

= The Swimming Hole =

The Swimming Hole (also known as Swimming and The Old Swimming Hole) is an 1884 ? 85 painting by the American artist Thomas Eakins (1844 ? 1916) , Goodrich catalog # 190 , in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth , Texas . Executed in oil on canvas , it depicts six men swimming naked in a lake , and is considered a masterpiece of American painting . According to art historian Doreen Bolger it is " perhaps Eakins ' most accomplished rendition of the nude figure " , and has been called " the most finely designed of all his outdoor pictures " . Since the Renaissance , the human body has been considered both the basis of artists ' training and the most challenging subject to depict in art , and the nude was the centerpiece of Eakins ' teaching program at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts . For Eakins , this picture was an opportunity to display his mastery of the human form .

In this work , Eakins took advantage of an exception to the generally prudish Victorian attitude to nudity : swimming naked was widely accepted , and for males was seen as normal , even in public spaces . Eakins was the first American artist to portray one of the few occasions in 19th @-@ century life when nudity was on display . The Swimming Hole develops themes raised in his earlier work , in particular his treatment of buttocks and his ambiguous treatment of the human form ; in some cases it is uncertain as to whether the forms portrayed are male or female . Such themes had earlier been examined in his *The Gross Clinic* (1875) and *William Rush* (1877) , and would continue to be explored in his paintings of boxers (*Taking the Count* , *Salutat* , and *Between Rounds*) and wrestlers (*Wrestlers*) .

Although the theme of male bathers was familiar in Western art , having been explored by artists from Michelangelo to Daumier , Eakins ' treatment was novel in American art at the time . The *Swimming Hole* has been " widely cited as a prime example of homoeroticism in American art " . In 2008 , the art critic Tom Lubbock described Eakins ' work as :

a classic of American painting . It shows a scene of healthy , manly , outdoor activity : a group of young fellows having stripped off for a dip . It is based on the swimming excursions that were enjoyed by the artist and his students . Eakins himself appears in the water at bottom right ? in signature position , so to speak . "

= = Title and composition = =

Eakins referred to the painting as *Swimming* in 1885 , and as *The Swimmers* in 1886 . The title *The Swimming Hole* dates from 1917 (the year after Eakins died) , when the work was so described by the artist 's widow , Susan Macdowell Eakins . Four years later , she titled the work *The Old Swimming Hole* , in reference to the 1882 poem *The Old Swimmin ' -Hole* ; by James Whitcomb Riley . The Amon Carter Museum has since returned to Eakins ' original title , *Swimming* .

The painting shows Eakins and five friends or students bathing at Dove Lake , an artificial lake in Mill Creek outside Philadelphia . Each of the men is looking at the water , in the words of Martin A. Berger , " apparently lost in a contemplative moment " . Eakins ' precise rendering of the figures has enabled scholars to identify all those depicted in the work . They are (from left to right) : Talcott Williams (1849 ? 1928) , Benjamin Fox (c . 1865 ? c . 1900) , John Laurie Wallace (1864 ? 1953) , Jesse Godley (1862 ? 1889) , Harry the dog (Eakins ' Irish Setter , c . 1880 ? 90) , George Reynolds (c . 1839 ? 89) , and Eakins himself . The rocky promontory on which several of the men rest is the foundation of the Mill Creek mill , which was razed in 1873 . It is the only sign of civilization in the work ? no shoes , clothes , or bath houses are visible . The foliage in the background provides a dark background against which the swimmers ' skin tones contrast .

The composition is pyramidal . The figure reclining at left leads the viewer 's eye to the seated figure , whose gesture in turn points to Godley at the apex of the compositional pyramid . The diving figure at right leads to the swimming form of Eakins , who painted himself into the scene and whose leftward movement directs attention back into the painting . Eakins enforces this pyramidal structure by manipulating the focus of the painting : the center area containing the swimmers is extremely precise , while the outer areas are diffuse , with " virtually no moderating zones in between " . The

lighting within the picture is unnatural ? too bright in some places , and too dark in others ? although the effect , which tends to accentuate the body lines of the swimmers , is generally subtle .

The composition is notable for both its adherence to academic tradition (the mastery of the figure as an end in itself) , and its uniqueness in transposing the male nude to an outdoor setting . The depiction of someone diving into water was very rare in the history of Western art . The other figures are artfully arranged to imply a continuous narrative of movement , the poses progressing " from reclining to sitting to standing to diving " ; at the same time , each figure is carefully positioned so that no genitalia are visible . As in his previous works , Eakins chose to include a self @-@ portrait , here as the swimmer at bottom @-@ right . Unlike his appearances in *The Gross Clinic* or *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* , here the artist 's presence is more ambiguous ? he may be seen as companion , teacher , or voyeur . The ripple in the water next to Eakins , and the bubbles around the diver , are the only indications of movement in a painting where motion is otherwise arrested ; the water next to the red @-@ headed figure in the lake is still enough to offer a clear reflection . This contrast underscores the tension in the picture between classical prototypes and scientific naturalism .

The positioning of the bodies and their musculature refers to classical ideals of physical beauty and masculine camaraderie evocative of Greek art . The reclining figure is a paraphrase of the Dying Gaul , and is juxtaposed with the far less formal self @-@ depiction by the artist . It is possible that Eakins was seeking to reconcile an ancient theme with a modern interpretation ; the subject was contemporary , but the poses of some of the figures recall those of classical sculpture . One possible influence by a contemporary source was *Scène d 'été* , painted in 1869 by Frédéric Bazille (1841 ? 70) . It is not unlikely that Eakins saw the painting at the Salon while studying in Paris , and would have been sympathetic to its depiction of male bathers in a modern setting .

In Eakins ' oeuvre , *The Swimming Hole* was immediately preceded by a number of similar works on the Arcadian theme . These correspond to lectures he gave on Ancient Greek sculpture and were inspired by the Pennsylvania Academy 's casts of Phidias ' Pan @-@ Athenaic procession from the Parthenon marbles . A series of photographs , relief sculptures , and oil sketches culminated in the 1883 *Arcadia* , a painting that also featured nude figures ? posed for by a student , a nephew , and the artist 's fiancée ? in a pastoral landscape .

= = Studies = =

Eakins made several on @-@ site oil sketches and photographic studies before painting *The Swimming Hole* . It is unknown whether the photographs were taken before the oil sketches were produced or vice versa (or , indeed , whether they were created on the same day) .

By the early 1880s , Eakins was using photography to explore sequential movement and as a reference for painting . Some time in 1883 or 1884 , he photographed his students engaged in outdoor activities . Four photographs of his students swimming naked in Dove Lake have survived , and bear a clear relationship to *The Swimming Hole* . The swimmers are seen in the same spot and from the same vantage point , although their positions are entirely different from those in the painting . None of the photographs closely matches the poses depicted in the painting ; this was unusual for Eakins , who typically adhered closely to his photographic studies . " The divergence between these sets of images may hint at lost or destroyed pictures , or it may tell us that the photographs came first , before Eakins ' mental image had crystallized , and before the execution of his first oil sketch . " The poses in the photographs are more spontaneous , while those of the painting are deliberately composed with a classical " severity " . Although no photographic studies have survived that would suggest a more direct connection between the photographs and the painting , recent scholarship has proposed that marks incised onto the canvas and later covered by paint indicate that Eakins made use of light @-@ projected photographs .

Eakins combined his studies into a final oil sketch in 1884 , which became the basis for the finished painting . The basic composition remained unchanged , as all six men and the dog appeared in the sketch ; however , Eakins , who usually adhered closely to his sketches when developing a final work , made several uncharacteristic alterations to the specific movements and positions of the

figures . A friend and student , Charles Bregler , described the process :

... For a picture ... like the Swimming Hole , a small sketch was made 8 x 10 inches [20 x 25 cm] , then separate studies of the landscape and figures , to get the true tone and color , etc . The diving figure being the most difficult to paint , was first modelled in wax . This gave him a thorough knowledge of every form .

= = Commission and reception = =

The painting was commissioned in 1884 by Edward Hornor Coates , a Philadelphia businessman who chaired the Committee on Instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts , where Eakins taught . Coates intended to pay Eakins \$ 800 (\$ 21 @, @ 000 in 2016 dollars) , which at the time was the largest commission Eakins had been offered .

Coates intended the painting for an exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts , and it was shown at the Academy 's exhibition in the fall of 1885 . However , Coates rejected it as unrepresentative of Eakins ' oeuvre . In a November 27 , 1885 letter to Eakins , Coates reasoned :

as you will recall one of my chief ideas was to have from you a picture which might some day become part of the Academy collection . The present canvas is to me admirable in many ways but I am inclined to believe that some of the pictures you have are even more representative , and it has been suggested would be perhaps more acceptable for the purpose which I have always had in view . You must not suppose from this that I depreciate the present work - such is not the case .

It is not known precisely why Coates failed to purchase the painting ; however , it seems likely that Coates felt the work was too controversial to acquire . Coates , as Head of Instruction at Eakins ' academy , would have been familiar with the subject matter of Eakins ' works , and thus it seems unlikely that the nudity in the painting would have surprised or shocked him . Rather , it seems certain that Coates would have recognized the majority of men in the painting , as all but one were students of Eakins at the academy . He was undoubtedly familiar with the site depicted in the painting too , as it was only a half a mile (800 m) from Haverford College , where Coates studied as an undergraduate . The depiction of a professor and his students together in the nude would have been a sensitive subject for the academy 's directors , who had forbidden Eakins from using Academy students as models , as modeling was considered indecent . Coates chose to exchange The Swimming Hole for the " less controversial genre scene " of Eakins ' The Pathetic Song ? today housed in the Corcoran Gallery of Art ? and paid Eakins the \$ 800 he had offered for the original commission .

On February 9 , 1886 , Eakins was forced to resign from the Academy because of his removal of a loincloth from a male model in a class where female students were present . In a letter to Coates on February 15 in which Eakins explained his reasons for resigning , he addressed the issue of nudity in his artwork :

My figures at least are not a bunch of clothes with a head and hands sticking out but more nearly resemble the strong living bodies that most pictures show . And in the latter end of a life so spent in study , you at least can imagine that painting is with me a very serious study . That I have but little patience with the false modesty which is the greatest enemy to all figure painting . I see no impropriety in looking at the most beautiful of Nature 's works , the naked figure . If there is impropriety , then just where does such impropriety begin ? Is it wrong to look at a picture of a naked figure or at a statue ? English ladies of the last generation thought so and avoided the statue galleries , but do so no longer . Or is it a question of sex ? Should men make only the statues of men to be looked at by men , while the statues of women should be made by women to be looked at by women only ? Should the he @-@ painters draw the horses and bulls , and the she @-@ painters like Rosa Bonheur the mares and cows ? Must the poor old male body in the dissecting room be mutilated before Miss Prudery can dabble in his guts ? ... Such indignities anger me . Can not anyone see into what contemptible inconsistencies such follies all lead ? And how dangerous they are ? My conscience is clear , and my suffering is past .

= = Provenance = =

Following its rejection by Coates , the painting remained in Eakins ' possession until his death . It was exhibited just twice more during Eakins ' lifetime : at the 1886 Southern Exposition in Louisville , Kentucky , and in 1887 at Chicago 's Inter @-@ State Industrial Exposition , and ignored by critics on both occasions . The painting then disappears from the historical record ? there is no further reference to the painting in any records from Eakins or his circle of friends during Eakins ' lifetime . Following Eakins ' death , the painting was exhibited in Philadelphia and New York at memorial exhibitions in 1917 .

In 1925 , The Swimming Hole was purchased from the artist 's widow by the community of Fort Worth , Texas for \$ 750 (\$ 10 @,@ 100 in 2016 dollars) . Thereafter it was in the collection of the Fort Worth Art Association , the institutional predecessor of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth , and was displayed in the city 's public library . In 1990 , the museum announced it intended to sell the painting to build an endowment for the purchase of contemporary art . A public outcry ensued , prompting the museum to search for a local buyer . Eventually , after tumultuous negotiations , the Amon Carter Museum agreed to purchase The Swimming Hole for \$ 10 million (\$ 18 million in 2016 dollars) .

= = Restorations = =

Before its purchase by the Amon Carter Museum , The Swimming Hole appears to have undergone seven different conservatory treatments . It may have been restored prior to its inclusion in Eakins ' memorial exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1917 . A photograph from that time reveals cracks in the glazes and a drip mark , possibly caused by the splash of a caustic liquid . After the painting was acquired by the Fort Worth Art Association , it was often lent out for exhibitions and was damaged as a result . In 1937 it was relined by a private gallery in New York City and the drip was painted out . In 1944 it was relined and restored and in 1947 it was restored again , both times by a private New York dealer . The Brooklyn Museum performed two minor restorations in 1954 and 1957 . Although it continued to travel frequently , The Swimming Hole received no comprehensive treatment until 1993 .

Following its purchase by the Amon Carter Museum , in June 1993 , Claire M. Barry and staff from the Amon Carter and the Kimbell Art Museums began a major restoration of the painting . According to Barry , " The restoration revealed relatively little significant damage or deterioration not previously visible . Several layers of discolored varnish and overpaint were removed , exposing a rich and varied surface with brushwork ranging from the controlled , almost miniaturistic strokes forming the figures to the freer treatment of the landscape elements . "

Much effort went into distinguishing the original glazes from those added during subsequent restorations . Previous retouches were removed and a natural resin varnish was applied . The painting 's original frame , long missing , was located in 1992 . It too was cleaned , restored , and reinstalled to the painting .

During the restoration , it was discovered that a long @-@ standing ascription of the painting 's date to 1883 was the result of a misinterpretation : the artist 's original inscription of 1885 was painted in a fugitive red @-@ lake pigment that had faded , and was mistakenly repainted by a conservator to the earlier date .

= = Interpretation = =

The Swimming Hole represented the full range of Eakins ' techniques and academic principles . He used life study , photography , wax studies , and landscape sketches to produce a work that manifested his interest in the human form . Lloyd Goodrich (1897 ? 1987) believed the work was " Eakins ' most masterful use of the nude " , with the solidly conceived figures perfectly integrated into the landscape , an image of subtle tonal construction and one of the artist 's " richest pieces of painting " . Another biographer , William Innes Homer (b . 1929) , was more reserved and described the poses of the figures as rigidly academic . Homer found inconsistencies in paint quality

and atmospheric effect , and wrote that the painting was unsuccessful in reconciling antique and naturalistic ideals . For him , " it is as though these nudes had been abruptly transplanted from the studio into nature " .

Before the mid 19th century , the subject of the nude male figure in Western art had long been reserved for classical subject matter . In the 19th century , it was not unusual for boys and men to swim without clothing in public , but there was no precedent for this subject in American painting . Although there was an informal convention for multiple figure compositions featuring female nudes , in America such paintings were exhibited in saloons rather than galleries ; Eakins altered the gender and presented the subject as fine art . Viewed in a broader context , The Swimming Hole has been cited as one of the few 19th century American paintings that " engages directly with a newly emerging European tradition " ? that of the male bather . Eakins ' picture , although not as stylistically progressive as the works of his French contemporaries , parallels the novel thematic direction taken by Bazille in Summer Scene , Georges Seurat (1859 ? 91) (Bathers at Asnières , 1884) and Paul Cézanne (1839 ? 1906) in his numerous explorations of the subject .

Eakins ' work influenced the subsequent generation of American realists , particularly the artists of the Ashcan School . George Bellows ' (1882 ? 1925) Forty @-@ two Kids , painted in 1907 , bears obvious similarity to The Swimming Hole , although Bellows ' painting has been interpreted as a parody of the Eakins , and the many naked children of the title are playing in the urban Hudson River of New York City rather than in a rural setting . In a sentiment that reflected Eakins ' philosophy , Bellows later explained his motivation for painting Forty @-@ two Kids : " Prizefighters and swimmers are the only types whose muscular action can be painted in the nude legitimately . "

Eakins ' widow 's retitling of the picture after his death reinforced the popular association with the nostalgic sentiment of Riley 's poem . More recently , the painting 's subject has been compared to the poem " Song of Myself " by Walt Whitman (1819 ? 92) , particularly the section " Twenty @-@ Eight Young Men Bathe by the Shore " , given the shared interest in the imagery of men bathing in the nude . Whitman may have provided inspiration : the celebration of nudity , which in Whitman 's case was an open expression of his homosexuality , informs the art of both men . In 1895 , one of Eakins ' male students reminisced about " us Whitman fellows " , which has been interpreted as a reference to homosexuality . " But for their marital status , however , virtually nothing concrete is known of the private realms or sexual propensities of any of the men depicted (in The Swimming Hole) , with the exception of Eakins . "

Although the painting has been viewed as a platonic vision of the male nude seen unselfconsciously in a natural setting , by the 1970s some American writers were beginning to see Eakins ' work , and specifically The Swimming Hole , as having homoerotic implications . Critics have paid particular attention to the compositional prominence of the standing figure 's buttocks , which has been interpreted as suggestive of " homoerotic interests " . According to Jonathan Weinberg , The Swimming Hole marked the beginning of homoerotic imagery in American art . Eakins left a record simultaneously provocative and ambiguous on matters of sex . On the basis of the same visual evidence , that of the photographs , oil sketches , and the finished painting of swimmers , art historians have drawn markedly varying conclusions as to the artist 's intent .