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book review of

Thomas Eakins and the Uses of History by Akela Reason

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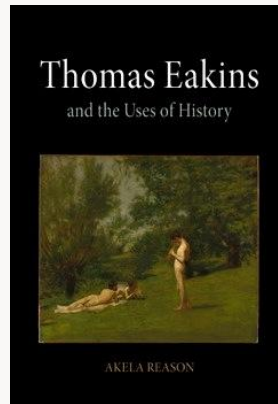
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Akela Reason,
Thomas Eakins and the Uses of History.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
232 pp.; 74 b/w illustrations; notes; index.
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Though best known for his realistic depictions of contemporary life, Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) was concerned with history throughout his career and aspired to produce what he called “big paintings.” This is the subject of Akela Reason’s recent contribution to Eakins scholarship, *Thomas Eakins and the Uses of History*. In this discerning study, modeled in part on Elizabeth John’s 1983 book, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*, Reason endeavors to document and interpret the artist’s relationship to history and to his own historical works, which, according to the author, were the images into which Eakins principally focused his artistic and professional beliefs. Throughout his career, Eakins returned to historical subject matter and developed a meticulous working method rooted in classical artistic practice in order to assert himself within the Pennsylvania Academy and within a broader art historical tradition. Thus, Eakins’s “uses of history,” as defined by Reason, refers to his interest in historical themes, the development of his own artistic principles on the basis of historical precedent, and his self-conscious desire to establish a permanent legacy as a kind of American Old Master. These objectives affected Eakins’s approach to teaching and to his artistic career such that, Reason claims, he “crafted his backward-looking historical works with an eye to the future” (7).

Reason diverts from the standard chronology of a monograph and pursues a thematic framework, which allows her to consider works that have received little attention in the extant Eakins literature, but which she argues are in fact more representative of the artist’s aesthetic convictions. The first chapter, which is the first of five case studies, focuses on *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (1876–77, Philadelphia Museum of Art), an ambitious work that negotiates portrait, genre, and history painting. Eakins devoted two years to this, his first history painting, and as Reason notes, its execution involved much research, deliberation, sketching, and modeling. The final image depicts a fashionably attired William Rush engaged in life study, carving the wooden figure of a nymph from the nude model posed

in the foreground. A Federal-era Philadelphia sculptor who primarily carved ships' mastheads, Rush unveiled his *Water Nymph and Bittern*, the work represented in Eakins's picture, as the ornament of a public fountain at Centre Square in 1809. By the 1870s, however, Rush had fallen into obscurity, and thus Eakins's gesture has been interpreted by many scholars as a recuperative one.

According to Elizabeth Johns, the painting is evidence of Eakins's desire to relate both Rush's and his own practice with an academic tradition: *William Rush* adheres to the tradition of representing artists in their studios and it marks sculpture, particularly classical sculpture, as the pinnacle of artistic achievement.^[1] Reason pushes this conclusion further, drawing attention to Eakins's decisiveness in representing Rush's likeness and biography (Eakins's prepared a précis of Rush's life and work to accompany the painting on exhibition) to suggest that both were an exercise in creative reconstruction, in many ways cast in Eakins's own image. Although Rush would not have engaged live models to produce his allegorical figures, Eakins's imaginative rendering of the studio allows him to stress the value of working directly from life. To emphasize Rush's dedication to his craft, Eakins directed the sculptor's gaze towards his own object, rather than towards the nude female model. Reason also characterizes Eakins's biography of Rush as a highly selective text, which omitted any mention of the artist's work as a portraitist and highlighted his civic commitments, professional reputation, and the legacy of his public monuments. Eakins's use of history, in the case of William Rush, involved the cultivation of a professional role model, whom he could place at the beginning of a distinctly American sculptural tradition.

Eakins's investment in American history is also taken up in Reason's second chapter, a reconsideration of the colonial revival paintings he produced between 1876 and 1883. These simple, intimate genre subjects, fashionable at the time, were praised by contemporary critics for their honesty and charm. Lloyd Goodrich has cited the anniversary of the nation's founding celebrated at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 as the inspiration for these images.^[2] Barbara Weinberg has suggested that the emphasis on craft in images like *Homespun* (1881, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *The Spinner* (1880, Brigham Young University Museum) reflect a kind of nostalgia for the pace of the previous century and the home manufacture displaced by the industrial revolution.^[3] Reason proposes an entirely different personal and social history as the background for these works, emphasizing that Eakins's development of this theme coincided with his increased teaching responsibilities at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which included a growing contingent of female students. Reason also cites the concurrent development of a science of women's health, psychology in particular, and notes that doctors specializing in the treatment of so-called nervous disorders regularly contrasted the formidable colonial woman with her fragile modern descendent. While previous studies have argued that Eakins's psychological portraiture evidences an interest in neurasthenia, the colonial revival series have not yet been considered in this context, nor have scholars made the connection between Eakins's female subject-matter and the field of female psychology.^[4] The discourse surrounding women's health was in part fashioned by two physicians with whom Eakins shared a friendship, Horatio C. Wood and Silas Weir Mitchell, who argued that access to education was the cause of psychological illness in women. Reason connects this history to Eakins's ambivalence about women's place in society and his own role in their education, for just as Eakins contemplated the abilities of female artists, including his own wife, his historical paintings seemed to idealize more traditional social roles for women. The images then portray complex and even

contradictory impulses, and a use of history, which is, in many ways, less successful than that of the paintings derived from confrontation with the modern era.

Eakins's return to classical subject matter, with three relief panels and two Arcadian paintings, marked a simultaneous engagement with the ancient past and the artist's present, with what he called "Greek methods," that are academic traditions inherited from antiquity, and the camera. The third chapter, "Reenacting the Antique," refers to Eakins's belief in the significance of life modeling for the classical tradition. In both the Arcadian series and *Swimming* (1885, Amon Carter Museum), Reason perceives the influence of the French artist and theorist Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran (1802–97), with whom Eakins had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Lecoq advocated the practice of "memory training," in which artists studied motifs not in order to reproduce them from memory, but rather so that they might be internalized to such a degree that they could be redeployed in the individual's own artistic language to produce wholly original compositions.

After returning to Philadelphia, Eakins enlisted Lecoq's method to translate photography through his own aesthetic. Reason describes *Swimming* as "the complete integration of Lecoq's ideas into [Eakins's] art," such that one figure who assumes a pose often seen in the figures at the ends of classical pediments is evidence of Eakins's recourse to memory, while the man caught in the act of diving alludes to the artist's interest in photography (117). For Reason, *Swimming* is a conflation of old and new, of classicism and realism.

The *Crucifixion* (1880, Philadelphia Museum of Art), which many art historians, including Lloyd Goodrich, Henry Adams, Jane Dillenberger, Joshua Taylor, Martin Berger, and Amy Werbel, have discussed in terms of Eakins's interest in human anatomy, is taken up by Reason in her fourth chapter and read biographically. Reason cites Elizabeth Milroy's article in which she situated the painting within the context of the academic tradition and argued that Eakins regarded *Crucifixion* in the manner of a reception piece, that is, as the work that would testify to his technical expertise and understanding of the literary and artistic sources, which were demanded of the mature artist.^[5] Similarly, Sidney Kirkpatrick has suggested that Eakins's choice of a subject embraced by the Old Masters was indicative of his ambition to establish himself as a kind of American "modern master" and to solidify his position within the Pennsylvania Academy.^[6] Reason accepts the notion of self-promotion, but in order to elaborate on the significance of what the artists described as his "best painting," she focuses on the conditions of Eakins's professional life in 1886, the year the painting was sent to the Southern Exposition in Louisville, Kentucky. She argues that having recently been dismissed from the Academy, Eakins felt metaphorically crucified by its directors. Perceiving himself as a martyr, Eakins retitled the painting *Ecce Homo*, or "Behold the Man," on the occasion of the Louisville exhibition. Thus with *Crucifixion*, Eakins imagined himself as a Christ-figure who had been punished for his beliefs.

In the last major chapter of the book, Reason examines Eakins's foray into public sculpture, and arguably his most explicitly historical works: two bronze panels on the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch (1891–95) in Brooklyn, which commemorate the Civil War, and two on the Trenton Battle Monument (1893), which commemorate heroes of the Revolutionary War. With these commissions, Eakins hoped to emulate the achievements of William Rush and Phidias by producing monumental public sculptures that would secure his legacy. Through

meticulous attention to details garnered from public records and personal correspondence, Reason describes the protracted and often frustrating process of his collaboration with sculptor William R. O'Donovan for this project. Reason attributes Eakins's lack of success in the medium to his limited practical experience with its materials and his attempt to apply his skill of draftsmanship and theories of painting to the reliefs. Despite this relative failure as a sculptor, Eakins continued to hold the figure of William Rush as the paradigmatic American master, and Reason concludes her study with Eakins's return to the subject of William Rush in 1908 (*William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River*, Brooklyn Museum).

Eakins scholarship to date is extensive, ranging from the more biographical to studies which aim to insert his works of art into an American social history. The catalogue published on the occasion of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's 2001 exhibition, "Thomas Eakins: American Realist," offers a comprehensive account of Eakins's life and work.^[7] Reason's contribution to this vast literature is certainly noteworthy. By employing history and its uses as a theoretical framework through which to consider Eakins's oeuvre, Reason presents an artist who consciously navigated and affected an American past and a historical present, and she supports her claims with reference to the existing research and unpublished archives. With equal attentiveness to works of art and to history, Reason offers an insightful study of one of the most celebrated figures of American art.

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Notes

- [1] Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 99.
- [2] Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 158.
- [3] H. Barbara Weinberg, "Thomas Eakins and The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (1994), 25–28.
- [4] See for example Norma Lifton, "Thomas Eakins and S. Weir Mitchell: Images and Cures in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art*, ed. Mary Matthews Gedo (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1987), 247–74; David Lubin, "Modern Psychological Selfhood in the Art of Thomas Eakins," in *Inventing the Psychological*, ed. Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 133–66.
- [5] Elizabeth Milroy, "Consummatum Est: A Reassessment of Thomas Eakins's Crucifixion of 1880," *Art Bulletin* 71 (1989): 283.
- [6] Sidney Kirkpatrick, *The Revenge of Thomas Eakins* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 254–55.
- [7] Darrel Sewell, ed., *Thomas Eakins: American Realist*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001).