

The Anesthetists in Thomas Eakins' "Clinics"

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Two of the more interesting paintings that portray medical subjects are "The Gross Clinic" and "The Agnew Clinic," by Thomas Eakins. Both depict eminent surgeons operating and teaching in their hospital clinics. In both, anesthetists occupy prominent positions. Who were they? To answer this question it seems appropriate to review briefly the character of the artist, his two "Clinics," and the subject matter, with specific reference to the anesthetists.

Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), a Philadelphian, must be ranked among the greatest of American painters. By the time he was 20 years old he had already demonstrated the characteristics that were later to distinguish his work. At school he objected to the prudish attitude of learning to draw the human body from a draped statue and of being denied the opportunity to draw from the living model. Consequently, he enrolled at Jefferson Medical College, took the regular course in anatomy, performed dissections and witnessed the dissections and operations carried out by Joseph Pancoast, Professor of Surgical Anatomy. His anatomical knowledge was as extensive as that of most physicians, perhaps equalled by only a few contemporary artists. His paintings were sober, factual, and unembellished. He painted carefully what he saw; above all he understood what he viewed. He had a scientific mind, with a facility in mathematics, and employed analytical methods in composing his canvases. The artist's interest in the realistic portrayal of man caused him, in 1884, to engage in experiments at the University of Pennsylvania, serially photographing athletes walking, running, jumping, swinging weights or throwing balls. He then published a paper on "The Differential Action of Certain Muscles Passing More Than One Joint."

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These laudable traits, in portrayal of honesty and faithfulness, proved to be Eakins' undoing. Clients seeking portraits naturally sought a result that was flattering or pretentious; but they thought Eakins' efforts too realistic and much too probing. As a result, some refused acceptance of the finished product and others paid the commission, only to destroy the likeness. His life-long earnings amounted to only \$15,000, a sum less than the worth of any one of his canvases today. Eventually the art world turned against him, refusing to hang his paintings (including both of the "Clinics," because the subject matter was offensive), and he was dismissed from the faculty of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts as a result of his extensive use of nude models. Honor came to Eakins only late in life and he never forgave the public's attitude toward him. When awarded a gold medal by the Pennsylvania Academy, he appeared for the ceremony dressed as if for cycling and proclaimed that it was impudent for the Academy to grant him honor after failing to support him as a teacher. Immediately after receiving the award, he cycled to the mint and turned in the medal for \$75 in currency. Today, Eakins is recognized as having been perhaps the painter with the most virile technique in American history. Walt Whitman once remarked, "Eakins is not a painter, he is a force."

The Gross Clinic (1875)

While witnessing an operation performed by Dr. Samuel Gross (1805–1884) in the amphitheater at Jefferson Medical College, Eakins conceived the composition of "The Gross Clinic." This, at the age of 31, was his most important work to date, an uncommissioned opus, although finally purchased for the sum of \$200. It now hangs in McClelland Hall, at Jefferson Medical College. Gross was at the



The Gross Clinic.

time, one of America's most famous surgeons, his impressive appearance lending itself readily to portrayal. The painting shows Gross, scalpel in hand, blood on his fingers, pausing to talk to the students. Dr. James H. Barton probes

the incision, Dr. David Appel retracts, and Dr. Charles S. Briggs grasps the patient's legs. The patient's mother, behind Gross, demonstrates obvious grief, while Dr. Franklin West records the surgeon's remarks.



The Agnew Clinic.

The anesthetist, Dr. Joseph W. Hearn (1842–1917), was graduated from Jefferson Medical College in 1867, a course which then embraced only two years. After graduation he practiced medicine for three years in Delaware, returning to Philadelphia in 1870 at which time he was appointed “Anaesthetizer” to Dr. Gross. Dr. Hearn’s status is defined in a quote from the sixth edition of Gross’ “System of Surgery,” “At my clinic at the Jefferson Medical College Hospital, where until recently I employed chloroform in all my operations, no mishap from its use has ever occurred. Dr. Joseph Hearn, who has been my anaesthetizer for the past 11 years, has given it in many hundred cases, at all periods of life, and under almost every variety of disease and accident without any serious occurrence.” Subsequently for three years, Hearn continued as Dr. Gross’ anesthetizer, frequently employing ether as well as chloroform. He worked in a similar capacity with Professor Pancoast, administering ether for him during the last five years of that surgeon-anatomist’s tenure. Operative surgical practice was not overwhelmingly time-consuming

in those days, and anesthetizing patients occupied only a part of Hearn’s working day. At one time or another he was Chief of the Surgical Outpatient Clinic, Surgeon to Jefferson Hospital, Assistant Demonstrator of Anatomy and Surgery; he gave courses in microscopy, on the histology of tumors, in dermatology, and in genitourinary diseases. He gained renown for various neurosurgical procedures, for ligation of iliac aneurysm, for the surgical treatment of prolapsed rectum, and he was the second surgeon to operate for diverticulum of the esophagus. Finally he attained the rank of Professor of Clinical Surgery at Jefferson. In 1910, while riding in a carriage, his horse shied, and Hearn was thrown to the street fracturing his skull. In coma for many weeks, he eventually recovered consciousness, only to remain totally blind and invalided until death.

The Agnew Clinic (1889)

This was the most important commission of Eakins’ career. At the University of Pennsylvania, Professor D. Hayes Agnew (1818–1892), one of the great surgeons and ana-

tomists of his day, was to retire. His students, to commemorate the event, commissioned Eakins to paint the Professor's portrait. The price agreed upon was \$750. Eakins both a friend and admirer of Agnew, decided to do something far more ambitious than just an isolated portrait. The surgeon was portrayed in the clinic, amidst his associates and students; each individual in the painting sat for his own portrait, the whole enterprise being completed within 3 months. Presented at Commencement on May 1, 1889, the Agnew Clinic is now on display at the entrance to the Medical Library at the University of Pennsylvania.

The basic conception of the Agnew Clinic is similar to that of the Gross Clinic; the surgeon has paused in the midst of an operation to lecture to students. However, it is interesting to note the differences in surgical practice that had occurred in the 14 years that elapsed between the completion of the two paintings. Street clothing for the attendants is no longer worn: in its place white gowns have appeared. The wound is draped. A member of the family is no longer in evidence, but a nurse is now present.

Eakins left detailed notes on all of his paintings, and so with the Agnew Clinic, all participants are identified, including the visage of Eakins himself, at the extreme right. Dr. J. William White, Agnew's successor as Professor of Surgery, closes the wound after a breast operation. The anesthetist in this instance is Dr. Ellwood R. Kirby (1867-1935), a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1887, subsequently an intern at the University Hospital. Presumably, Dr. Kirby was an intern when this painting was executed, for upon the termination of this service, he spent three years studying Surgery in Germany. He later became a Clinical Professor of Genitourinary Surgery at the Medico-Chirurgical College, and was listed on the surgical staffs at the University and Philadelphia General Hospitals. He became known as a world traveler, connoisseur of the drama and fine arts, a collector of dueling weapons, and a noted criminologist.

So far as can be determined, neither Hearn nor Kirby made a significant contribution to the field of Anesthesia. Although general

anesthesia had been in use for over 43 years when the second of the paintings was done, simple open-drop techniques were still being used. Judging from Gross' remarks, Hearn must have been administering chloroform. The anesthetic towel or napkin is visible in his hand. A similar towel or cone is held in Kirby's left hand, while the object in his right hand is undoubtedly a Squibb ether container. At the time Squibb was the foremost ether manufacturer in the United States, and supplied ether to the University Hospital.* Hearn must have acted as an anesthetist for nearly 20 years, but there is little evidence to suggest that Kirby ever had further experience or interest in anesthesia, after his return from Europe. Both men contributed to the medical literature, but a search of the *Surgeon General's Catalogue* and the *Index Medicus* reveals only papers dealing with surgical subjects. However, Lyman's "Artificial Anaesthesia and Anaesthetics" describes an ether inhaler invented by Hearn, one that now would be considered physiologically unsound.

In résumé, then, one of the more vigorous figures in American art portrayed two of the outstanding figures of the American medical world of the late nineteenth century. The stature of the surgeons is clearly evident as is the progress of their specialty in the years that elapsed between completion of the portraits. By contrast, the anesthetists seem to be men of a different timbre, performing subordinate duties, with little change in technique over the years. Eakins' interpretation of the scene seems intuitively to have accentuated the relative importance of American surgery and anesthesia at the time.

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* The container has been identified by E. R. Squibb and Sons as identical to the cans then manufactured. (George Squibb, personal communication.)