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Whitman Naked?: A Forum

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Abstract

Introduces a forum concerning the controversy over whether a series of seven nude photographs from the 1880s by Thomas Eakins could be of Walt Whitman.

FORUM: WHITMAN NAKED?

Editor's Note:

The spring 1994 issue of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* printed on the back cover a photographic series by Thomas Eakins (or one of his assistants), labeled simply "Old Man, seven photographs," and dated in the 1880s. The nude model in the photographs bears a striking resemblance to Walt Whitman, and, in notes accompanying the photos, I raised the possibility that this long-suppressed series of images might be of Whitman.

In the short essays that follow, we offer what further evidence—for and against the Whitman identification—has come to light in the three years since the initial publication of the photos in *WWQR*. Since that initial publication, two of the photos from the series appeared on the front cover of *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), edited by Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman. In that volume, I published an essay, "Whitman's Calamus Photographs" (193-219), in which I discuss in more detail the circumstances that would have made it possible for Whitman to pose for these photos, even though the photos were taken before the date that Whitman recalled first meeting Eakins. I based my case on the journalist Talcott Williams, Whitman's and Eakins's mutual friend, who was in close contact with both artists in the early 1880s in the Philadelphia area, and who championed both artists' celebration of the body (Williams served as one of the nude models for Eakins's famous "Swimming" painting).

There are other mutual friends who also might have brought Whitman and Eakins together at that time—the physician and writer S. Weir Mitchell, for example, served as Whitman's physician while he was also a friend and patron of Eakins, as well as a close friend of Talcott Williams. Mitchell's son, John Kearsley Mitchell, was also close to Whitman and to Eakins. In the first piece below, Joann Krieg offers another intriguing possibility of an early connection between Eakins and Whitman—the young artist Percy Ives. What seems to be emerging is a remarkable set of friendships and fascinating interrelationships between the Eakins circle and the Whitman circle from 1880 on.

Following Krieg's essay, the art historian William Innes Homer casts some doubt on the identification of the "Old Man" as Whitman by examining a painted portrait of an "Old Man" done by J. Laurie Wallace at about the same time as the photographs were taken. After Homer's essay, I offer a brief response.