

EAKINS: The Innovator

By MONTYE CHAFEY
Staff Writer

In many ways, Thomas Eakins fitted the popular conception of artist as eccentric.

He may have been the world's first streaker when in 1884 he had himself photographed running nude for motion studies; he dissected cadavers to study anatomy; he was forced to resign from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for lifting a male model's loincloth to show his student's pelvis.

Obviously, Thomas Eakins, the Philadelphian who sculpted the Trenton Battle Monument Bronzes, was not an average 19th century artist. But neither was he really an eccentric. His infamous acts were part of his pursuit for a realistic style of painting which created, not copied life. For this pursuit, he suffered neglect, even abuse dur-

ing his lifetime. (He died in 1916 at the age of 72.) Two of his most famous paintings "The Gross Clinic" and "The Agnew Clinic" were rejected from exhibitions because of their realism.

As he himself wrote, "My honors are misunderstanding, prosecution and neglect, enhanced because unsought."

But Walt Whitman, a contemporary who sat for a portrait by Eakins in his Camden home, understood Eakins.

"Eakins is not a painter, he is a force," said the poet.

His force has long since won Eakins the title "Dean of American painters." Tonight he will get another tribute when at 8:30 p.m. the new documentary "Eakins" opens for its United States premiere at the Walnut Street Theatre, Ninth and Walnut Streets, Philadelphia, as a selection in the First Philadelphia International Film Festival. It will be shown again tomorrow at 7:15 p.m.

Produced by Daniel Dietrich, a Philadelphian who has one of the largest private Eakins collections, and directed by Christopher Speeth, who has 12 short documentaries to his credit, the film includes interviews with six people who knew the artist.

Dietrich, who hit upon the idea for a film about Eakins while working on the restoration of the Eakins house at 1729 Mount Vernon Street, calls his subject "an extremely powerful painter, the finest America has produced."

THE 32-YEAR-OLD PRODUCER admitted that he and his crew had some difficulty making a 90-minute film about a man who died more than 50 years ago. "It's like archeology. You try to get the little pieces and put them together...he has remained somewhat of an enigma because he wrote few letters."

After the film staff overcame the difficulties of tracking down Eakins' surviving portrait subjects and two of his relatives, they uncovered a wealth of reminiscences about not only Eakins, but about his times, his friendship with Walt Whitman and their lives.

According to Speeth, he and the film crew traveled in a "rented, broken-down hearse" to places as far away as Roanoke, Va. or Minneapolis, Minn. to record the memories of persons who knew Eakins. Despite their subjects' advanced ages (he estimates that the portrait subjects' ages ranged from 90 to 105) their recollections "were amazing" says the director.

Although one reason for the film, Speeth says, is the realization that these people and their knowledge were vulnerable to time and death, the point was driven home when after the interviews two interviewees — Eleanor Pue Lavell of Philadelphia and Frances Crowell, niece of Thomas Eakins — died.

Interspersed with the interviews in the film are over 100 of Eakins' paintings which were photographed through a special infra-red absorbing glass to avoid heat damage. Eakins probably would have approved of their inclusion in the film because he once said "for the public, my life is all in my art."

Also included in the film are re-enactments of certain scenes and modern photos of art school life class, surgery featuring Philadelphia surgeon Samuel Kron (Eakins was intrigued by people at their jobs, particularly doctors), a dissection laboratory and a stroboscopic motion study of nudes (Eakins felt that the study of the nude was central to painting.)

Speeth, a graduate of Kenyon College who has studied film at the Annenberg Center in Philadelphia, says that he has tried to give the film the point of view "that Eakins would have given it if he were making the film, a very realistic point of view."

Supplying a suitable backdrop to the film images is the electronic score composed by J.K. Randall, a member of the music department at Princeton University. (See Don Delany's story on Page 5.) The narration is supplied by a



At age 40, Thomas Eakins' face reflected the strength and determination which made his art among the best America has produced.

foremost authority of Eakins, Lloyd Goodrich, who interviewed Eakins' wife, Susann, while she was still alive. Goodrich is advisory director of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

THE FILM'S SUBJECT, Thomas Cowperthwaite Eakins, is best known in Trenton for his two sculptures which adorned the sides of the Battle Monument for 74 years — until 1969 when they were removed for their own protection against pollution and weather. Today they're in the New Jersey State Museum while reproductions take their place on North Broad Street at Five Points.

Although his sculpture is not included in the film for the sake of brevity, both the director and producer of "Eakins" commented on the bronzes' significance. The sculptures, which depict Washington crossing the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton, reflected Eakins' interest in movement and form. Their commission came at a low point in his popularity and it was probably through his friendship with William R. O'Donovan (who executed the other figures on the monument) that he landed the job at all.

Born in 1884, the son of a writing master in Philadelphia, Eakins was educated at Central High School and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The Academy frustrated him because of its emphasis on copying casts from classical art and he supplemented his education with anatomical courses at Jefferson Medical Center.

He sailed for France at 20 and entered Jean Leon Gerome's class at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Here the nude was emphasized, an interest Eakins would continue for much of his life. Before returning to America he toured galleries, particularly in Spain, finding Velasquez his favorite painter and Rubens "the nastiest, most vulgar, noisy painter that ever lived."

He returned to Philadelphia where he would live almost his entire life, sometime crossing over into New Jersey for hunting expeditions. He was fascinated with mathematics

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Was Thomas Eakins the world's first streaker? Maybe. Or at least the first streaker recorded via a very primitive type of motion photography known as the "murey wheel." This photo is representative of Eakins' combined interest in muscular locomotion and photography.