



1875

Oil on canvas

8 feet x 6 feet 6 inches  
(243.8 x 198.1 cm)

**THOMAS EAKINS**

American

Gift of the Alumni Association to Jefferson Medical College in 1878 and purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2007 with the generous support of more than 3,600 donors, 2007-1-1

### LET'S LOOK

What is happening in this picture?  
What is everyone doing?

What areas catch your eye?  
What made you look there?

Describe the character of Dr. Gross, the doctor in the center. What do you see that tells you about him?

Why do you think the artist included so many other people in this portrait of Dr. Gross?

This painting was created over one hundred years ago.  
What clues tell you so?

## PORTRAIT OF DR. SAMUEL D. GROSS (THE GROSS CLINIC)

In this painting by Thomas Eakins, Dr. Samuel D. Gross appears in the surgical amphitheater at Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College (now part of Thomas Jefferson University), illuminated by the skylight overhead. Five doctors (one of whom is obscured by Dr. Gross) attend to the young patient, whose left thigh, bony buttocks, and sock-clad feet are all that is visible to the viewer. Chief of Clinic Dr. James M. Barton bends over the patient, probing the incision, while junior assistant Dr. Charles S. Briggs grips the patient's legs and Dr. Daniel M. Appel keeps the incision open with a retractor. The anesthetist (Dr. W. Joseph Hearn) holds a folded napkin soaked with chloroform over the patient's face, while the clinic clerk (Dr. Franklin West) records the proceedings. A woman at the left, traditionally identified as the patient's mother, cringes and shields her eyes, unable to look. Confident of the outcome of the operation, Dr. Gross calmly and majestically turns to address his students, including the intent figure of Thomas Eakins, who is seated at the right edge of the canvas.

*The Gross Clinic* sparked both controversy and praise at its first showing in Philadelphia at the Centennial Exhibition in 1876. For example, a critic from the Philadelphia Daily Evening Telegraph wrote in 1876, "We know of nothing in the line of portraiture that has ever been attempted in this city, or indeed in this country, that in any way approaches it. . . . This portrait of Dr. Gross is a great work—we know of nothing greater that has ever been executed in America." However, a critic from The Art Interchange remarked in 1879, "Although vigorously treated, [the painting] ought never to have left the dissecting room."

Despite these early mixed reviews, *The Gross Clinic* was recognized in Eakins's lifetime as his greatest work, and it has gained stature

since his death in 1916 as one of the most often reproduced, discussed, and celebrated paintings in American art history. In Philadelphia, it has come to represent the spirit and accomplishment of both the city and its most famous artist. Purchased from Eakins for two hundred dollars and given to Jefferson Medical College by alumni in 1878, the picture was acquired by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2007, following an unprecedented campaign to keep this masterpiece in its native city.

## ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Born in Philadelphia in 1844, Thomas Eakins ("AY-kins") enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) in 1862, a year after graduating from the city's Central High School. He also attended anatomy classes at Jefferson Medical College, participating in dissections and observing surgeries to better understand how the body works, a knowledge he thought was crucial to an artist's development. In 1866, he traveled to Paris to continue his artistic training at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. There, under the supervision of painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, Eakins developed an appreciation for the human figure that would drive his later work as a painter, sculptor, photographer, and teacher.

Eakins returned to Philadelphia in 1870 and spent the rest of his life depicting the city and its people. He began to teach at PAFA in 1876 and was made professor of painting and drawing three years later; in 1882, he was appointed its Director of Schools. As a teacher, he was both admired and condemned for his radical beliefs about how artists should be trained, particularly his emphasis on anatomical dissection and the study of the nude.

After 1886, Eakins increasingly turned to portraiture, although his penetrating character studies usually failed to flatter his sitters and he thus won few commissions. Honored, as he bitterly noted to a journalist in 1894, by "misunderstanding, persecution and neglect" in his lifetime, he is now recognized as one of the greatest American artists.



*Portrait of Thomas Eakins*

c. 1920–25

Oil on canvas

50 x 40 inches (127 x 101.6 cm)

**SUSAN MACDOWELL EAKINS**

American

Gift of Charles Bregler,  
1939, 1939-11-1

## WHO WAS DR. SAMUEL D. GROSS?

A star of Jefferson Medical College, Dr. Samuel D. Gross (1805–1884) was one of the school’s first graduates and among its greatest professors. Born on a farm near Easton, Pennsylvania, he received his medical degree in 1828 with the third graduating class of the new college, chartered in 1824. His expertise as an anatomist led to teaching appointments in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky, until 1856, when Jefferson Medical College invited him to take the post of professor of surgery. By 1875, when Thomas Eakins painted him surrounded by his “clinic” of fellow doctors, he was revered as a teacher, admired as a surgeon (who claimed never to have lost a patient on the operating table), and respected as a founder and member of many local, national, and international medical societies. Dr. Gross—referred to in his day as “The Emperor of American Surgery”—innovated many surgical techniques and instruments, and he was also a prolific and influential author. *A System of Surgery* (1859), among his important textbooks, was translated into several languages. His pocket-sized *Manual of Military Surgery* (1861) was carried on the battlefield on both sides of the American Civil War (1861–65).



Dr. Samuel D. Gross (Courtesy Thomas Jefferson University Archives, Philadelphia)

The operation shown in *The Gross Clinic* demonstrates one of Gross’s areas of special expertise: the removal of dead tissue from the thighbone of a patient suffering from a bone infection. His procedure reflects the recent revolution in treatment for this disease, achieved by a new understanding of anatomy and the body’s ability to heal itself. Gross inspired his students—including Eakins, who attended his lectures—with his vision of the dramatic progress in American medicine in the nineteenth century, pioneered by the research and innovation of Philadelphia’s scientific community.

## CONSERVATION OF THE GROSS CLINIC

As scholars studied early images of *The Gross Clinic*, they determined that the painting’s appearance had been altered by a restorer in the 1920s. Today conservators (specially trained professionals responsible for art preservation and restoration) use scientific and historical research to learn about the original materials and appearance of works of art. This information helps them meet a basic requirement of art conservation: Cause no damage when taking steps to preserve, clean, or restore a work of

art. This requirement was not understood, however, by many restorers when Eakins's paintings were first cleaned and restored.

Eakins made many parts of *The Gross Clinic* very dark to create a strong mood of drama and to suggest the deep stillness of the clinic room, but, as frequently happened in early cleanings of the artist's paintings, his dark and muted colors were misunderstood. Around 1925, a restorer attempted to lighten the tone of the background, mistakenly removing some of Eakins's paint surface in several areas. The most obvious damage was to the passageway to the right of Dr. Gross, where the restorer removed the final dark paint layer that Eakins had applied to create a deep brownish tone. The harsh cleaning exposed his red-orange foundation color and damaged the figures in that area. This unfortunate alteration upset the artist's careful organization of colors and the illusion of depth (the brighter color does not look as shadowy or distant), as well as weakened the focus of the composition (the brighter color draws the eye away from the surgical group).

After a thorough technical examination in 2009, a plan for conservation treatment was carried out. First, conservators carefully removed the previous conservator's varnish and retouching paint, which was applied in 1961. Removal of these materials revealed old damages and what survived of Eakins's own paint. In the passageway area, conservators studied the color and pigments of the few remnants of the artist's final layer of dark paint. They restored the effect of the missing dark color by applying a very thin, transparent layer of paint that, if ever desired, can be removed without any harm to the original paint. No original paint surface was concealed by the conservators' 2010 retouching—only the distraction of damages where Eakins's paint was missing.