



Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures (Yale University Art Gallery)

Ms. Helen A. Cooper

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During the 1870s, rowing became a tremendously popular sport in the United States. An enthusiastic rower, the young Philadelphia-born Thomas Eakins painted, sketched, and drew an extraordinary series of rowing pictures that were the most ambitious project of his early career. He brought to the theme his personal experiences as an avid amateur rower on his beloved Schuylkill River, and a scientific understanding of the physical effort involved. His 24 rowing works, which include some of the most celebrated and recognized images in the history of American art, are brought together and examined as a group for the first time in this beautiful book. They shed light on the artist's creative process and subsequent achievements as well as on social, cultural, and artistic concerns central to nineteenth-century audiences. Helen A. Cooper, along with essayists Martin A. Berger, Christina Currie, and Amy B. Werbel discuss various aspects of Eakins' rowing series, explaining his affection for the sport, his adoption of the images of popular culture into the realm of fine art, his commitment to novel, "modern" subjects, his preoccupation with perspective and measurement, and his belief that the most profound artistic truths were best expressed through the human figure - particularly the male figure. Just as sculling is dependent upon precision, practice and unwavering dedication, so the paintings were constructed from scrupulous observation of details and intense preparation. In the less than four years in which the rowing pictures were created, Eakins moved subtly from the analytic and descriptive toward the more intuitive and suggestive.

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