



Book reading at East End Books, East Hampton, New York, 2007 (photo by Bob Lefferts)

[Link to Yale University Press](#)

BOOK REVIEWS: Amy Werbel, *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

Karol K. Weaver, *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 77, no. 1 (Winter, 2010).

"Werbel's creativity is inspiring . . . The author supports her examination of Eakins' art and life with an amazing variety of primary sources. . . The book's fine set of illustrations and Werbel's superior integration and analysis of written primary source evidence clearly show the connections between Eakins' art, nineteenth-century medicine and science, and Victorian notions of sexuality. . . [S]cholars of Philadelphia history and culture will discover an intriguing look at Eakins and the city where he lived and worked."

Gert H. Brieger, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 1 (Spring, 2009).

"Amy Werbel has given us the richest context for Eakins's life and work of any study thus far . . . Her book is as much about the cultural climate of Tom Eakins's city as it is about his life and work. . . Victorian sexuality is hardly a new field, but Werbel uses Tom Eakins as an interesting case study of both attitudes and practices. . . If you wish to read only one book about Eakins, this would be a good choice."

W. L. Whitwell, *Choice Magazine* (August, 2008).
Designated an "Outstanding Academic Title" for 2008

Through meticulous period research into the "paradigms of another age," Werbel offers an evenhanded perspective on this ever-problematic painter. . . Werbel uses other Philadelphia figures for comparison and offers many insights into the inception, creation, and reception of Eakins's paintings. Historical records and contemporary newspaper articles place paintings within their original context. . . This excellent addition to the Eakins literature features numerous footnotes with detailed citations . . . Werbel offers a balanced look at this much-maligned artist, his paintings, and his intellectual and social surroundings, seeing Eakins not with "intellectual fashions of our own time," but instead within Philadelphia's artist-scientist traditions of his time. Summing Up: Highly recommended. Lower-level undergraduates and above; general readers.

Akela Reason, [Association of Historians of American Art Online](#)

"Some readers might be disappointed that Werbel does not engage in the revisionist mode that has dominated Eakins scholarship for the past decade. To her credit, however, she counters these important and influential arguments by contextualizing the artist's life and work in new and important ways. Without engaging in hagiography, Werbel insists that "our historical subjects deserve the same common courtesies we hope for the living the privilege of self-definition to the extent feasible, an effort to understand context and point of view, a presumption of innocence, and finally, not to be neutered, outed, demonized, or similarly categorized to suit the intellectual fashion of our own times" (161). Werbel's approach proves fruitful in situating Eakins's familiar story in a new framework, offering fresh observations on his rich artistic output. "

Robert E. Greenspan, M.D., [The New England Journal of Medicine](#) 357: 17 (October 25, 2007).

"This book is not simply a biography of a famous painter but also an exploration of important social issues in Victorian America such as sexism, homosexuality, and the propriety of nudity in art, which gives the book contemporary interest, relevance, and consequence. . . By introducing contemporary personalities from the art and medical communities into the book, Werbel demonstrates the manner in which Eakins tested undefined sexual and social boundaries, capably illustrating how people come to be characterized as heroes or villains, and how the tides of custom can make those judgments ebb and flow. . . this is not a biography of Thomas Eakins in the traditional sense but is more like a family album of early America with its many-textured layers -- a tapestry of art, politics, medicine, and social history . . . Werbel has written a rigorous academic review that is readable and enjoyable. *Thomas Eakins* will be of interest and relevance not only to the medical community but also to art and social historians."

George Fetherling, *Books in Canada* (September, 2007).

"Werbel is never tempted, not even slightly, to fall into [the] trap of cheap condemnation. Instead she looks everywhere for context, as when comparing Eakins's time with that of a hundred years earlier when American provincialism was being made a kind of state religion, or when examining the 1897 scandal in light of the Oscar Wilde trial. Where she really shines, however, is in discussing the influence of photography, especially nude photography, on Eakins's work."

Philip Dacey, "Gorgeous Gravitas," *Journal of Clinical Anatomy* 20, no. 6 (June, 2007).

"Werbel's book would be exceptional if it only offered an unusual and useful double-focus on art and the medical world, but in addition she manages on the one hand to range widely, casting a net that draws in many diverse persons and equally diverse topics, while on the other hand never to lose sight of the connections between them and her subject. Across her stage come Benjamin Franklin; Sylvester Graham, who invented the Graham cracker as part of his efforts at sexual reform; Anthony Comstock, famed for his anti-obscenity laws; Lewis Carroll; the early photographer Eadweard Muybridge, whose murder of his wife's lover here becomes a contributing part of the Eakins' story; and even Oscar Wilde!

As to diverse topics, the book reads like many histories woven successfully together to make one grand tapestry . . . "

"For those readers not particularly conversant with Eakins, this new book provides a doorway into a compelling world; for knowledgeable students of Eakins, it's a welcome addition that brings coherently together much disparate material . . . Werbel characterizes a particular Eakins self-portrait as "simply gorgeous gravitas." The phrase captures the painting perfectly, signals Werbel's fondness for Eakins, and applies to her own portrait of him . . . Eakins emerges radiantly from Werbel's book, which--thoroughly reliable, eminently readable, and conscientiously informed--is one of the best books available on the great American artist."

"Back to the Future"

<http://artblogbybob.blogspot.com/2007/08/back-to-future.html> (August, 2007).

"Amy Werbel's *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* does what I never thought any critic could do it brings Thomas Eakins back to life. Not physically, obviously, but by traveling back in time and seeing Eakins through the eyes of Victorian Philadelphia, the era in which he lived and worked. After decades of critical deconstruction, Werbel reconstructs Eakins' life, work, and reputation not to apologize for his actions but to contextualize and rehumanize them. Eakins was smart enough to intuit many of the cultural land mines in his hometown of Philadelphia, Werbel writes, but then subversive enough to find ways to step on each one. Werbel guides us through the minefield

of Eakins time and defuses much of the explosiveness of Eakins scandals for today, bringing the Eakins of the past back to his future today. . .

By reconstructing Eakins in his time, Werbel removes the deconstructive and destructive patina that decades of analysis have hardened around Eakins and his work. She takes us back to the past and then back to the future, showing the necessity of placing any work of the past in context if we are truly to understand it today. By reforming the cultural environment around Eakins, Werbel reforms his tarnished reputation and allows his Inner Light to shine once again.