

**Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*.  
Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, xx + 207 pp.,  
124 black-and-white plates, \$63.00 (cloth)**

Bryan Mangrum

Volume 14, numéro 1-2, 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073466ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073466ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Mangrum, B. (1987). Compte rendu de [Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, xx + 207 pp., 124 black-and-white plates, \$63.00 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 14(1-2), 173-175.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073466ar>

Athena: though she is a figure of the imagination, Ruskin saw her as a "literal, natural yet divine, power."

Summary cannot do justice to this fascinating book, which no student of Ruskin can afford to ignore. Nonetheless, Wihl makes a number of serious errors. His insistence that "sensation, as such, has no role to play in Ruskin's epistemology" is surely unjustified. The fifth chapter of *Modern Painters I*, to which Wihl devotes considerable attention, begins by claiming that the word "Truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind *or senses*, of any fact of nature" (emphasis added); and in the famous penultimate paragraph of his chapter on the Theoretic Faculty in *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin concedes that "sensual pleasure" may be the "basis" of an "idea of beauty." It would be amazing, given the evidence of Ruskin's notebooks, if the satisfaction he derived from the detailed recording of visual phenomena should have been entirely overwhelmed in even the most extreme of the anti-sensualist diatribes of *Modern Painters*.

It is perhaps symptomatic of Wihl's own distaste for close visual study that his few attempts to link Ruskin's writings with analysis of specific works of art should be unsuccessful. His remarks about Ruskin's evocation of Turner's *Slave Ship* contain the amusing assertion that the ship is being "tossed" about in waves that have not yet come into being. Using part of Turner's title, *Typhon Coming On*, in an attempt to discredit Ruskin's accurate perception of the fact that the ship is engulfed in a storm that must already have raged at least long enough to stir up some of the most monstrous waves ever depicted on canvas, Wihl concludes that a "single, very casual mistake has a tendency to call forth associations with all the force of an *idée fixe*." A glance at Turner's work is enough to convince one that it is Wihl, not Ruskin, who is suffering from a fixed idea. Similar carelessness is apparent in Wihl's illustration of one of Ruskin's most emphatic celebrations of the richness of Turner's cloud painting with a hasty pencil sketch that contains not a single stroke even suggestive of a cloud (p. 32 and pl. 5). Again (though this could be the fault of publisher rather than author), the book's cover, which purports to illustrate a detail from Ruskin's "*Grand Canal, Venice*, showing the Casa Grimani," has neatly excised from the drawing precisely the portion which depicts the noble front of that building.

Partial readings of Ruskin give rise to some misleading generalizations. It is not true, for example, that for Ruskin "Byzantine mosaics . . . appeal primarily to the intellect." Even in *The Stones of Venice*, where the mosaics are treated in part as an exercise in reading, Ruskin wrote with special power of the emotional responses they generate. The mosaics are

vast shadowings forth of scenes to whose realization he [the believer] looked forward, or of spirits whose presence he invoked. And the man must be little capable of receiving a religious impression of any kind, who . . . remains altogether untouched by the majesty of the colossal images of apostles, and of Him who sent apostles, that look down from the darkening gold of the domes (Vol. II, chap. 4, paragraph 63).

Furthermore, though it is true that Ruskin was increasingly concerned with allegorical forms of art in his later works, it is misleading to claim that "the 'ruder the symbol, the deeper its significance' becomes the motto

of his analysis." Some of his most moving praise in *St. Mark's Rest* is reserved for mosaics (such as the exquisite Salomé in the Baptistery) which display consummate artistry. The *Vierge Dorée* of Amiens, as treated by Ruskin in a lecture of 1858 (published in *The Two Paths* the following year), is not, as Wihl claims, the "last 'tender' fiction that he allows himself to appreciate."

Wihl's study, concentrating as it does on "the failure of epistemology to overcome rhetoric" in Ruskin's writings (p. 2), might blind the unwary reader to the fact that Ruskin's most valuable writing on art—the contribution that has most to offer the modern art critic—is neither rhetorical nor concerned with epistemology. Many of his verbally restrained studies of individual buildings and paintings set standards of analytical accuracy that are seldom equalled in the best contemporary criticism.

Finally, one cannot discuss this fine book without lamenting Wihl's adherence to Harold Bloom's egregious claim that "all Ruskin's later works (beginning perhaps with the final volume of *Modern Painters* [in a later echo Wihl speculates 'beginning perhaps with *Sesame and Lilies*']) are massive pathetic fallacies" (pp. 2, 131). That the author of *The Elements of Drawing*, *The Laxus of Fesole*, *Praeterita*, and large portions of *Fors Clavigera* should still be subjected to such assertions is evidence that the sin of idolatry—the "self imposition" of the critic before the truth (p. 27)—is as rampant in modern criticism of Ruskin as it was in the works of the master himself.

JOHN UNRAU  
*Atkinson College, York University*

---

ELIZABETH JOHNS *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, xx + 207 pp., 124 black-and-white plates, \$63.00 (cloth).

We are well informed about the life and work of Thomas Eakins, but any reader at all familiar with the literature on the artist would have to confess that our understanding of his life and work is limited. An abundance of data supports a fundamentally superficial interpretation of the style and content of his works. This new study by Elizabeth Johns is therefore a particularly welcome contribution because it builds up a coherent and sophisticated picture of Eakins's art and thought through the critical analysis of a few selected works in which the full range of traditional art-historical methods is brought to bear. While in her preface Johns acknowledges her debt to Goodrich and others who have laboured to establish the facts of Eakins's life, she makes it quite clear that she is not simply following in their footsteps and attempting to mine new facts or rearrange old ones about the artist's biography or his stylistic development.

The author's broader, more comprehensive approach is indicated by the volume's subtitle, *The Heroism of Modern Life*, which identifies an overarching theme used to link observations and conclusions about paintings with different kinds of subject matter. The theme is not a novel one. Linda Nochlin devotes a chapter of her well-known book on realism to it and notes that concern with the heroism of modern life arose out of a new

notion of history that was absolutely central to the whole outlook of realist painters in the nineteenth century. In taking it as the organizing theme of her study, Johns avoids from the start such oft repeated but not terribly insightful statements about Eakins as "objective realist," "man of science," and the like, which have focused attention too narrowly on the character of his style while clouding and distorting the perception and understanding of it. Her approach puts the consideration of Eakins's work within a framework which allows her to pose specific, concrete, and productive questions in a way that corresponds remarkably well with the programme set out by Timothy Clark for a social history of art that "... explain[s]... the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes and more general historical structures and processes..." (*Image of the People* [London, 1973], 12). It also sets Eakins's art and thought firmly and unambiguously within the mainstream of nineteenth-century realism instead of treating the artist as a kind of ruggedly individual provincial, as Eakins is sometimes portrayed.

The specific, concrete questions—or at least the two most important and productive—are concisely posed in the preface: "Why did Eakins paint what he painted?" and "Why did he paint the way he did?" These apparently simple questions are set in sharp relief by two critical observations. The first is that the previous literature has not sufficiently stressed the circumstance that the artist was financially independent and therefore, unlike so many other American artists, did not paint portraits to make a living. On the contrary, he painted portraits because they were for him the best way to formulate and express his ideas. This partly explains why sitters were not infrequently disappointed with his pictures of them.

He simply ignored the conventional flatteries most of them expected in a likeness. As Johns tellingly demonstrates in the chapter centred on the portrait of Walt Whitman, Eakins—the objective realist—often aged his sitters prematurely and showed them frailer than they were to suggest their human vulnerability and their helplessness before time and change despite their achievements and position in society.

To understand Eakins's portraits, therefore, it is necessary to recognize and define the ideas and values they embody rather than to admire them solely, or primarily, as triumphs of verisimilitude.

Second, Johns notes something crucial in Eakins's style which has, curiously, been unremarked (although I am certain it has been dimly sensed by most people looking at his paintings): he did not always paint objectively at all and large areas of his canvases are frequently roughly worked in a fashion that does not point in any obvious way to nature but is effective in creating a mood. This observation, which I think is undeniably true, makes one realize with a start that not only has the depth and scope of Eakins's thought been insufficiently understood, but his style has not even been adequately described. Consequently, Johns gives due weight to a fresh and searching analysis of the style of each of the paintings she examines and to relating the way they are painted to the overall meaning of the works.

The first chapter weaves together a brief summary of Eakins's early education and training with more general and far-reaching comments on the intellectual milieu that shaped his thought. It is characteristic of her approach that Johns is not content merely to record that Eakins attended Central High School but fleshes out that fact by exploring the educational objectives of the school's founders and the nature of the curriculum in force when Eakins studied there, absorbing the two values that dominated American life from the middle of the nineteenth century: respect for scientific thought and egalitarianism. She tells us, for example, that "in the intellectual world of Central High School, the only aristocracy was that earned by disciplined application," and thereby establishes, almost in passing, the chief criterion which Eakins as a mature artist had in mind as over the years he gradually assembled his pantheon of heroes of modern life.

Moreover, she critically examines the distinguished, if short, artistic tradition of the city of Philadelphia, a tradition in which the art of portraiture—an art whose history she briefly but deftly summarizes—loomed large, especially the *portrait d'apparat* which by mid-century had become the usual one used to celebrate the achievement of modern heroes. Finally, Johns argues that the values inculcated in the young man guided his determined pursuit of what he himself called, rather vaguely, "big painting" and a "technique that was not contrived or flashy, but that was faithful to the look, the memories of experience" during the time he was a student in Paris.

In the following chapters Johns takes up and analyzes at length five masterpieces in more or less chronological order: *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* (1871), *The Gross Clinic* (1875), *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (1877), *The Concert* (1892), and *Walt Whitman* (1887). The chapters are, in effect, self-contained essays dealing with the heroic figures that allowed Eakins to develop his thought on the principles and meaning of different activities: sport, science-medicine, art, music, and literature. All the essays are organized along roughly similar lines. There is a carefully considered assessment of the style and expressive characteristics of each work, followed by a thorough iconographic analysis that leads into a wide-ranging discussion of the intellectual and social milieu out of which the work grew. This sounds like very traditional art history and it is. The excellence of the book lies not in novelty but in the author's mastery of her craft.

The analysis of the style and expressive characteristics of the paintings results in a major reassessment of the nature of Eakins's work and is one of the most original aspects of her contribution to the literature. The case is made particularly in the discussion of *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*, in which Johns demonstrates at some length that the "objective realism" tag usually applied to Eakins's work simply does not do justice to its complexity and subtleties:

To brushwork, Eakins gave a strong... role. He formed the sky with virtual scrubbing... Whereas some of Eakins' technique was subtle, nowhere on the canvas did he use it to point transparently to the natural world. In several areas, in fact, undecorative of any forms whatsoever Eakins moved his brush back and forth, up and down the water in heavy blue crescents that communicate his presence as a painter.

One cannot help remarking that some of these observations might be more or less expected from art historians who grew up with Abstract Expressionism, but this does not invalidate them. The brushwork is there and it is only fair to call attention to the way such effects are largely responsible for generating the distinctive mood of Eakins's paintings.

After exploring the style of each of the paintings, Johns then turns to an iconographic-iconological analysis. In the case of *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* this involves a history of the sport of rowing, particularly amateur rowing, and the way it was illustrated in popular prints and magazines. Equally important are the meanings and values that were associated with the sport at the time, values of physical and moral discipline, intelligence, and communication with self and nature that drew Eakins to the subject as a contemporary manifestation of an almost classical ideal of heroism. Since the painting celebrates the achievements of a Philadelphian in a distinctively Philadelphian setting, these values also allowed him to present it as a kind of monument to civic pride. Similarly, in the study of the *Gross Clinic* there unfolds a systematic examination of the imagery of anatomists and physicians from the time of Rembrandt, the history of medicine, especially surgery, and even an investigation of the particular kind of surgery Dr. Gross is performing and why it was chosen as the subject. Especially fascinating is the account of how Eakins's portrait of the long dead and largely forgotten Philadelphia sculptor William Rush restored that artist "to the canon of the history of American sculpture." One can do no more here than hint in this way at the extent and variety of the material Johns judiciously brings to bear on the paintings.

The picture that emerges of Eakins and his work from Johns's study is richer in texture, more varied, and more profound than any previously presented, as is her picture of the intellectual and cultural environment which he both worked within and helped to define (she also appends an excellent and useful bibliographical essay to her text). At a time when art historians have become increasingly concerned with the theoretical basis of their methods, her book also makes an interesting contribution by way of offering, as it were, a practical demonstration of the fruitfulness of methods developed and refined since the twenties. Clearly she owes much to the method of Panofsky and I have already mentioned how her work puts one in mind of Clark's programme for a social history of art. In this sense it addresses not just those interested in Eakins and late nineteenth-century American painting but a wider public as well.

BRYAN MANGRUM  
*University of Western Ontario*

---

DOUGLAS COOPER and GARY TINTEROW *The Essential Cubism: Braque, Picasso and their Friends, 1907-1920*. New York, George Braziller, Inc., in association with the Tate Gallery, London, 1983, 448 pp., 233 illus., \$65.00 (cloth).

Those fortunate enough to attend *The Essential Cubism* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in the spring of 1983 were treated to an eye-ful of masterworks by Picasso, Braque, Gris, Léger, and others on a scale that few museums today are capable of mounting. For those who were not so fortunate, there is the catalogue by Douglas Cooper and Gary Tinterow which documents and beautifully illustrates (often in colour) each of the works exhibited, with fleshed-out provenances and new material unpublished elsewhere. Many of the paintings and graphic works (the exhibition also included the sculpture of Laurens and Lipchitz) come from private collections and are published for the first time here. With all this going for their retrospective, it is a shame that the authors saddled such a potentially important opus with a bias that most readers will find suspect if not thoroughly disagreeable.

In their introductory essay, Cooper and Tinterow begin with the reasonable premise that the public is familiar with Cubist art in only a generalized way, recognizing its formal qualities without really comprehending its *raison d'être*. This they attribute to exhibitions that present unfocused or all-embracing notions of the movement without penetrating its significance or clearly examining its origins. To rectify the error, the authors propose to define for us "true" Cubism "in its purest form" in terms of the two major practitioners of the style, Braque and Picasso. Thus, we are told that:

Cubism as it was created from 1909 on by these two artists was never, in the conventional sense, a definable style of painting which other artists could adopt as it stood. The central episode in the evolutionary history of Cubism is entirely dominated by Braque and Picasso, who together progressively perfected and consolidated their new manner of pictorial representation, and eventually (1911) shifted from a perceptual to a conceptual approach to reality.

Cooper and Tinterow go on to describe the movement as a reaction against Impressionism, while relying on the Impressionist paradigm—the terms "Modernism" and "avant-garde" are conspicuous by their absence here—to explain Cubism's origins and development. For the authors, it was strictly a two-person affair which changed its look and direction as others took up the idiom and adulterated it. Finally, Cooper and Tinterow recall Juan Gris's *phrase lapidaire* that "Cubism is not a manner but an aesthetic: it is a state of mind."

*The Essential Cubism* unfortunately leaves it up to the reader to determine the compelling factors of this state of mind. The early, formative years of Braque and Picasso and their investigation of such source material as the paintings of Cézanne and African art are conscientiously chronicled, but without regard to the historical forces that are often instrumental in shaping the mind set necessary for the production of a work of art. The few quotations from the press found in the various entries do not provide a clear or balanced view of the critical reaction to the new painting, and we are thus deprived of any basis for exploring the moral or ideological implications that these innovative works surely convey.

Despite more than seven decades of hindsight and re-evaluation, it is important not to underestimate the shock value of the Cubist manifestation at the Salon des Indépendants in 1911—the first opportunity the gen-