only a supplement. There are also discrepancies between Eakins's image and Renan's account. Renan describes the darkening of the sky during Christ's suffering and death. Eakins paints the Crucifixion in the bright diagonal light of late afternoon. Renan insists on archaeological evidence to indicate that the Cross was constructed in the shape of a truncated capital "T," and that Christ was suspended with arms upraised.44 Eakins, by comparison, used the traditional cross form depicted by his painter predecessors. In fact Eakins's painting is a calculated conflation of the Gospel of Saint John and the modern retelling by Renan.

The painting cannot be simply an academic exercise. Its large scale and the intricacy of its design and construction place The Crucifixion among Eakins's most important works. The frequent appearance of the canvas at exhibitions indicates that the painter intended it to be a public depiction of the dead Christ, Durand omits the crosses of the two thieves, shown in close proximity to Christ in the previous illustration, in order to emphasize Christ's solitude. This was the only illustrated edition of Renan's text. It was published during Eakins's last year in Europe (he left Paris in June of 1870). Eakins was a committed francophile, almost fluent in idiomatic French, and he had several friends among the French community in Philadelphia. It is not unlikely that he had access to a copy of the illustrated Vie de Jésus when composing his painting of the Crucifixion.

44 Dinnerstein makes only a passing reference to Renan. Eakins was working in Gérôme's atelier at the École des Beaux-Arts during the years that Hippolyte Taine, also a close friend of Renan, presented his celebrated lectures on the philosophy of art at the school. Taine's positivist philosophy was an important influence on Renan's biblical research and commentary. For Taine's influence on American artists, see L. Fink, "The Innovation of Tradition in Late Nineteenth-Century American Art," The American Art Journal, iv, November 1978, 68.

45 Renan, 290-291. The translator of this edition is not identified.

46 Ibid., 291.

47 Renan, Vie de Jésus, Paris, 1870, 301. It should be noted that in his
picture. Eakins probably started the painting as an independent venture. But he must have had some audience in mind. Were Roman Catholics his intended audience? It should be noted that during the 1880's Eakins sent the painting for exhibition to several predominantly, or increasingly, Roman Catholic cities - New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and St. Louis. Some years later, Eakins lent the painting to the Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary at Overbrook, Pennsylvania, consciously inserting his work into a Roman Catholic environment.

Since the 1840's, the Roman Catholic community in Philadelphia had grown steadily in size and influence. Pope Pius IX recognized the importance of the Catholic population when he declared the diocese a metropolitan see in 1875. By 1880, Philadelphia was the second largest archdiocese in the United States. The increasing size and wealth of the community were reflected in the number of building projects undertaken. In 1864, the newly completed cathedral church of Saints Peter and Paul at Logan Square had been dedicated. And in 1865, then-Bishop James F. Wood ordered that the campus of the diocesan seminary of Saint Charles Borromeo be moved from downtown Philadelphia to the suburb of Overbrook. The new seminary was built by 1871.

Roman Catholics publicly expressed their concern for building and maintaining properly decorated churches, so they must have seemed a lucrative source of patronage to local artists. Speaking to members of the public during a special tour of the construction site at the new basilica in August 1863, Bishop Wood emphasized the importance of decoration in Catholic churches and spoke particularly about the main decorations in the Cathedral apse:

... The Catholic church is not four cold, bare walls. The Catholic church must be decorated and the decorations must be such as will justify the claims which the Church puts forth as the patroness and the mother of the arts and sciences. They must be such as will call to the minds of the faithful the mysteries of our holy religion, the truths we believe, which are everywhere the standard of our faith here and the basis of our hopes hereafter. ... We thought it right to place over the main altar, the pure mystery of love and mercy, and a doctrine which we believe to be incorporated in our holy religion — the picture of the Crucifixion — Jesus Christ crucified today, yesterday and forever, in Whom we place all our hopes, and Whose Name is the Only One under heaven by which man may be saved.

The main altar decoration to which Archbishop Wood referred was a fresco of the Crucifixion designed by the Ital-

9 Durand, "Sa tête s'inclina . . .," from La Vie de Jésus by Ernest Renan, Paris, 1870 (photo: Yale University Library)

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49 Eakins liked to assume projects rather than wait for commissions and he is known to have presented prospective patrons with a fait accompli, gambling that they would buy the work. This ploy had succeeded with his monumental portrait of the Philadelphia surgeon Samuel Gross, whom Eakins asked to pose in 1875 for a painting that the artist planned to exhibit at the Centennial Exhibition. At the close of the Exhibition, Eakins persuaded Gross to take the canvas for a short time before the artist finally sold it to the Jefferson Medical College. And Eakins may well have projected a similar strategy for The Crucifixion. Ellwood Parry first suggested this possibility in "The Gross Clinic as Anatomy Lesson and Memorial Portrait," Art Quarterly, xxxii, Winter 1969, 389, n. 37.

50 In fact, his desire to address a Roman Catholic audience might have encouraged Eakins's realistic treatment of the Crucifixion subject. Note, for example, Ruskin's comment that it was "in the common and most Catholic treatment of the subject, [that] the mind is either painfully directed to the bodily agony, coarsely expressed by outward anatomical signs, or else it is permitted to rest on that countenance inconceivable by man at any time, but chiefly so in this its consummated humiliation"; in Modern Painters, 5 vols., London, 1869, II, 172-173.


A REASSESSMENT OF THOMAS EAKINS'S CRUCIFIXION OF 1880

Eakins's initial involvement with the Roman Catholic community in Philadelphia dates from the mid-1870's when he volunteered to paint a formal portrait of James F. Wood, the newly appointed archbishop of Philadelphia. A handful of surviving thumbnail sketches made during services at the cathedral in May of 1876 document that Eakins spent a good deal of time familiarizing himself with the archbishop's environment and routine (Fig. 10). He paid particular attention to the altar crucifix, sketching it more than once and noting its height and width. As with the Gross portrait, Eakins wanted to portray Wood in active pursuit of his vocation. But Wood's ill health prevented Eakins from portraying the archbishop in the act of celebrating Mass, as first planned. Eakins compromised with a life-size seated portrait of the cleric, but failed to sell it to the archdiocese.

In Philadelphia, it was quite daring for a Protestant artist to volunteer his services to the Catholic community. Relations between Protestants and Catholics in the city were uneasy at best. Catholics had not forgotten the violent Nativist riots of the 1840's, which left dozens dead or injured and churches destroyed. More recently, increased immigration from Southern Europe, as well as from Ireland, and labor unrest had revived nativist feelings, and the anti-Catholic movement was again in evidence by the end of the 1870's. But Thomas Eakins would have been impressed by the precedent of William Rush, the early nineteenth-century Philadelphia sculptor. Eakins admired Rush and had effectively revived the sculptor's reputation when he exhibited his painting William Rush Carving His Allegorical Sculpture of the Schuykill in 1878 (Fig. 11). Rush, a Protestant, had carved crucifixes for two local Catholic


53 I have recently discovered an engraving that depicts the interior of the cathedral with Brumidi's Crucifixion fresco dominating the wall behind the main altar. Christ is shown on the Cross (with head bowed to the viewer's right) at the center of the fresco, flanked by attendant figures, indicating that Brumidi painted the conventional Calvary grouping. Unfortunately, the mediocre quality of the engraving makes it impossible to determine whether Brumidi painted the Christ living or dead. However, the engraving does show that the scale and pose of Brumidi's Christ are very similar to Eakins's. Eakins must have consulted this image as typical of what would be acceptable to prospective clients among Philadelphia's Roman Catholics. See "The Installation of Archbishop McCloskey," Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 10 Sept. 1864, 392. For Brumidi's work in Washington, see L.B. Miller, Patrons and Patriotism, Chicago, 1966, 66-78.

54 Eakins had gained an introduction to Wood through Samuel Gross; Parry (as in n. 49), 35.

55 Susan Eakins told Lloyd Goodrich that Eakins had wanted to portray the archbishop standing outside on the steps of the cathedral, although Eakins's sketches would suggest that he intended to show the priest celebrating Mass; Lloyd and Edith Havens Goodrich Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Eakins later presented the Wood portrait to the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary.

56 Sister Mary Consuela (as in n. 51), 272.

57 Johns, 109-114.
churches. By establishing a business relationship with the Catholic community in Philadelphia, Eakins would have forged another link with his predecessor.

Important visual clues in the painting itself suggest that Eakins designed his picture to be seen by a Roman Catholic audience. Saint John’s account of Christ’s Passion is read during the Roman Catholic liturgy for Good Friday. During this reading the congregation stands until the point at which Christ announces his death — “Consummatum est . . .” (it is finished) — then kneels for a moment of prayer, and resumes standing as the celebrant continues the Gospel and its account of the transfixion. Eakins’s evocation of the exact instant of the “consummatum” and the significance of this instant for any Catholic, suggest that the artist had consulted the Catholic liturgy when formulating his composition. Eakins’s thumbnail sketches document his presence at Catholic service four weeks after Easter in 1876. So an earlier visit on Good Friday is not out of the question. Only in the Roman Catholic liturgy for Good Friday is the Gospel interrupted, and Eakins might have thought the visualization of this moment particularly acceptable to a Catholic audience.

Even so, Eakins’s approach and his singular personal reinvention of pictorial tradition conspired against the painting’s success. In his concern for narrative precision, Eakins had read the Gospels literally and so omitted a critical symbolic detail — the lance wound in Christ’s right side, a mandatory element in any representation of Christ’s death because it signified the theological proposition that the transfixion of Christ fulfilled the Mosaic requirement for blood sacrifice. The wound thus became an emblem for the doctrine of atonement. As Christ identified himself with the temple of Israel described in Ezekiel’s vision, so the blood and water that ran from the wound in his right side corresponded to the springs that flowed from the right side of the heavenly temple. By omitting the wound as a visual record of Christ’s transfixion, Eakins effectively removed theological meaning from his picture.

Eakins also failed to meet the requirements of Catholic devotion. There is no reference here to Christ’s charismatic power in his human existence, nor any hint that the martyr ultimately will triumph over death. On this the meaning of the Crucifixion is hinged. In a composition he certainly intended as a religious image, Eakins had relied too heavily on the literal reading of written sources. He was attentive to the design structure of traditional Crucifixions. But he did not comprehend the complex symbolic references that governed it. His personal iconography emphasized Christ’s human form at the expense of divinity. So Eakins undermined the essential purpose of the Crucifixion image, which is to express the humanity and divinity simultaneously present in Christ’s sacrifice. Catholic iconography — and the Catholic community — might offer an opportunity for an artist to work within the European tradition, but it would not accept untutored innovation. When Eakins presented his painting of The Crucifixion to faculty members

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58 Rush’s crucifix for St. Augustine’s church, which one 19th-century writer called the sculptor’s masterpiece, was destroyed during the riots of 1844. See A. Ritter, Philadelphia and Her Merchants Constituted Fifty or Seventy Years Ago, Philadelphia, 1860. In his history, Ritter refers specifically to Rush’s “accuracy of delineations” in the crucifix. Ritter’s comments are quoted in Johns, 87. Rush’s second crucifix, for the church of St. Mary’s, is now lost. See L. Bantel, William Rush, American Sculptor, Philadelphia, 1982, cat. nos. 41 and 47.
at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, they did not display it.\textsuperscript{59}

Thomas Eakins effected a careful synthesis of European pictorial sources when formulating his version of \textit{The Crucifixion}. And in the final analysis, it is here that we find the real purpose of Eakins’s seemingly anomalous picture – and its true audience. Eakins was a proud veteran of the teaching ateliers of Paris. After his return to the United States, he had maintained contact with both former teachers and fellow students. In Paris, Eakins had become fully committed to the academic first principle that the human body was the supreme vehicle of artistic expression.\textsuperscript{60} He did not need an “excuse” to paint the male nude. His \textit{Swimming Hole}, painted in 1883, eloquently demonstrates that Eakins was very capable of devising original interpretations of this theme (Fig. 12). But Eakins did need a subject that would convey his ability to produce a major history painting in the European tradition, specifically the academic French tradition. \textit{The Crucifixion} was Eakins’s “reception piece,” the painting in which he demonstrated the high level of technical expertise and sophisticated understanding of literary and artistic sources required of mature academicians.

Though Eakins previously had sent several paintings to his teacher Gérôme in Paris for criticism and though he exhibited two paintings at the Salon in 1875, he did not send \textit{The Crucifixion} to France. He did the next best thing, however, which was to exhibit the picture first with the new Society of American Artists. Founded in 1877 to protest the exclusionary policies of the powerful National Academy of Design, this society rapidly had attracted members from the expanding community of American artists who had trained in European, especially Parisian teaching ateliers. The Society’s annual exhibitions provided young artists with an ideal forum in which to display their recently acquired technical prowess and their easy famil-

\textsuperscript{59} Note the correspondence between the date of Eakins’s painting and the construction of the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary: in 1885, after the death of the seminary’s patron, Francis Drexel, a marble relief of the \textit{Crucifixion} was erected in the antechamber of the seminary chapel in his memory. For a history of the seminary chapel, see J.F. Connelly, \textit{Saint Charles Seminary, Philadelphia} . . . , Philadelphia, 1979, 71-72. It is unlikely that a Catholic lay congregation would have recognized Eakins’s unfortunate theological lapse. But Catholic priests must have seen this immediately. Late in the 1890’s, Eakins made the acquaintance of faculty members at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary through his student Samuel Murray, and he painted portraits of several Catholic clerics between 1900 and 1906. At that time he also presented \textit{The Crucifixion} to the seminary. How then must the faculty at St. Charles Borromeo have reacted to \textit{The Crucifixion}? According to seminary legend, the tear in the canvas just above center allegedly was caused when a hurried seminarian inadvertantly pushed a doorknob into the painting. The painting had been propped against a wall in the sacristy, behind a door. It may have been after this accident that Eakins angrily took the painting back. Thereafter, the painting hung in the front hall of the Eakins house. I am grateful to Father Francis Carbine, pastor of St. Christopher’s Parish in Philadelphia, for confirming the currency of this anecdote. For Eakins’s association with the seminary, see E.H. Turner, “Thomas Eakins at Overbrook,” \textit{Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia}, lxxxi, December 1970, 195-198; and W.H. Gerds, “Thomas Eakins and the Episcopal Portrait: Archbishop William Henry Elder,” \textit{Arts}, lxxii, May 1979, 154-157.

\textsuperscript{60} In a letter of 22 February 1877, Eakins’s teacher Gérôme reiterated this aesthetic, urging that only “by constant study from the nude” could a painter arrive at “really strong, deep and true” expression. From a lost original, trans. Louis Husson, in Bregler, PAFA (as in n. 7).
arity with the latest Continental styles.  

The Crucifixion was Eakins's first specifically "European" submission to the Society. Previously, he had been singled out as one of the few resident artists who sent "American" subjects to the Society annuals: at the first exhibition in 1878, he exhibited William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill and Spinning, from his Colonial series.  

Since then he had sent only one painting each year: in 1879, the Gross Clinic (on loan from Jefferson Medical College); At the Piano in 1880, and The Pathetic Song the following year. In 1882, The Crucifixion was his single submission.  

As a number of scholars recently have demonstrated, Eakins drew heavily upon European prototypes when formulating his own work. He innovated within the European academic tradition; he did not invent from without. By 1882, Eakins had proved his ability to adapt the European idiom to American subject matter. In The Gross Clinic, Eakins saluted an American surgical pioneer and pronounced his own commitment to the depiction of modern American progress and achievement. With the portrait of William Rush, Eakins looked back to the career of an early nineteenth-century Philadelphia artist in homage to his native artistic roots. The musical portraits were intimate studies of the artist's family and close friends.

In The Crucifixion, Eakins adhered more rigidly to both the form and the content of specific European sources, purposefully abandoning the localism of his earlier works. Ostensibly, this was a subject that transcended national boundaries. But in his eagerness to prove his artistic knowledge and sophistication, the hapless artist chose to treat a difficult subject in a manner almost certain to alienate American audiences. Though many of his other paintings had been severely criticized, viewers could still identify with the very American subjects. But the subject and uncompromising realism of The Crucifixion encouraged no such empathy from American Protestants. Eakins's distortion of Crucifixion symbolism deterred American Catholics.

Eakins made The Crucifixion, as he did many of his pictures, primarily for an audience of fellow artists. The opinions of newspaper critics and an unsophisticated public mattered little to him. As Elizabeth Johns has observed, Eakins painted for two publics, the "insiders," and the "outsiders." His viewers were divided "not so much on whether they liked his painting as on whether they would acknowledge that a painter could insist he had responsibilities that were beyond their ken." The majority of exhibition-goers and critics saw only a schoolmaster's startling exercise. But fellow veterans of the Parisian ateliers instantly would have recognized Eakins's compositional references to Velázquez and Rubens. And they would not have turned away from Eakins's forthright realism. Nor did they, as the long exhibition history of this controversial work indicates. But the painting worked only so long as it was displayed to that small audience of artist colleagues who had shared and so understood Eakins's response to his training and the academic tradition. Once an informed audience was gone, The Crucifixion became a discomfiting curiosity.

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61 "[The artists'] admiration was especially drawn to displays of the skill which they had just been striving to gain so that the exhibitions were full of 'Studies' and 'Sketches,' with occasionally a big 'Salon Picture,' wherewith, as with a sort of thesis, the young aspirant graduated from the atelier, and demonstrated his ability as an independent artist"; S. Isham, The History of American Painting, rev. ed., New York, 1936. 373.

62 [E. Shinn], "Fine Arts. Lessons of a Late Exhibition," The Nation, xxxvi, 1878.

63 In 1883, he sent the portrait of his father entitled The Writing Master. Eakins did not exhibit again with the Society until 1887.

64 Ackerman (as in n. 38). 1969; Parry (as in n. 49). 1969; Johns.

65 Johns, 77.