Book Review: 'Portrait - The Life of Thomas Eakins'

by Robert L. Pincus

"Portrait: The Life of Thomas Eakins" by William S. McFeely; Norton; 256 pages; $26.95.

The greatest 19th century American poet, Walt Whitman, thought Thomas Eakins was the best American painter of his time - a force as much as an artist, he declared. But this was a minority opinion in their day.

When Eakins died in 1916, most of his paintings were stacked against the walls of his home on Philadelphia's Mount Vernon Street. His most famous picture, "The Gross Clinic," got the cold shoulder when he hoped to exhibit it at Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exposition. The curators didn't want Eakins' uncompromisingly realistic image of a surgeon included among their choices, though it did get hung in a corner of the Civil War-era field hospital staged for the event.

THE â€˜PORTRAITâ€™ ARTIST - Thomas Eakinâ€™s life is good grist for a bio; William S. McFeely sketches in the details. CNS Photo.William S. McFeely, a historian who won the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Ulysses S. Grant, sides with Whitman on the greatness of Eakins in his new "Portrait: The Life of Thomas Eakins." This is hardly an original point of view. It's pretty much the consensus that he was one of 19th-century's major realists, both in his narrative pictures, like "The Gross Clinic" and "Swimming," as well as his psychologically telling portraits. Winslow Homer is his only American peer, and at his best he rivaled the likes of Gustave Courbet in France.

McFeely's book is also the third biography of the artist in two years. So one question is almost automatic: Do we need yet another life of this artist? For McFeely's "Portrait," happily the answer is yes.

His book is elegantly written - more accessible than Henry Adams' dark and sometimes dour "Eakins Revealed" of 2005 and more psychologically probing than Sidney Kirkpatrick's "The Revenge of Thomas Eakins," which appeared earlier in 2006.

The book is well-illustrated, though the color reproductions are much better than the black-and-white examples. McFeely's book has great timing in its favor, too. No recent sale of a historical American picture has grabbed more headlines and created as much controversy as the announced purchase of "The Gross Clinic" for $68 million by two museums, the National Gallery of Art and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (funded by Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton).

The seller is Thomas Jefferson University. Back in 1878, when surgeon Samuel Gross was on the faculty of the university's medical school, alumni bought it for $200 and it has resided there ever since. Now, the school wants the money for improvements to the campus, and institutions in Philadelphia have a 45-day window to match the purchase price, though there are maneuvers under way to extend that timeline.

It's likely that Eakins would have never painted anything like "The Gross Clinic" if he hadn't gone abroad a decade earlier. Just after the Civil War ended, he left for Paris. He studied with one of France's leading academic painters, Jean-Leon Gerome, and ignored the emerging Impressionists. He also took instruction from the prominent Leon Bonnat, who gave him advice that proved pivotal: Go to Spain and look at Velazquez's art. Eakins was enthralled. In the end, his art owes more to the no-frills style of Velazquez than to the fussier effects of Gerome or Bonnat.

One of Eakins' most celebrated works, "Swimming," gets its own chapter - the only work that does. It was a daring picture in 1880s America, which still held to Victorian attitudes about nudity. The scene is the bank of a river; six men are either lounging on the bank, diving or swimming. All are naked, though the artist is concealed by the water. His dog swims alongside him.

The man who purchased this picture - Edward Coates, director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts - had second thoughts about hanging the image in his parlor and exchanged it for one of Eakins' easier domestic subjects.

Of the ill-fated canvas, McFeely has this to say: "In his lifetime, 'Swimming' seemed only to hit him, to have done him harm. It does no more. The picture is so good, so inviting, that Eakins seems only to be saying come on in, the water's fine."

Ultimately, it is about more than simple physical pleasures, McFeely reminds the reader. To him, the painting is a visual equivalent of "Walden," though it pictures a more social idyll than Thoreau's. Yet it is just as strongly a statement about freedom, literal and symbolic. The homoerotic dimension of "Swimming" is surely what ruffled Coates, and McFeely looks at Eakins' complex, ambivalent sexual identity more closely than previous biographers.

His nuanced approach fits the artist's story. Eakins did marry, in 1884. His partner was Susan Macdowell, also a painter; she was 33, he was almost 40, and they had no children. She is in one of his great portraits, "The Artist's Wife and His Setter Dog" (1884-89), now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her long pale dress sets her apart from the domestic setting and her gaze suggests an inner strength at odds with her gaunt frame.

"Neither Sue nor Tom appear to have been particularly attracted sexually to the other yet they managed this fact with great grace. What enabled them to do so? They were truly great friends. ... They respected each other's artistic ability, although there was a little condescension on his part and a corresponding lack of confidence on hers," McFeely says.

More likely than not, his relationship with Samuel Murray, a much younger, accomplished sculptor, did have a romantic and sexual dimension. They were inseparable in the 1890s. Both loved photography and applied it to their work.

After Eakins introduced his friend to Whitman, Murray took some renowned portraits of the poet. Murray also made photographs of Eakins that have an erotic quality. The friendship with him was a refuge from some of the tragic dimensions of Eakins' life.

The event from which he never seemed to recover fully was his dismissal from a longtime teaching post at the Pennsylvania Academy. Every Eakins biographer, going back to Lloyd Goodrich in 1933, recounts the story of how the artist removed the loin cloth from a male model in his life drawing class to make a point and some students, particularly the women, were scandalized. McFeely hints that there may have been more involved in his firing, which took place in February 1886, but the ultimate tragedy was the way it divided members of Eakins' family and the faculty as well as separating him from a role he loved.

McFeely rightly suggests that the optimism of Eakins' pictures of the 1870s and early 1880s - his daylight images of men rowing, sailing and, yes, swimming - dissipated. This darker view is embodied most fully in his late portraits of women.

No American portraits from this period match these paintings for their emotional depth. One of the greatest, dated 1899, depicts his wife Susan, her face filling the canvas. In 1904, he painted a talented pianist, "Mrs. Edith McMahon" - just after her divorce, McFeely tells us - the face exuding a haunting wistfulness.

Susan's belief in Eakins' importance never wavered. In 1917, a year after his death, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted a major retrospective of his art. (There had never been one in his lifetime.) In 1929, she and her longtime housemate, the same Mary Adeline Williams that Eakins once painted, donated more than 80 works to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. These events marked the beginning of his precipitous rise in reputation.

McFeely's "Portrait" isn't definitive. His aim, it seems, wasn't to write an exhaustive biography but a

thoroughly readable one. For those who want to understand both Eakins' remarkable art and the obstacles he confronted to create it, he tells the artist's tale eloquently.

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