

FACT SHEET
About *The Gross Clinic*

Painted in 1875, *The Gross Clinic* is widely considered Eakins' finest work. It is one of the great American paintings, as well as a testament to Philadelphia's distinction in the medical and education fields. It depicts the Philadelphia physician Samuel D. Gross and the members of his "clinic" performing bone surgery on a young man, while a figure often thought to be the patient's mother cringes nearby. Known in his day as "the emperor of American surgery," the 70-year-old Gross is depicted turning from the patient to address his students in the surgical amphitheater at Jefferson Medical College. Eakins' viewpoint thrusts the viewer into the role of one of Gross' students, observing the operation.

Measuring eight by six feet, *The Gross Clinic* was completed by Eakins at age 31. When he submitted it for the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia it was rejected from the Fine Arts Gallery (now Memorial Hall) because its content was considered shocking. Probably through the machinations of Dr. Gross and his colleagues, however, it was placed on view on the Centennial grounds at the United States Army Post Hospital, in a ward filled with hospital bedding and furniture. Commentators wondered at the placement: "It was one of the most powerful and life-like pictures to be seen at the Exhibition, and should have had a place at the Art Gallery, where it would have been seen but for an incomprehensible decision by the Selecting Committee."

The critic William Clark—who had earlier written, "This portrait of Dr. Gross is a great work—we know of nothing greater that has ever been executed in America," returned to his defense of the picture: "There is nothing so fine in the American section of the Art Department of the Exhibition and it is a great pity that the squeamishness of the Selection Committee compelled the artist to find a place in the United States Hospital Building. It is rumored that the blood on Dr. Gross's fingers made some of the committee members sick, but, judging from the quality of the works exhibited by them we fear that it was not the blood alone that made them sick. Artists have before now been known to sicken at the sight of pictures by younger men which they in their souls were compelled to acknowledge were beyond their emulation." (Marc Simpson, in *The 1870s*, essay in Thomas Eakins (Philadelphia Museum of Art 2001) ed. Darrel Sewell)

An art critic for the New York Tribune called it "one of the most powerful, horrible yet fascinating pictures that has been painted anywhere in this century ..." In 2002, when it was exhibited in the Philadelphia Museum of Art-organized *Thomas Eakins: American Realist* retrospective exhibition at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman called it "hands down, the finest 19th century American painting ..."

The painting was purchased for \$200 by Jefferson alumni and given to the institution in 1878. It has remained on view at Jefferson, where Eakins himself studied anatomy, since its donation, except for periodic loans to exhibitions in the United States and France.

Ten reasons to Keep the Gross Clinic in Philadelphia

1. *It was made in Philadelphia in 1875, and has been treasured here ever since.*

An icon at Thomas Jefferson University since 1878, Thomas Eakins's *Gross Clinic* has long been a pilgrimage painting to alumni and admiring visitors. It has become one of the most often reproduced, discussed, and celebrated paintings in American art history.

2. *The artist, Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), was born and died in Philadelphia. He loved this city and made Philadelphia and its citizens the center of his art.*

Eakins' special relationship with the city of Philadelphia is anchored in his childhood home at 1729 Mount Vernon Street, now a neighborhood art center and the offices of the city's celebrated Mural Arts Program. Until his death in this house in 1916, Eakins worked in the third floor studio (where *The Gross Clinic* was painted) or in the new fourth floor space added after 1900. From this base, he ranged across the city, painting rowers on the Schuylkill, hunters in the New Jersey marshes, and a spectrum of friends, neighbors, and distinguished citizens. No other artist in the history of Philadelphia has so shaped the city's sense of itself. No other American city can point to an artist of such stature who has so indelibly represented its character.

3. *The principal subject of the painting, Dr. Samuel D. Gross, was one of the first graduates of Jefferson Medical College, where he became a charismatic professor and an internationally renowned authority on surgery.*

In 1856, Samuel Gross assumed the post of professor of surgery at Jefferson, and by 1875 he was revered as a teacher, admired as a surgeon (who claimed to have never lost a patient on the operating table), and respected as a founder and member of many local, national, and international medical societies. Gross was also a prolific and influential author: he innovated many surgical techniques and instruments, and wrote several important textbooks, including *A System of Surgery* (1859), which was translated into many languages.

The operation shown in the painting demonstrates one of Gross's areas of special expertise: the removal of dead tissue from the thighbone of a patient suffering from osteomyelitis. His procedure demonstrates the recent revolution in treatment for this disease, opened by new understanding of the body's ability to heal itself. Gross inspired his students—including Thomas Eakins, who attended his lectures (and who appears at the right-hand edge of the canvas, attentively taking notes)—with his vision of the dramatic progress in American medicine in the nineteenth century, pioneered by the research and innovation of Philadelphia's scientific community.

4. *The painting was made for a special occasion in Philadelphia: the Centennial Exhibition of 1876, celebrating a century of American independence and progress.*

In the spring of 1875, a circular was sent out to the artists of Philadelphia, urging them to prepare for the upcoming great international Centennial Fair, where they could show their own skill and bring honor to the city. By April of 1875, Eakins had blocked out a painting that he described as “far better than anything I have ever done.” Ultimately, he would show other paintings in the art exhibition in Fairmount Park’s Memorial Hall. *The Gross Clinic*, deemed too shocking and offensive for the general public, was displayed among the Army medical exhibits.

5. *For the Centennial, Eakins created a painting about Philadelphia, to represent to millions of visitors the “world-class” excellence and modernity of his city.*

Eakins’ pride in his professor and his colleagues at Jefferson inspired a painting that is about the glory of modern Philadelphia and its heroes of science and education. His painting, in the context of the Centennial, argues for Philadelphia’s accomplishment as part of a larger story of American progress, seen as a model to the world.

6. *As Dr. Gross lectures to his students (including Eakins in the audience), the painting celebrates teaching and learning in Philadelphia; artist and surgeon were both students and professors in schools (Central High School, Jefferson, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) that were national models of educational practice.*

Eakins successfully competed for a place in Philadelphia’s famed Central High School, a highly competitive public school that awarded a baccalaureate degree comparable to a college education. He graduated fluent in four modern languages and Latin, and a master of advanced mathematics, geometry, chemistry, history, and art. Two years of study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the oldest art school in North America, introduced him to models of European painting and sculpture, after which he traveled to France for more advanced instruction in painting. Before and after his stay in Paris, Eakins attended anatomy classes at Jefferson. This extraordinary education made him one of the best-trained artists of his day, and—like Samuel Gross—he would turn his experience to the improvement of his alma mater. In the decade after completing *The Gross Clinic*, he would shape the Pennsylvania Academy into the most progressive art school in the world.

7. *The painting suggests the long tradition of research, innovation, and instruction in Philadelphia’s health and science community.*

From the late eighteenth century, Philadelphia and Edinburgh led the English-speaking world as centers of education for physicians and surgeons. Other learned societies and institutions, such as the American Philosophical Society and the Academy of Natural Sciences, also made Philadelphia a hotbed of scientific research, publication, and debate. Eakins himself published an original paper on equine anatomy, which he read to the members of the Academy, and he invented an improved lens for motion photography. As

a participant himself, Eakins understood the vitality and excellence of Philadelphia's scientific community.

8. The painting is by Philadelphia's best artist, at the peak of his form. A masterpiece begun when the artist was thirty years old, it gathers all his ambition and skill as a modern realist.

Drawing on his education in Philadelphia, Paris, and Spain, Eakins produced the finest painting of his career, a masterpiece that has since been recognized as the greatest American painting of the nineteenth century. Taking his inspiration from eminent painters of the European baroque, such as Rembrandt and Velasquez, and the unsparing naturalists of his own day, including his teachers in Paris, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Léon-Joseph-Florentin Bonnat, Eakins developed a personal style that blended careful observation, broad paint handling, and dramatic contrasts of light and dark.

As a modern realist and something of a provocateur, he confronts us with a confusing, even shocking scene—as if we are seated in a surgical amphitheatre, facing an oddly foreshortened body ringed by a tangle of intent doctors, some touched with bright blood. The scene is lit from the skylight above, giving the necessary daylight that floods the operating table and strikes the forehead of Dr. Gross, suggesting divine inspiration. Gross's nimbus of hair glows like the halo of a secular saint as the doctor towers confidently above his colleagues. Calmly, he turns to address his students. Behind him, the frightened woman, perhaps the mother of the patient, cringes and covers her face. She represents the ignorant layman, the emotional family member, too terrified to watch. But everyone else is looking, learning, and working together to control the situation. Eakins' masterful composition, while charged with mystery and drama, ultimately tells a story of wisdom, discipline, and inspiring professionalism. In Eakins' vision, the serene and majestic Gross commands our respect as a hero of modern science and the embodiment of American progress.

9. The context of Philadelphia—including its landscape, architecture, art collections, educational institutions, and diverse audiences—adds meaning and importance to the painting.

When *The Gross Clinic* leaves its traditional home at Jefferson University, it will be seen to advantage in both of Philadelphia's great museums of American art. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in the splendid building by Frank Furness that opened in 1876, offers a spectacular Centennial-era frame for the painting, as well as the rich context of many of Eakins's teachers, colleagues, and students there. Historically, what could be more satisfying than showing the painting in the building where Eakins taught, amid the largest collection of his papers and study material? At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the painting will be the crown of the Eakins Memorial Collection established by the artist's widow in 1929–30. Surrounded by the world's finest holdings of Eakins's work, and backed by the comprehensive Eakins Archive, the painting will gain strength from an understanding of the artist's entire career and his deep connection to the city.

In Philadelphia, the audience also brings an emotional and experiential richness to the painting: medical students see themselves and their history in this painting; doctors are reinspired by a sense of their professional calling; art students follow in Eakins's footsteps, learning to make art from American life; and visitors come to understand the special character of the city, its landscape, institutions, citizens, and traditions.

10. If Philadelphia is to be America's "Next Great City," it must protect the special qualities that residents prize and visitors seek, and remain inspired by the city's tradition of excellence in art, science, and education, united in America's greatest nineteenth-century painting, The Gross Clinic.

Philadelphia must defend the identity—the sense of place—that makes it attractive to its citizens and to millions of visitors each year. From the eighteenth century, it has been a center of the medical sciences, art, and learning, and these traditional strengths, played out through three centuries of history, continue to drive the economy and shape the personality of the city. As an icon of the interconnected strands of this tradition and an emblem of the “best of Philadelphia,” *The Gross Clinic* will remain to remind the city of its excellence—past, present, and future.