

Eakins

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Masters of Art

Thomas Eakins

(1844-1916)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

Eakins

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Masters of Art Series

Thomas Eakins



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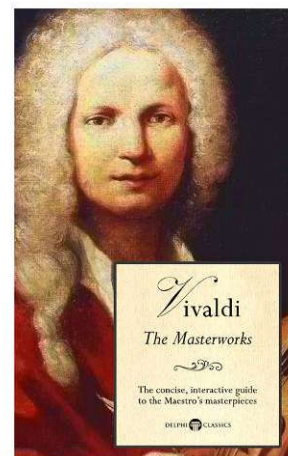
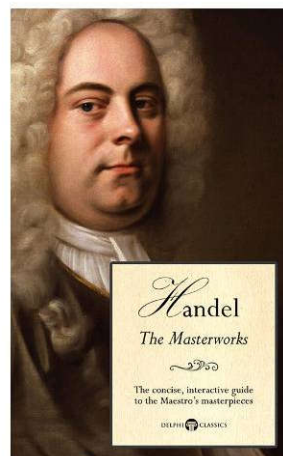
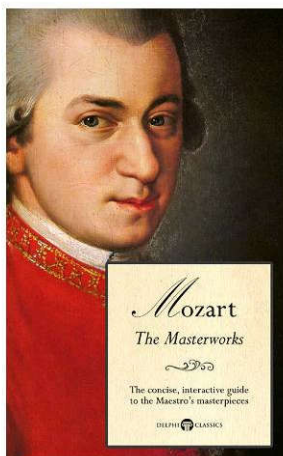
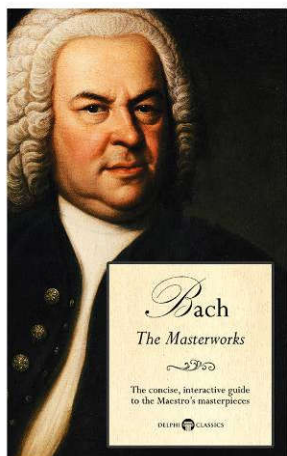


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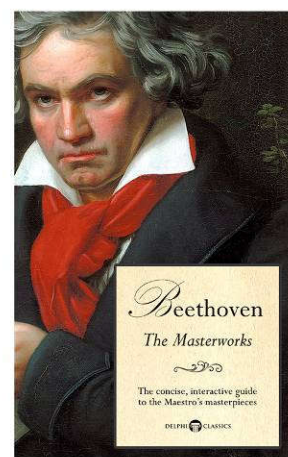
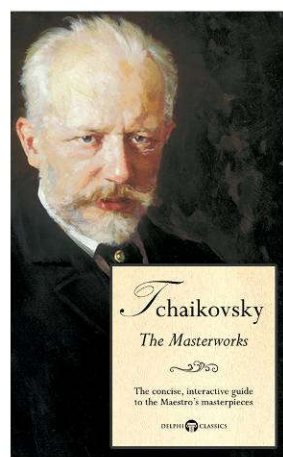
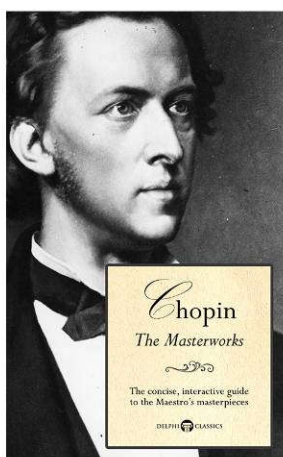
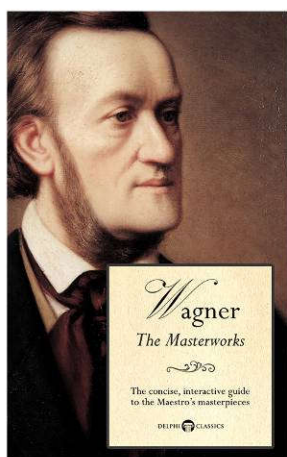
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The Highlights



Philadelphia, 1856 — Thomas Eakins' birthplace



Eakins, aged 6

The Highlights



In this section, a sample of Eakins' most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

The Champion Single Sculls (1871)



A nineteenth century master of American Realism, Thomas Eakins was born on 25 July 1844 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Save for one extended study trip abroad and a brief trip to the West, virtually all of his life would be spent in that city. He was the son of Caroline Cowperthwait Eakins and Benjamin Eakins, a well-liked teacher and calligraphist employed at Friends' Central School. His father supplemented his salary by lettering certificates, diplomas and other legal documents in elegant script. Benjamin Eakins was careful and shrewd with his investments, ensuring that his family could live comfortably.

While still a student at the Central High School, Eakins produced impressive drawings that belied his tender age. By the age of sixteen, he had mastered challenging problems of perspective that would bewilder other artists throughout their careers, while his charcoal studies demonstrated an assured understanding of form and anatomy. Eakins was tutored at home by his talented father and was able from a young age to produce accomplished calligraphy. Father and son both loved the outdoors and spent much time together on Philadelphia's Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, skating in the winter and sailing, swimming and hunting in the summer. By all accounts, they were very close.

Eakins graduated on 11 July 1861, amidst the early stages of the American Civil War, but he chose not to enlist in the Union Army. Instead, his father established him in the family business of teaching calligraphy and inscribing documents. Less than a year after his graduation, he unsuccessfully applied for a position as an instructor of art and penmanship at his former High School. This daring act, at the age of eighteen, reveals Eakins' determined and headstrong character — a trait that would apply to him all his life. Undaunted, he returned to the classroom as a student, enrolling at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

There, he attended life-drawing sessions and anatomy lectures, while making countless drawings from their collection of antique casts. As there were no paid teachers or formal instruction, Eakins had to rely on the more experienced students for guidance. He also was aided during this formative period by two of his father's closest friends: George W. Holmes (c. 1812-1895), a landscape painter and art teacher; and John Sartain (1808-1897), an internationally known engraver. Eakins liked to go out painting with Holmes, while he became intimately acquainted with Sartain's son William, as they were classmates, first at the High School and then at the Academy. Eakins always showed a great interest in human physiology, developing his education by attending the rigorous anatomy classes required of the students at Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College. After four years of study, he still felt that his education was incomplete. Though he could draw adeptly, he believed he still could not paint. Disappointed by the lack of professional instruction in America, he persuaded his father to fund his enrolment in Paris' celebrated *École des Beaux-Arts*. Eakins promised that after a few years tutelage at the *École*, he would return home to support himself as an independent painter. In spite of his doubts, his father consented.

In September 1866 Eakins sailed out of the New York harbor, bound for adventure in Europe at the age of twenty-two. In Paris he was stunned to learn that there were no

vacancies at the École, as it had filled its quota of foreigners and there were already four Americans ahead of him on the waiting list. Once more undaunted, Eakins overtook the line of applicants, cutting short the French bureaucracy using a series of impressively lettered, yet empty envelopes, while feigning an ignorance of the French language. By October he had gained admission to the prestigious school, dishonestly, but assuredly.

During his three and a half years there, he studied under the great Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), who was an enthusiastic master of academism, famous for detailed and highly finished paintings of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as Orientalist canvases inspired by trips to the Middle East. His works were meticulously researched, though his detractors would complain that they were overly stylised and sentimental. However, Gérôme's penchant for anatomy attracted the interest of young Eakins and would go on to inform some of the artist's greatest creations.

By 1869 Eakins had been plagued by long periods of insomnia, homesickness and poor health, exacerbated by his damp lodgings. Things improved with the arrival of his old friend William Sartain and together they enjoyed a month of private study with the portrait painter Léon Bonnat (1833-1922). Through the guidance of Bonnat's gentle but assured manner, Eakins finally felt that his artistic education was complete and it was time to leave Paris. After a brief sojourn in the warmer climate of Spain to improve his health, Eakins made the journey back to America, arriving in Philadelphia on 4 July 1870. Although he would speak with great fondness of his time spent in Europe, he would never return.

His father had converted the fourth floor of the family residence at 1729 Mount Vernon Street into a studio where his son could work. Eakins was keen to resume the athletic life he had enjoyed as a boy, especially on Philadelphia's two rivers. He had always been a keen oarsman, fascinated by rowing as a strenuous image expressive of physical as well as "moral discipline". He was also inspired to depict the local heroes of the popular sport of boat racing in his artworks. His high-school classmate Max Schmitt (1842-1900) had even gained a celebrity status by recently winning several highly competitive races. A representation of Max Schmitt, sculling through the calm waters of the Schuylkill River on an autumnal afternoon, would provide the subject of Eakins' first masterwork, *The Champion Single Sculls* (1871). Held today in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it is an original painting, unprecedented in its attention to realism and lack of artifice.

The canvas reveals the influence of Gérôme and Bonnat, as well as the work of the Spanish master Diego Velázquez, which had fascinated Eakins during his trip to the Prado in Madrid. The painting celebrates Schmitt's victory in the 5 October 1870 single sculls competition. An early convert to sculls, Schmitt owned his own vessel, which he named "Josie" after his sister. The name of the scull is visible in the canvas below Schmitt's right hand. The composition echoes the reported weather conditions during the event, with the precise position of the sun at the date and time of Schmitt's triumph. However, instead of portraying a dramatic scene in the midst of the competition, Schmitt is depicted at rest, dragging his oars with the disappearing eddies of his course visible in the water. The location is just downstream of the Columbia Railroad Bridge, the site of the turn in the race. Eakins includes a self portrait in the canvas, depicting himself as the rower in the middle distance and he has signed the painting – "Eakins, 1871" – on the stern of his scull. This striking image of calm and meditative victory would be the first of almost thirty rowing works, comprising sketches, oil paintings, watercolours and perspective drawings produced over the next couple of years.

Nine months after his return from Europe, Eakins submitted *The Champion Single Sculls* to a show at the Union League of Philadelphia. The reviews were mixed, though considering that this was the very start of his career, the canvas was no small feat. The Philadelphia Bulletin described it as:

“...a picture entitled ‘The Champion Single Sculls’ (No. 137), which, though peculiar, has more than ordinary interest. The Artist, in dealing so boldly and broadly with the commonplace in nature, is working upon well-supported theories, and despite a somewhat scattered effect, gives promise of a conspicuous future.”

The reviewer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* stated that,

“While manifesting a marked ability, especially in the painting of the rower in the foreground, the whole effect is scarcely satisfactory. The light on the water, on the rower and on the trees lining the bank indicates that the sun is blazing fiercely, but on looking upward one perceives a curiously dull leaden sky.”

Eakins went on to gift the painting to his friend Schmitt. After Schmitt’s death in 1900, his widow retained it until 1930, when she sold it Susan Macdowell Eakins, the artist’s widow. Mrs. Eakins consigned it to Babcock Galleries, New York City, where it failed to find a buyer. In 1934 it was purchased from Milch Galleries, New York City, by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it hangs to this day.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



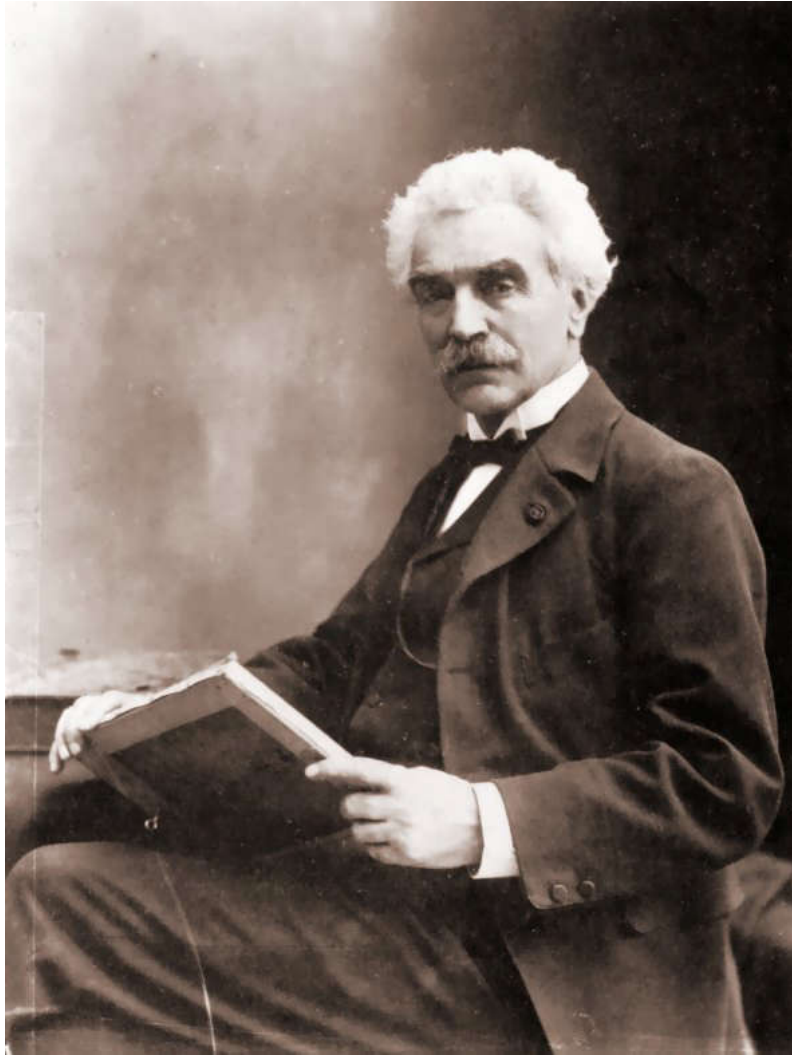
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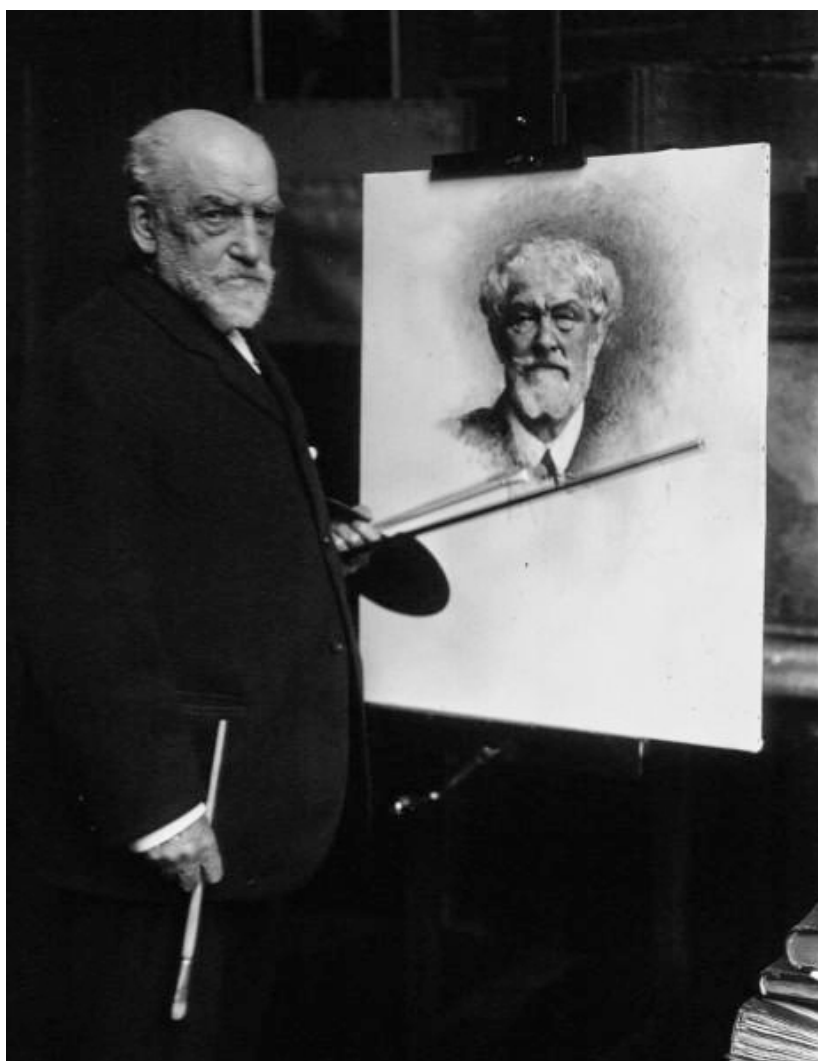
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Jean-Léon Gérôme by Nadar, c. 1890



'Encampment near Constantinople', an example of Gérôme's plein-air technique, Ger Eenen Collection, The Netherlands, 1878



Léon Bonnat, 1918



View of the Schuylkill River today

The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake (1873)



On 4 June 1872 Eakins' mother died suddenly from a mysterious illness, leaving the family in great distress. Eakins dealt with the tragedy by throwing himself with renewed vigor into his work. After a month's mourning, he was back at the riverbank with his sketchbook in hand. One figure that especially caught this eye was the physically impressive North American single-scul champion, John Biglin. Eakins commenced a series of artworks that depicted John and his younger brother Barney Biglin in action on the river. Over the next two years, the artist created four final oil works, five watercolours and numerous drawings and studies of the Biglin brothers.

The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake (1873), held today in the Cleveland Museum of Art, portrays the decisive moment in a five-mile contest, with the prize being a purse of \$2,000. The Biglins (John on the right; Barney on the left) have turned their scull around their designated blue stake flag and are now heading to the finishing line. The team of Coulter and Cavitt are represented several lengths back, striving for their flag. Throngs of spectators line the riverbank and closely observe the Biglins negotiate the challenging turn. The Biglins, of course, won the race, cementing their status as the most celebrated oarsmen of their era. Preparatory to producing the final oil, Eakins made several meticulous drawings, planning every detail from the angle of the oars to the varying reflections of the water. And again he includes a self portrait: note the tiny figure cheering in the scull near the red stake flag.

The subject of rowing offers obvious advantages to an ambitious artist. Like Degas' fascination for racing horses and ballet dancers, a depiction of rowing enables an artist to showcase his skills in replicating scenes of spontaneous action, while capturing the effect of changing patterns of light on the water. No doubt, the young artist relished the opportunity to show off the fruits of his intensive training at Paris' École des Beaux-Arts. Also, his representations of half-clad athletes, depicted in momentary action, allowed Eakins to continue his studies in the faithful depiction of anatomy. However, though these sporting images were noted for their accomplished flair, attracting numerous admirers, they did not sell well. Today, the series of Biglin pictures is hailed as a landmark in American Realist art and Eakins' works are renowned for their unsentimental realism. These champions are not larger than life heroes, appearing in the grips of Herculean struggles, as some artist's would represent them. They instead appear as everyday figures that have achieved greatness through quiet and self-reflective actions.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail; note self portrait off-centre left



Eakins' depiction of 'John Biglin in a Single Scull', 1873

The Gross Clinic (1875)



Poor sales of his work would be an issue that affected Eakins for many years. From 1870 until 1878, a period when he produced some of his greatest masterpieces, he earned a mere \$140 from the sales of his paintings. Rejection after rejection frustrated the artist, who was convinced that the quality of his work was not lacking. His yearning for financial independence grew stronger due to changes in his domestic setting: his sister Frances had married Tom's boyhood friend, William Crowell, and the couple settled in the Mount Vernon Street house, where Eakins also ran his studio. Before long, three children had arrived and it was noisy household. In 1874, aged thirty, Eakins became engaged to his new brother-in-law's twenty-three-year-old sister, Kathrin Crowell (1851-1879). Rumour has it that the artist's father engineered the match as a remedy for his son's carousing...

During this engagement period, Eakins sought for a theme that might make his canvases more marketable. Eventually, he hit upon the idea of depicting the celebrated surgeon Dr. Samuel D. Gross at work in his amphitheatre, believing that it would attract unusual interest. His fascination with anatomy had led him to Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College, where he had enrolled in Practical Anatomy courses. While studying there, he met Dr. Samuel D. Gross, whose commanding presence in the amphitheatre inspired what is now regarded by many as Eakins' magnum opus, *The Gross Clinic*.

The composition features more than twenty portraits, narrating a complex medical drama with vivid realism. Having just executed his incision, Dr. Gross waits while his assistant, Dr. James M. Barton, probes for a piece of bone in the patient's thigh (he is being treated for osteomyelitis of the femur). The painting is noted for its use of *chiaroscuro* (the dramatic balance and pattern of light and shade), which surely would have impressed Eakins' great hero Velázquez, a master of the technique. It is a painting of marked contrasts that are subtly counterbalanced. On one side we have the calm detachment of the medical team and the objective and seemingly unfeeling interest of the students, juxtaposed to the vulnerability of the young patient and the anguish of his mother, who looks away in horror. The dramatic contrast of light against dark, aptly reminds us of binary polarities of disease against health, objectivity against subjectivity, ignorance against knowledge; and life against death.

Although now regarded as a masterpiece of nineteenth century realist art, when Eakins unveiled *The Gross Clinic* few reviewers were enthusiastic. Several critics went so far as to describe it as "a degradation of Art," and "both horrible and disgusting". Eakins had planned to exhibit the painting at the United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia on 10 May 1876, therefore announcing his status as an American master — so great were his hopes for this composition. Yet, once more his work was ultimately rejected. The *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph* reported that the blood on Dr. Gross's fingers made some of the committee members sick. The board had grave doubts that they should exhibit to the public a work so 'graphic' in its realism. Eakins was understandably devastated by this further disappointment, though the painting would eventually find a place in the exhibition — not in the gallery, but in the Army Post Hospital exhibit, where it was placed on a wall of a mock hospital

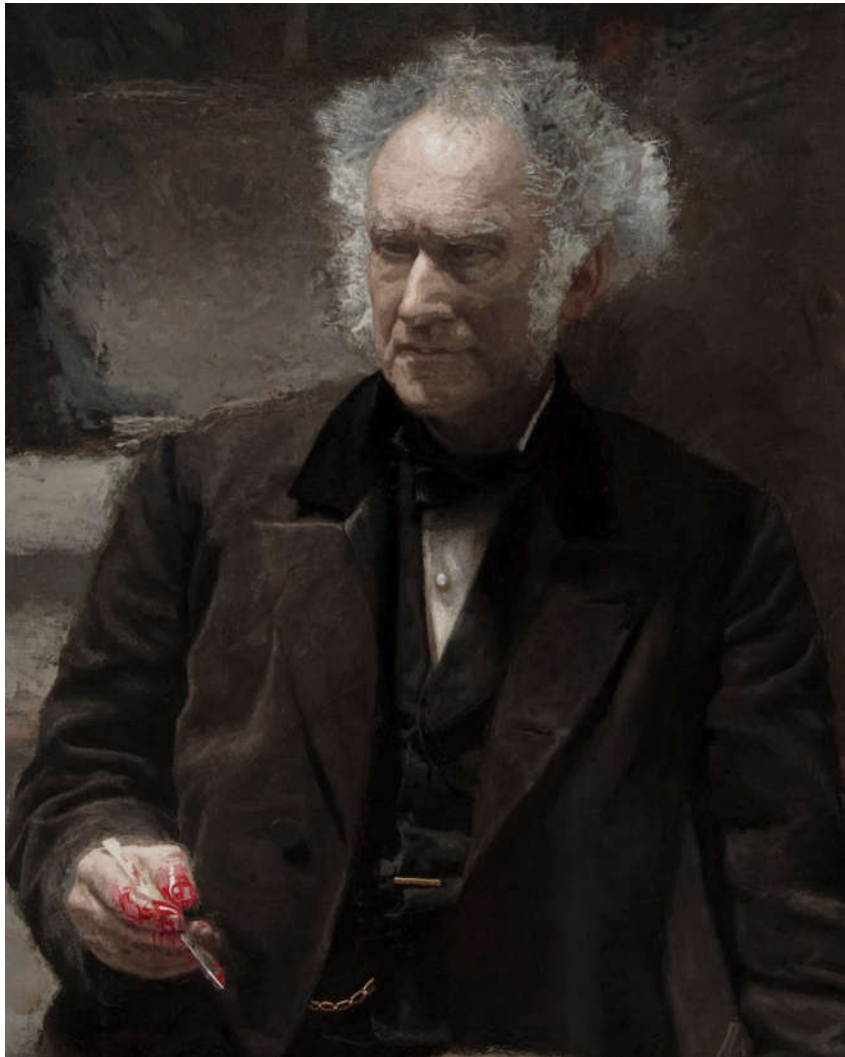
ward with papier-mâché patients. When Eakins saw the dismal fate of his grand canvas he is reported to have nearly cried.

Celebrated for its uncompromising realism, *The Gross Clinic* has earned an important position for documenting the history of medicine, since it honours the emergence of surgery as a healing profession (in previous times surgery was associated primarily as a last resort with amputation). Historians have praised its faithful recording of how a surgical theatre appeared in the nineteenth century. The canvas is often contrasted with Eakins' later painting *The Agnew Clinic* (1889), which depicts a cleaner, brighter, surgical theatre, with participants in white coats. In comparing the two, the advance in understanding of the prevention of infection is clear. Another noteworthy difference in the later painting is the presence of a professional nurse, Mary Clymer.

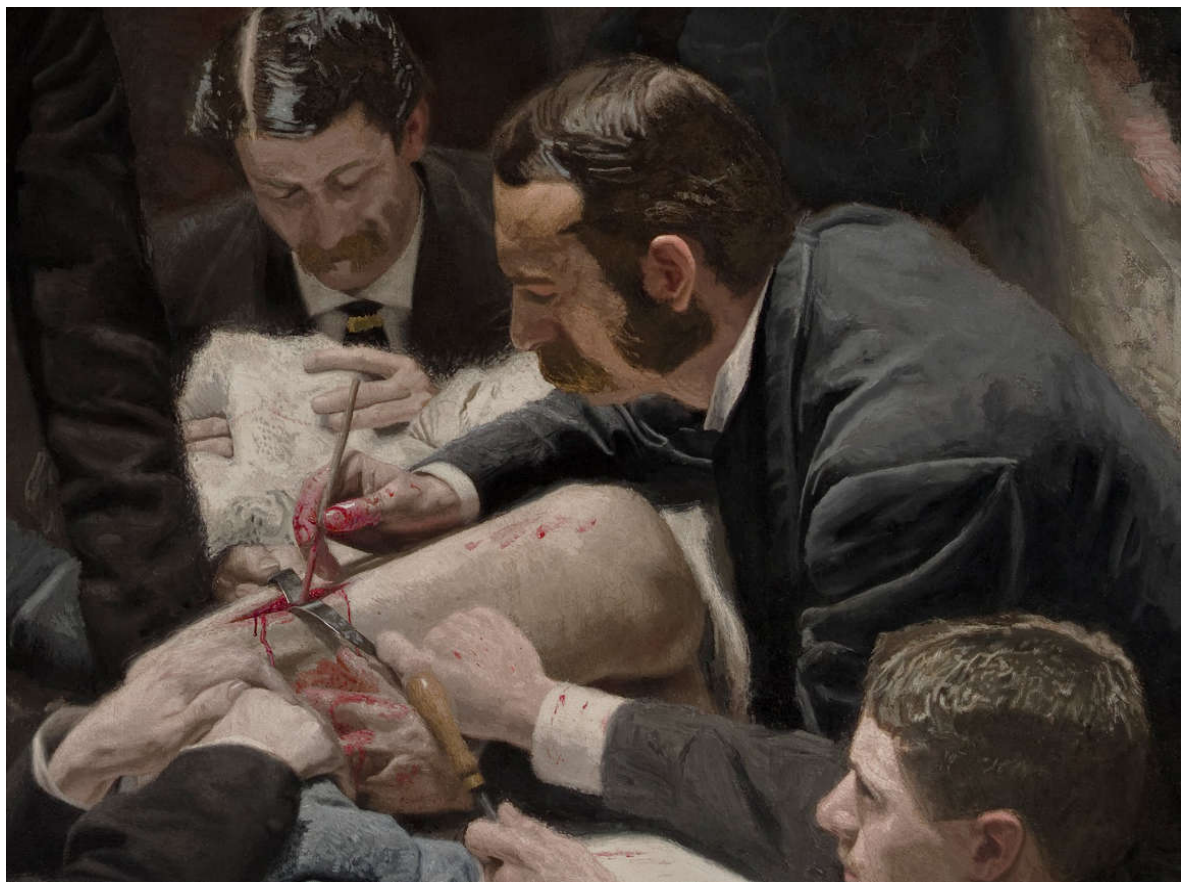
The Gross Clinic was purchased for \$200 at the Centennial Exhibition and housed in the College Building of Jefferson Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia until it was moved in the mid-1980's to Jefferson Alumni Hall. Although undocumented, in the late-1970's there was a rumour of a substantial offer by a collector, who wished to donate the painting to the National Gallery of Art. In 2006 the Thomas Jefferson University Board voted to sell the painting for \$68 million to the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the new Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, then under construction in Bentonville, Arkansas. The sale would represent a record price for an artwork made in the United States prior to World War II.

This proposed sale was seen as a secretive act. In late November 2006 efforts were made to keep the painting in Philadelphia, raising a fund for a December 26 deadline to purchase the canvas, invoking a "historic objects" clause in the city's preservation code. In a matter of weeks \$30 million was raised and on 21 December 2006 Wachovia Bank agreed to lend the difference until the rest of the money had been raised, keeping the painting in Philadelphia. Still, pledges alone were not enough to cover the \$68 million purchase price. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts was forced to deaccession Eakins' *The Cello Player* to an unidentified private buyer; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art deaccessioned Eakins' *Cowboy Singing*, along with two oil sketches to the Anschutz collection and the Denver Art Museum. Today, a reproduction of *The Gross Clinic* sits in the place of the original at Thomas Jefferson University. Every year at the graduation ceremony, graduating fellows of Vascular Neurology & Neurocritical Care Departments receive a special reproduction print of the painting as a parting gift.





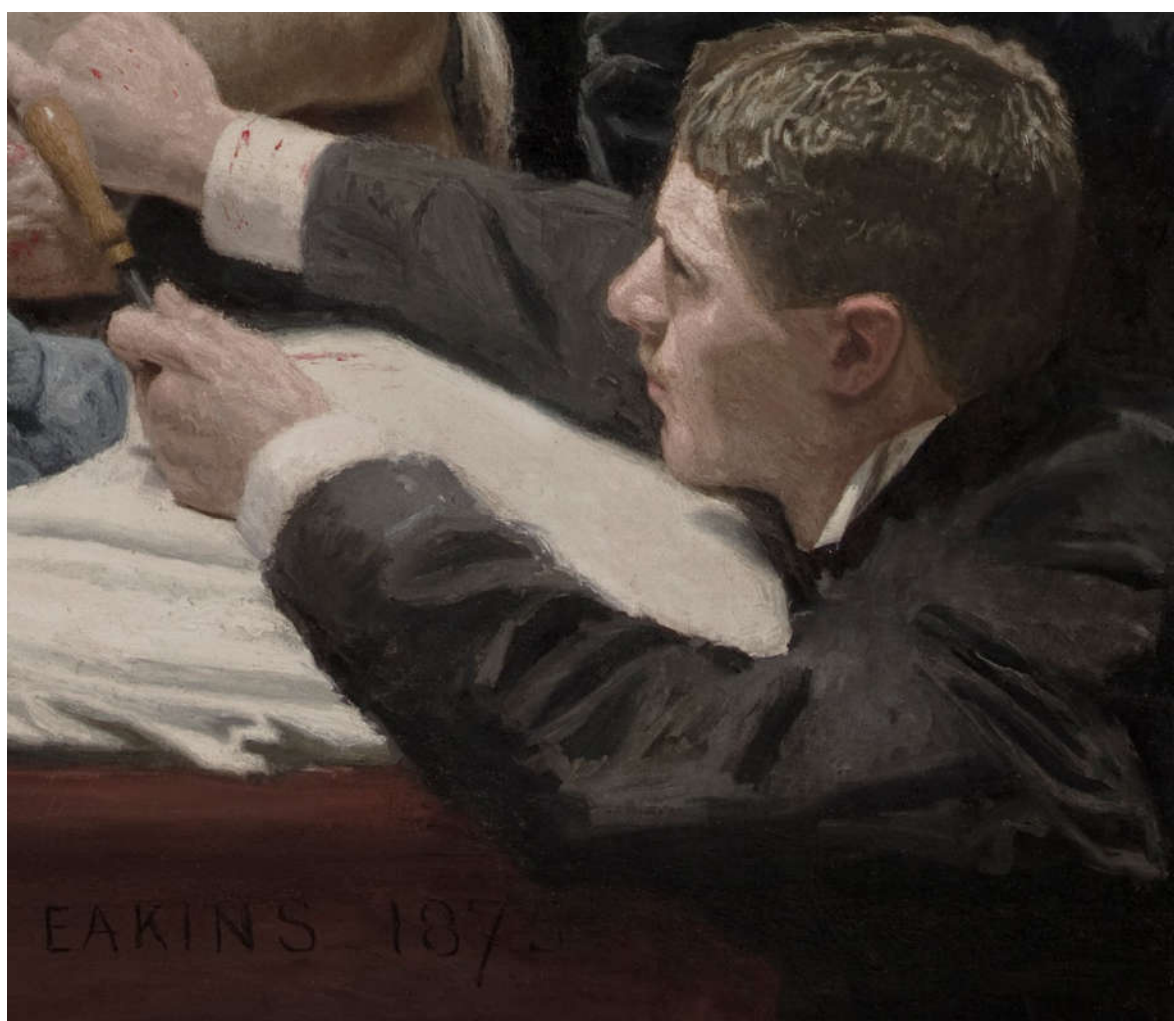
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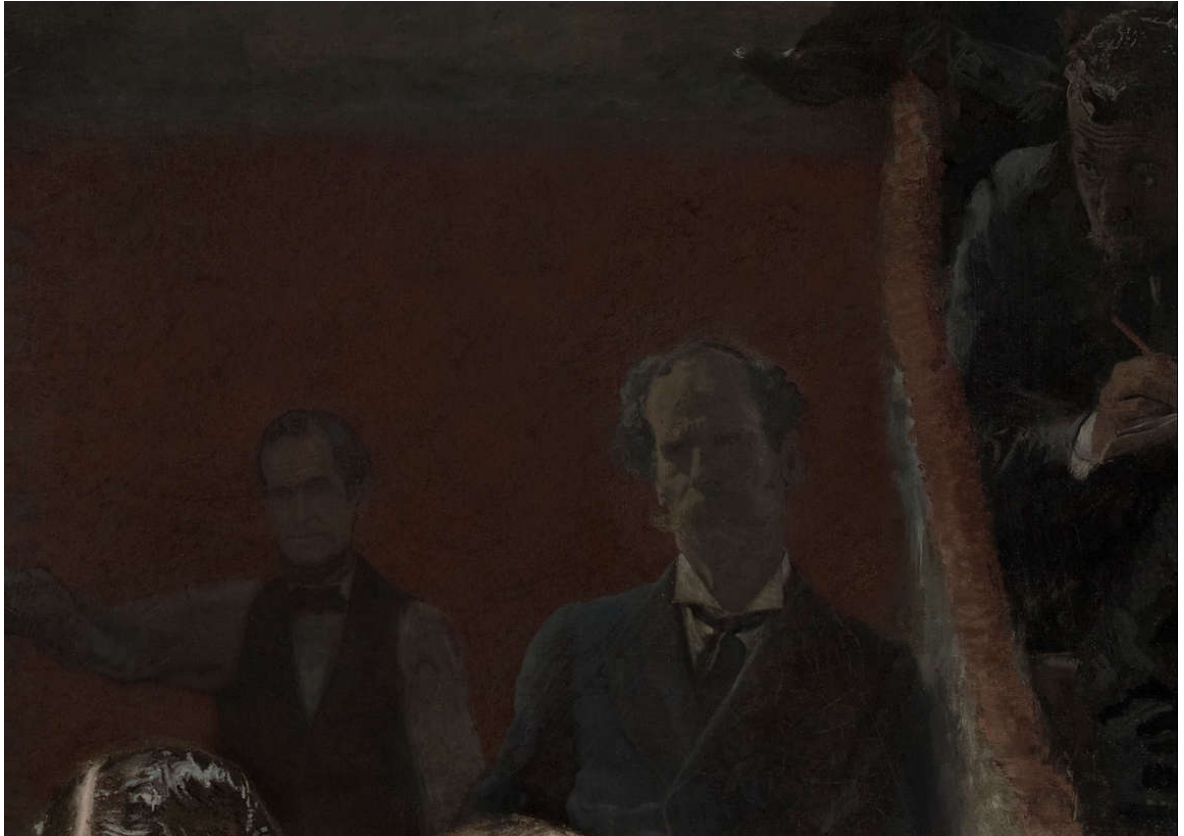
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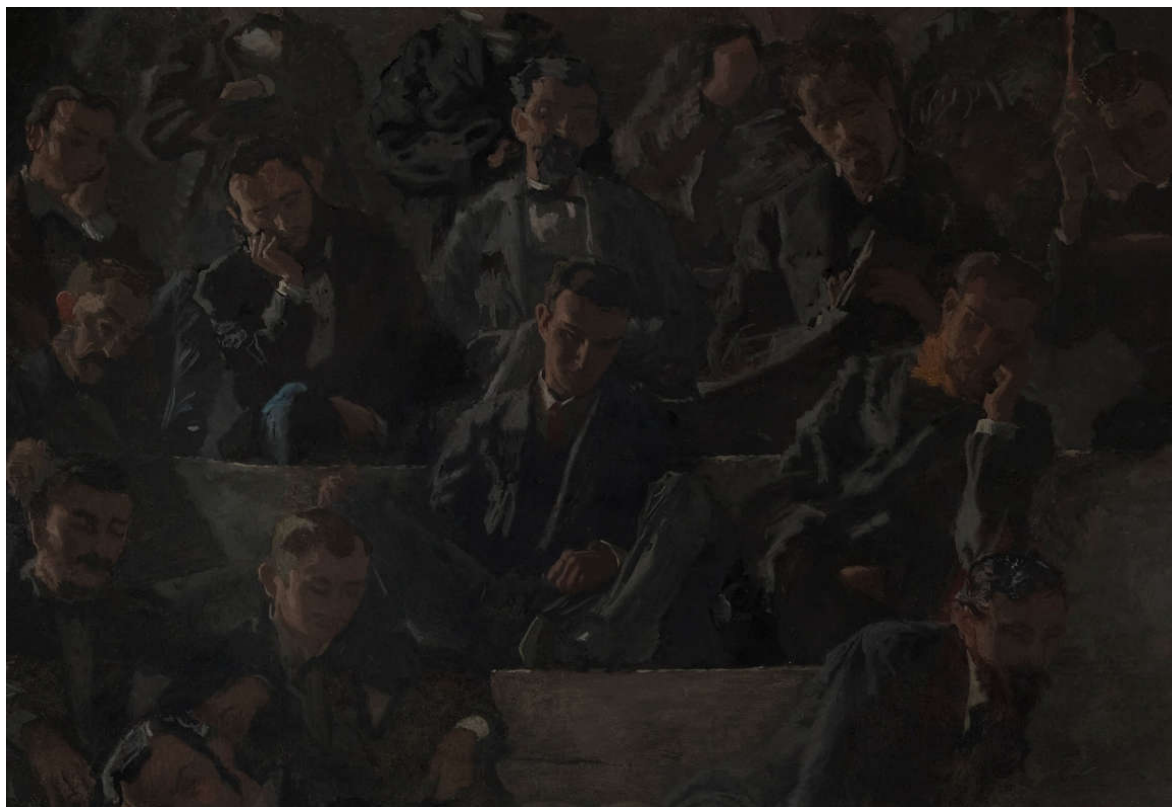
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Compositional study for the painting, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1875



Samuel Gross (1805-1884) was an academic trauma surgeon.



'The Gross Clinic' on display in the U.S. Army Post Hospital at the 1876 Centennial Exposition

The Chess Players (1876)



Although profitable sales still eluded Eakins, his reputation as an assured practitioner of the realist mode was gradually growing. In 1874 he was invited to teach a life class at the Philadelphia Sketch Club. As the school at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts had been closed since 1870 for the old building to be demolished and a new one erected in its place, the Sketch Club had become a popular choice for aspiring artists. In this role Eakins received no salary, though it gave him ample opportunity to improve his studies in anatomy — his enduring interest. The all-male classes conducted by Eakins were an immediate success and he taught several artists that would become leading figures in their own right, including Thomas Amshutz (1851-1912). Eakins is documented as being a skilled teacher, who treated all of his students with patience and understanding, regardless of who was talented and who was not.

After finishing work on *The Gross Clinic*, he commenced a series of paintings revealing domestic Victorian interiors, often featuring his father, sisters or friends as the subjects. A notable example of this type of genre painting is *The Chess Players* (1876), executed with dark tonality and focusing on the unsentimental characterisation of individuals, exhibiting natural and mundane attitudes in their homes. It is a small oil-on-wood panel, presenting the artist's father Benjamin observing a chess match between Bertrand Gardel (on the left), an elderly French teacher, and George Holmes, a painter. The figures are situated in a dark, wood-panelled Victorian parlour, with a quality of light suggesting late afternoon. The game is well in progress, as many pieces have been removed from the board. Holmes, the younger player, seems to be winning the contest, as he has taken the queen of his opponent, which pokes out of the table's drawer, while his own black queen is well-positioned in the centre of the board.

Eakins produced this painting as a gift for his father and it is signed in Latin in small letters on the drawer of the table: "BENJAMINI. EAKINS. FILIUS. PINXIT. '76" (the son of Benjamin Eakins painted this). His knowledgeable treatment of chess would indicate that he was familiar with and interested in the game. Art historians have suggested that the painting serves as a tribute to a number of the artist's father-figures. Holmes was likely Eakins' first art teacher; Gardel was his French teacher; Benjamin Eakins was his literal father; and Jean-Léon Gérôme, his master at the École des Beaux-Arts, is represented by a print of *Ave Caesar Morituri te Salutant*, hanging over the clock.

The solemnity and intensity of the game is softened by the inclusion of the family pet. Uninterested in the game, the black cat in the bottom right is more concerned cleaning itself. The avidity of the players is humorously questioned by the animal's disregard. However, the true drama of the painting has to be the meticulous delineation of still life forms, such as the stunning crystal decanter and glasses and the expert *chiaroscuro* effects of the chess pieces. These features signal the artist's extraordinary brushwork and the unquestioned bravura of the genre painting.

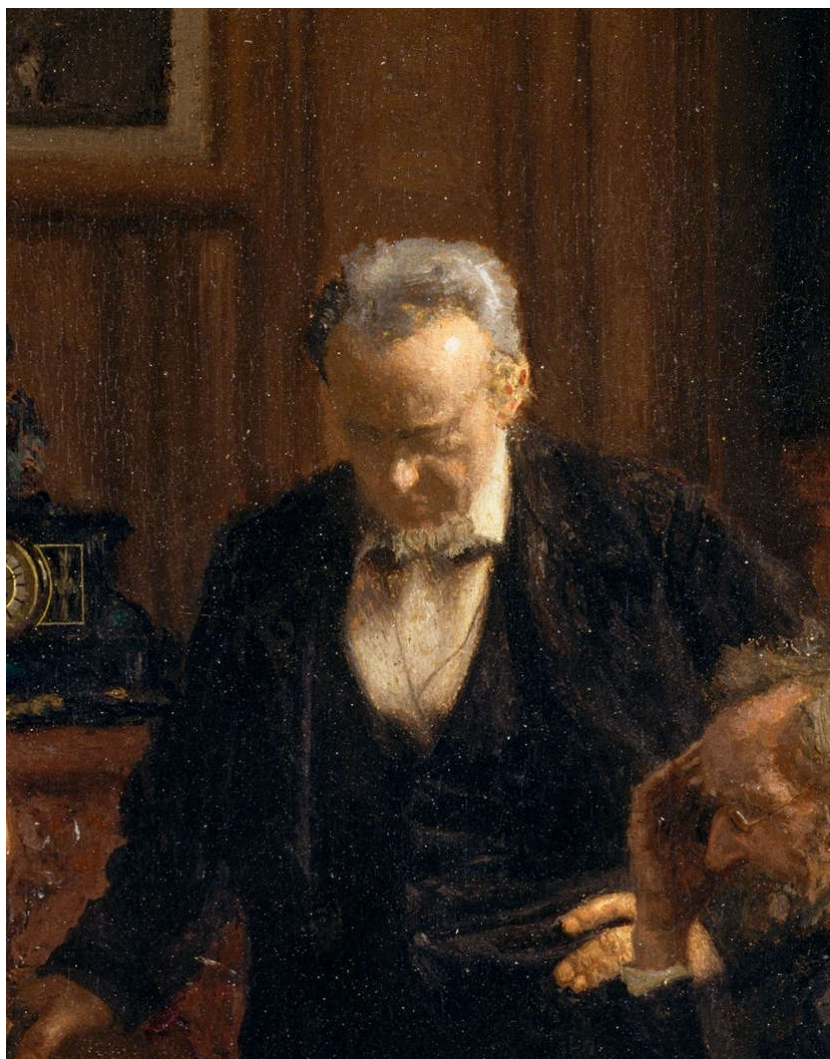




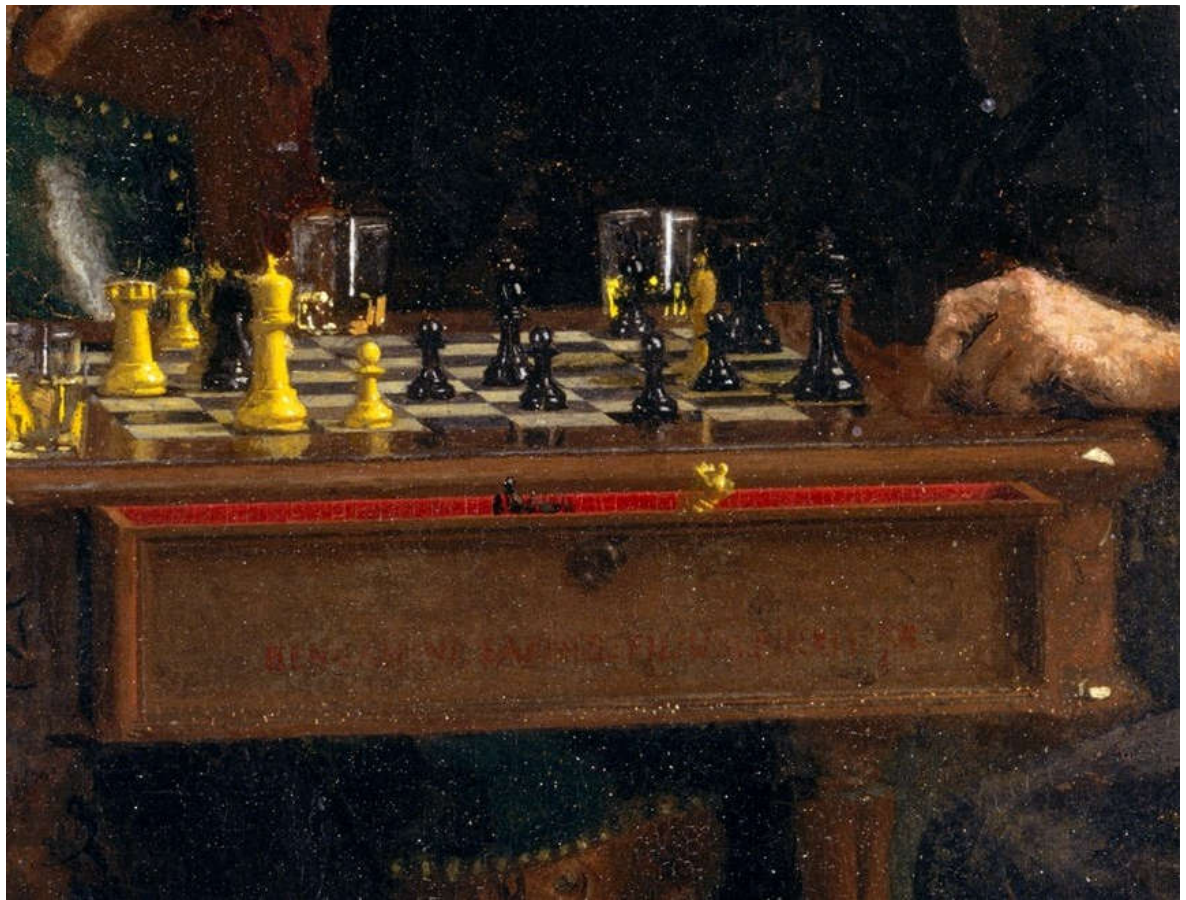
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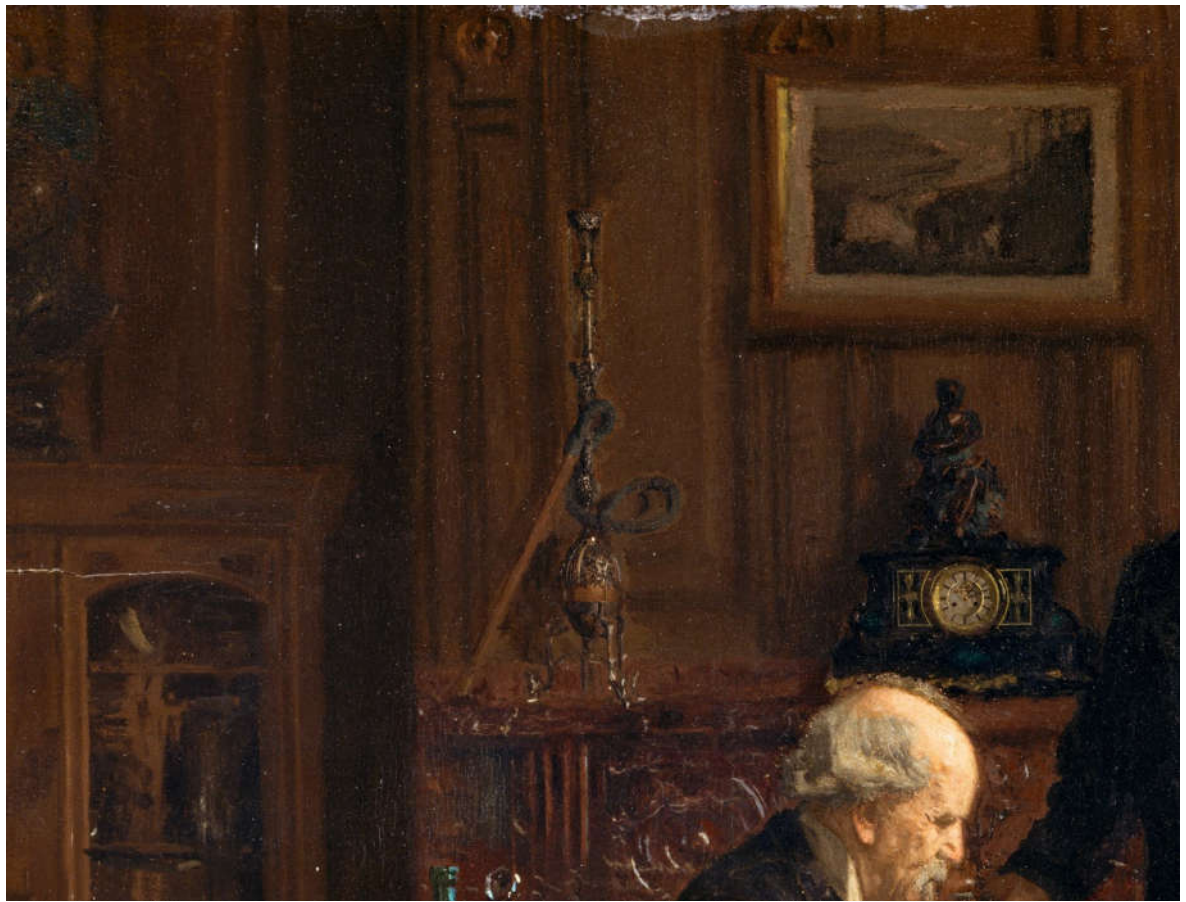
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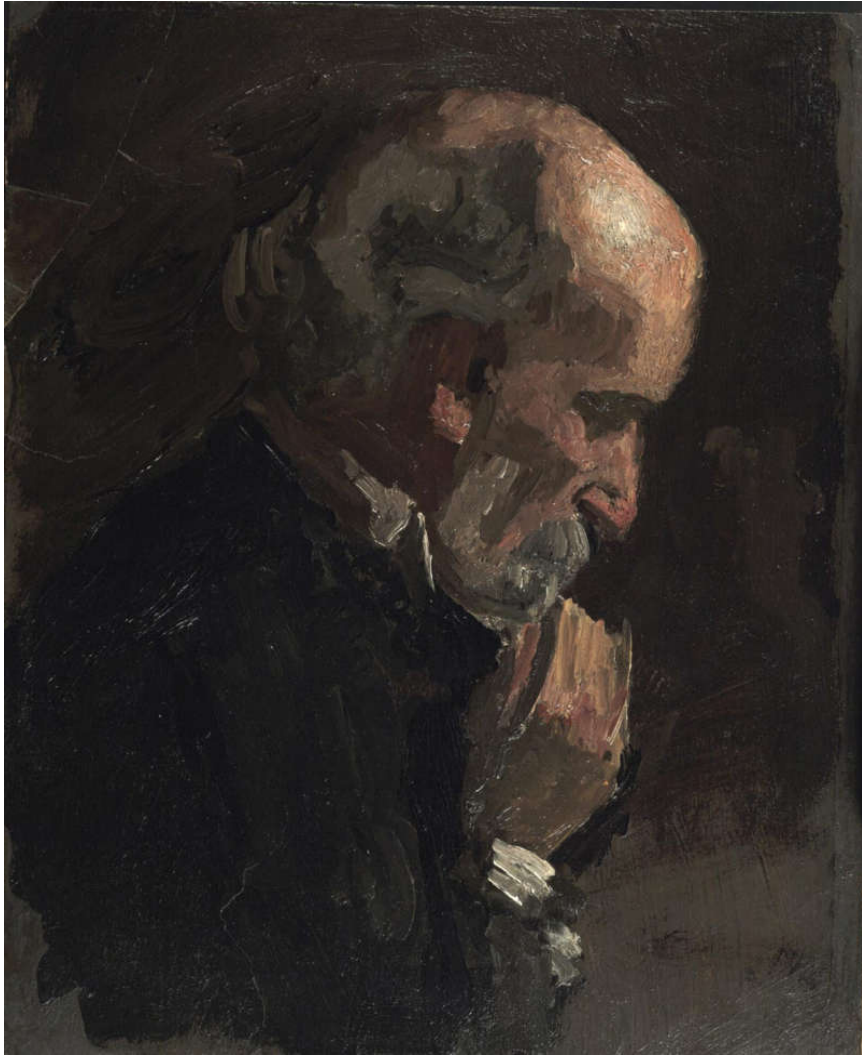
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'Study of Bertrand Gardel' for 'The Chess Players', Philadelphia Museum of Art



End of Sample