

Thomas Eakins, Photographer

Cheryl Leibold

Thomas Eakins's photographs of nude models have become famous, if not notorious, having been part of the almost mythic scandal which surrounded his dismissal from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1886. Recently a completely unknown series of images has appeared which reveals yet another nuance of Eakins's fascination with nudity and human anatomy.

In 1985 the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts acquired the Charles Bregler Collection of Thomas Eakins letters, drawings, and photographs. Two hundred images of nude models, both males and females, were included, some taken in the studio and others in outdoor settings. Numerous rather prosaic images of horses were also found. In three photographs Eakins combined a nude male with a horse. And in four images, which came as a complete surprise to Eakins scholars, he took anatomical juxtaposition to more dramatic lengths by posing a nude female with a horse.

Within this new group there are two variants showing Eakins's wife Susan seated side saddle on the horse, and two more in which she stands, leaning against the horse's body. In one of the latter pair, shown here, the horse gently turns his head toward her while she rests her arms on his back. All four are set in a wooded glade with strong sunlight creating deep shadows.

Eakins had a longstanding interest in both human and equine anatomy. He introduced a rigorous program of anatomical study to the curriculum at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1881 and also made many photographic studies for anatomical demonstration. While the image shown here may have been conceived as a kind of comparative anatomy study, Eakins seems to have been intrigued with the resulting enigmatic image, as suggested by the dark platinum printing and the fact that he had it, and the companion frontal view, enlarged.

Throughout his active years as a photographer, roughly 1880 to 1893, Eakins surely was aware of the work being done in the new style of pictorialism. He must have seen the large photography exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1883, 1886 and 1889. Through acquaintances such as Edward Redfield and publications like the *Philadelphia Photographer* he would have followed the debates about photography's expressive and aesthetic potential. While he did not exhibit his work in public, nor join any club or society, his creation of a photograph with this degree of dramatic interest reflects the ideas of the most progressive photographers of the day. The influence of the pictorialists on Eakins cannot be proven or measured, but in a few photographs, such as this one, it cannot be ignored.

The Pennsylvania Academy's 1994 catalogue of the Eakins photographs in the Bregler Collection, *Eakins and the Photograph* (Smithsonian Institution Press), includes four critical essays and illustrates over 200 images.

Courtesy of Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts



Thomas Eakins, Susan Macdowell Eakins nude, from rear, leaning against Thomas Eakins's horse Billy, ca. 1890, Platinum print.