

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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ALL OF THOMAS EAKINS' KNOWN ROWING PICTURES

BROUGHT TOGETHER FOR FIRST TIME;

AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, JUNE 23 - SEPTEMBER 29, 1996

Washington, D.C. -- For the first time, all of the known rowing pictures by the great American realist painter Thomas Eakins (1814-1916) will be on view, brought together for Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures. The exhibition at the National Gallery of Art's East Building, June 23 through September 29, 1996, will contain nine paintings, one watercolor, and thirteen drawings that reveal the artist's lifelong interest in rowing and other subjects of contemporary American life, as well as the human figure.

The show was organized by the Yale University Art Gallery, where it will be on view from October 11, 1996 to January 14, 1997. It will also be on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art from February 15 to May 15, 1997.

Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures has been made possible by a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a

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Federal agency.

"Eakins' rowing pictures beautifully evoke an era in American history, and his technical achievement is remarkable. The National Gallery is pleased to be able to present Eakins' work on this topic in such depth," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art.

Following three-and-a-half years of rigorous artistic training in Europe, Eakins returned to his native Philadelphia in 1870. Unlike other young artists whose study abroad caused them to lose interest in the American scene, Eakins was determined to work from American subjects. Nine months later he sent to his first public exhibition The Champion Single Sculls (1871), on loan from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its subject not only rejected European tradition but also dealt with a subject of contemporary popular culture -- the amateur oarsman Max Schmitt, who excelled at a demanding, competitive task. Rowing on the Schuylkill River was an important pastime in Philadelphia, and Eakins himself was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable oarsman. The seminude, muscular rower allowed Eakins to demonstrate his anatomical knowledge and Paris-trained skills as a figure painter.

All the rowing pictures were executed in the studio, with every element precisely worked out. In an exceptional series of perspective drawings, oil studies, watercolors, and finished oils, the artist would depict single scullers, pair-oared and

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four-man shells, at practice or in contests, in the near distance or far, in bright light or in shadow, set against the open river or enclosed by the pier of a bridge. In their intense analytical discipline, Eakins' studies for his rowing series are unique in American art. One drawing gives so exactly the dimensions of the Biglin shell, specific information about its location on the river, the configuration of the bridge, the distance of all objects from the viewer, and the position of the sun, that one scholar determined that the time depicted was shortly before 7:20 p.m. in early June or mid-July, 1872.

Eakins' most frequent subjects for subsequent rowing pictures were the celebrated professional oarsmen, the Biglin brothers of New York. He depicted John and Barney Biglin together in three oils and two drawings and John Biglin alone in one oil and two works on paper.

The first painting of the Biglin series, the Philadelphia Museum of Art's The Pair-Oared Shell (1872), shows the brothers practicing. Painted just a year after The Champion Single Sculls, the visual elements have been reduced to a strikingly bold composition. Eakins next portrayed them in an historic racing contest on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. The Biglin Brothers Racing (1872) from the National Gallery of Art and The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake (1873) from the Cleveland Museum of Art convey the excitement of that event. The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake, the largest and most complex

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painting in the series, is the last to include the brothers together. In it Eakins shows the moment when the brothers had almost completed a complicated turn, with each oar at a slightly different angle in the water.

With Oarsmen on the Schuylkill (c. 1874), Eakins came to the end of the rowing-picture series. He had captured the golden moment in American rowing. Within a few years, betting and racing scandals would cause the sport to lose its popularity.

Curators for the exhibition are Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., curator of American and British paintings, National Gallery of Art, and Helen Cooper, curator of American paintings and sculpture, Yale University Art Gallery. A fully illustrated catalogue, published by Yale University Art Gallery, contains essays and entries that explore both stylistic and thematic issues.

The National Gallery of Art, located on Constitution Avenue between Third and Seventh Streets, NW, is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is free. For general information call (202) 737-4215, or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., at (202) 842-6176.

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