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Abstract

Describes Thomas Eakins' recently discovered photographs of a nude man who may be Walt Whitman; the photographs are printed on the back cover of the journal.

NOTES

On the Back Cover: WHITMAN NAKED?

Over the years, poets and critics have speculated about the possibility that there might have been a Thomas Eakins painting or photograph of Whitman in the nude. The poet Philip Dacey, for example, in "Thomas Eakins: The Secret Whitman Sitting" (*Hudson Review* 41 [1988], 489-492), offers a dramatic monologue in which Eakins tells about the imagined time he painted Whitman nude: "I helped him / out of his robe and shawl-like blanket, feeling / the while like a nurse about to bathe a patient. . . ." Even naked, Whitman manages to strike a pose, construct an identity: "He was giving me The Good Gray Poet down / to his last disguise. Even the face he showed / was itself a mask, formal, hieratic, / as if he meant to say, 'Even while you should / think you caught me, behold, I have escaped you.'"

An Eakins photograph of Whitman "undisguised and naked" may in fact exist. The multiple photograph reproduced on the back cover of this issue (with permission of The Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California) is one of a series of such multiple photographs of naked men and women that Eakins left behind; this one is now simply labeled "old man" and bears a striking resemblance to Whitman. Its date is uncertain—sometime in the 1880s. If the "old man" is not Whitman, Eakins clearly found a model who was a ringer for Whitman, a stand-in who could serve Eakins as Whitman's body-double for his form studies. This photo of the confident and proud old man stripped but, as Dacey suggests, still giving us The Good Gray Poet down to his last disguise, recalls the opening of Whitman's first self-review of *Leaves of Grass*:

Very devilish to some, and very divine to some, will appear the poet of these new poems, the "Leaves of Grass"; an attempt, as they are, of a naive, masculine, affectionate, contemplative, sensual, imperious person, to cast into literature not only his own grit and arrogance, but his own flesh and form, undraped, regardless of models, regardless of modesty or law, and ignorant or silently scornful, as at first appears, of all except his own presence and experience. . . . (*Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett [New York: Norton, 1973], 777)

This Eakins multiple photograph was published for the first time in a catalogue of an exhibit of newly discovered Eakins materials (*Photographer Thomas Eakins* [Philadelphia: Olympia Galleries, 1981]), where it is labelled only "old man." It should come as no shock that Whitman would pose nude. The poet who portrayed himself in "Song of Myself" as "hankering, gross, mystical, nude," often swam naked as a young man (in scenes like those later made familiar in Eakins's "Swimming Hole" painting and photos). In *Specimen Days* ("A Sun-Bath—Nakedness"), Whitman tells of his days spent in the nude by Timber Creek in the late 1870s, when he would take an "Adamic air-bath"

and enjoy "two or three hours of freedom, bathing, no talk, no bonds, no dress, no books, no *manners*." "Nature was naked, and I was also," wrote Whitman, arguing that "nakedness" was not "indecent," that he experienced "moods when these clothes of ours are not only too irksome to wear, but are themselves indecent." Sounding like a supporter of Eakin's controversial insistence on the undraped figure as essential for an artist's training, Whitman celebrated the "purity" of nakedness, and he suggested that those "many thousands" who had not experienced "the free exhilarating extasy of nakedness" could not know "what faith or art or health really is," for "the whole curriculum of first-class philosophy, beauty, heroism, form" derived from the "natural and religious idea of Nakedness" (*PW* 1:150-152). Around this time, in 1879, Herbert Gilchrist sketched Whitman naked (except for hat and shoes) by Timber Creek (see back cover, *WWQR* 9 [Spring 1992]).

If this multiple photograph is of Whitman, it probably was taken sometime between the mid-1880s and early 1888, after he and Eakins met but before Whitman suffered a severe stroke in June of 1888. In 1887, Whitman was in relatively good health (following his recovery from an earlier stroke) and was busy posing for several artists, including Eakins, Gilchrist, Sidney Morse, and J. W. Alexander ("Am *sculpted & portraited* lately," he wrote in June of 1887 [*Corr.* 4:104]).

Eakins photographed many men and women of various ages and body types (though the man in this photograph is strikingly older than any of the others); he almost always posed them in the same seven postures represented in this multiple photograph. Many of the models were Eakins's students at the Pennsylvania Academy; Eakins himself posed for one series. This group of photos furnished him with a storehouse of accurate representations of the human body for use in his paintings and art classes. Eakins also used the photos to illustrate "the general axes of weight and action" and "the centers of gravity" of the human figure. He referred to these photographs as his "naked series," and he began taking them in 1882, mounting each multiple photograph on a piece of light blue textured cardboard. Sometime after Eakins's forced resignation from the Pennsylvania Academy in 1886 (in part a result of his photographing female students in the nude), a package of the "naked series" photographs (including this one) ended up in the hands of Edward H. Coates, Chairman of the Committee on Instruction; the images remained in Coates's safe deposit box and resurfaced only in the late 1970s (see Ellwood C. Parry, III, "Introduction," *Photographer Thomas Eakins*, n.p.; and Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982], 1:246-248).

Since Eakins began painting Whitman's portrait in 1887 (and started at least one other portrait of the poet as well as taking several photographic portraits during the last years of the poet's life), it would have made sense for him to have made a photographic record of Whitman's form. In addition, Eakins's associates, Samuel Murray and William O'Donovan, both sculpted Whitman, and both used Eakins's various photographs of Whitman for their work (see Gordon Hendricks, *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins* [New York: Grossman, 1972], 10n.).

I discuss this image along with the various photographs of Whitman with young men in "Whitman's Calamus Photographs" in Betsy Erkkila and Jay

Grossman, eds., *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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