

America's Rembrandt

Not Too Much Praise for Eakins

—BY JERRY BYWATERS—

Among the paintings in the highly important fair art exhibition opening Saturday is the "Portrait of Letitia Bacon" by Thomas Eakins. This work refreshes our conviction that in Eakins we find America's Rembrandt and the possible basis of a "tradition" for the future of American painting. . . . Born in Philadelphia in 1844, Eakins studied in Paris under Gerome and the essential strength of his particular draftsmanship broke through the academic style of his instruction. On his return home he settled directly into the business of being himself. He did not paint to show how pictures were being made in France, but to show what people were like in Philadelphia.

The splendid job he performed is attested to by a string of masterly portraits that include "Arthur B. Frost," "Dr. Gross," "Signora Gomez D'Arza," "Letitia Bacon," "Mr. Harry Lewes" (once rejected by a national academy jury), "Addie," "Clara" and many more equally as fine. There were also figure groups of oarsmen, prize fights, operating scenes, among them "Salutat," "Gross Clinic" and "Agnew Clinic," the last two comparable to if not better than Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson." Eakins taught at the Pennsylvania Academy until he resigned, when not permitted to use male and female models in life classes. He taught privately until a few years before his death in 1916.

Depth and Honesty.

Excluded from the mass of native art history, absent from most of the museums, unrecognized by his contemporary critics and collectors, Eakins advances with the passing of time as a figure with depth and honesty enough to sorely embarrass the Sargent and challenge the modern abstractionists to check over again the meaning (for us) of the sophisticated experiments in decorative distortion which are imported from the great Parisians.

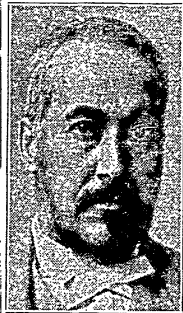
Of the most likely candidates for an American tradition we would choose Homer and Eakins, realists Ryder and Davies, romantics. Homer used the realism of the forces of nature as the key to his rugged excursions in paint. Ryder and Davies dwelt on the realism of emotion and prophesied in a peculiar way the "inner needs" of subjective painting which now form the catch words for the modern movements. Eakins, never concerning himself with controversial aesthetics, seems to have achieved a satisfactory fusion of these two opposite types—realistic and romantic.

Unmitigated Realist.

Those connoisseurs with halted perception would catalogue Eakins as an unmitigated realist and put him in the pigeon holes with Duvencek or Sargent. They might as well lump Frans Hals and Rembrandt together. Sargent and Hals were realists of the brush wallowing in the superficiality of their technique. Eakins was even clumsy in his technique, but it never failed him as a proper means to achieve character in his subjects. And, though his major interest was always in subject, he can not be accused of being a "parasite of the object" as Redon dubbed most realists.

Eakins took actuality that he knew well, and rendered it slowly and seriously. His portraits are convincing likenesses but without the slightest reference to the wealth, surface beauty or social station with which the average sitter thinks himself possessed. It is because of this uncompromising truthfulness and lack of

Respect at Last for Fair Gallery Painter



THOMAS EAKINS.

Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) is riding on the crest of posthumous appreciation. His "Portrait of Letitia Bacon" will be on view in the Fair Park Art Gallery during the fair term, Oct. 7 to 22.

saccharinity that Eakins has been somewhat neglected and will probably never become widely popular. "This painter gives no joy, no exaltation,"

says the stodgy critic Cortissov bemoaning Eakins' neglect of the graces of painting (gaseous forms and empty silhouettes), in which Blashfield and Sargent indulged so freely.

So little was this painter respected at one time that his "Swimming Hole" was permitted (fortunately for Texans), to go to the Fort Worth Museum. Many paintings were offered as gifts to acquaintances and were never removed from the artist's studio. Uncourted by officialdom, Eakins let fashion go its way while he proceeded with his own development into a master of economic utterance in paint and thought. To his students he said: "A teacher can do very little for a pupil and should only be thankful if he don't (sic) hinder him, and—the greater the master, the less he can say."

We can be grateful that within the last decade the importance of Eakins' painting has at last been recognized. The museums are making spirited efforts to secure his works while they can be found on the market. An excellent biography by Lloyd Goodrich has been recently published by Scribners for the Whitney Museum of American Art. And "official" recognition has (post-humously as usual) come Eakins way—his portrait "Clara" has been acquired by the Louvre to serve as the nucleus for an American section.