Everything for Young Men to Enjoy:
Examining American Nationalism and Homoeroticism in
Thomas Eakins' *The Swimming Hole*

Daniella Sanader

**Abstract**

Focusing on Thomas Eakins’ *The Swimming Hole*, this research paper examines the painting as a landscape fraught with conflicting concerns. I explore *The Swimming Hole* from within the constructed ideals of nineteenth-century American masculinity and discuss how across its surface, notions of homoeroticism, athletic morality and nationalism engage with one another yet remain unresolved and discontinuous. This instability is explained through a contextual history of the nineteenth-century popularity of sports and recreation, the advent of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and the association between organized play and the growth of a moral American citizen. Eakins’ use of the male nude will also be examined, while defining the concept of the homoerotic as it relates to the painting. By tying together these varied themes, this research paper reaches a conclusion of how *The Swimming Hole* fits into art historical discourse, queer studies and the history of American nationalism.

*They have everything for young men to enjoy,*
*You can hang out with all the boys...*
*It’s fun to stay at the YMCA.*

- “YMCA” by The Village People

Set against a picturesque backdrop of the American countryside, Thomas Eakins’ *The Swimming Hole* depicts a lazy afternoon shared between Eakins and five of his male students at Dove Lake, near Philadelphia. For such a simple subject, *The Swimming Hole* is a remarkably unstable image, and Eakins’ ambiguous artistic strategies have puzzled critics and art historians ever since the painting’s completion in 1885. *The Swimming Hole* proves to be highly problematic from within the constructed ideals of nineteenth-century American masculinity: across its surface, notions of homoeroticism, athletic morality and American nationalism engage with one another yet remain unresolved and discontinuous. I will examine this instability by providing a contextual history of the nineteenth-century popularity of sports and recreation, the advent of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and the association between organized play and the growth of a moral American citizen. Then, through an exploration of Thomas Eakins’ compositional and ideological strategies, specifically his use of the male nude, *The Swimming Hole*’s varied critical receptions will be discussed. It seems bizarre that such a seemingly innocent painting
could contain so many disparate ideals, yet Eakins' piece provides us with such a case. By tying together these varied themes, perhaps *The Swimming Hole* will find its place within the art historical discourse, queer studies, and the history of American nationalism.

The late nineteenth century brought about a desire for the reaffirmation of traditional American gender roles. With urbanization came centralized offices, bureaucracies and corporations: the nature of the American work force was changing. As a consequence, many middle-class men lost confidence in their own manliness and independence whilst trapped behind desks all day. And of course, as one's manliness diminishes, the threat of feminization is just around the corner. Suddenly, the concept of "manhood" as a state of being was replaced with "masculinity": "something that had to be constantly demonstrated, the attainment of which was forever in question." American masculinity was defined by actions rather than biology; it was an unstable quality which dually carried with it the reaffirmation of gendered identity and the constant threat of disavowal. In conjunction with this widespread concern over manliness, a new emphasis on sports and recreation developed within middle-class America. Thus, if nineteenth-century work-life proved dangerously feminizing, the American man could reassert his masculinity on the sports field or in the gymnasium. Yet the importance of sports did not end there: their influence was felt in the development of young boys as well.

The new sports craze in late nineteenth-century America saw the rise in popularity of youth sports leagues. Organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) began to develop as centers where American youth could participate in healthy, regulated physical activity. As the director of physical education at the YMCA, Luther Halsey Gulick Jr.'s efforts to incorporate organized sports into the lives of American boys figure prominently within this discussion. To Gulick, organized sports did not simply represent a method of staying healthy, they helped instill in young boys many of the qualities necessary for the development of a good American citizen: self-regulation and control, the ability to place the needs of the many over the desire of the individual and an understanding of proper teamwork. In Gulick's own words, the playground and the athletic field act as:

fundamental conditions without which democracy cannot continue, because upon them rests the development of that self-control which is related to an appreciation of the needs of the rest of the group and of the corporate conscience that is rendered necessary by the complex interdependence of modern life.  

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2 Ibid., 120.
By engaging in organized sports within the regulated environment of the YMCA or an equivalent sports league, these young men were preparing to enter the adult world as responsible American citizens. Yet the characteristics learned through sporting activities, such as obedience, teamwork and loyalty, were not only emblematic of the law-abiding American male, but were highly valued Christian standards as well. Gulick wrote: “these values appear to me to be a great pulse of beginning altruism, of self-sacrifice, of that capacity upon which Christianity is based.” Thus American nationalism, Christian values and the athletic field became neatly bound together in the education of young boys, all held under the banner of the Young Men’s Christian Association.

In 1884, Edward Coates approached Thomas Eakins and commissioned a painting. As the board treasurer for the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, Coates had known Eakins for several years; Eakins was the professor of drawing and painting at the same institution. Yet when Eakins unveiled The Swimming Hole the following year, the painting was met with a lukewarm reception. Coates, who refused to accept the painting, and the rest of Eakins’ Philadelphia audience would have undoubtedly been perplexed by his compositional and ideological strategies, and little writing about the painting has been left behind by its contemporary critics. One writer for the Philadelphia Times found The Swimming Hole “not agreeable,” claiming that Eakins “evidently intended to show the results of instantaneous photography,” with little success. Yet no one seemed willing to mention the swimmers themselves. Evidently something about The Swimming Hole was too peculiar for them to process. On the most immediate level, the figures in the painting were all recognizable students from the Academy community, portrayed in the nude with their professor, swimming at Dove Lake, a familiar local landmark:

No one appears to have stated what must have been on everyone’s mind: the graphic nudity of academy students. Two of the students, in fact, could be readily identified by portraits of them hanging in the same exhibition only a few feet away from Eakins’ canvas.

Yet on a second level, Eakins’ use of the nudes themselves would have been difficult for his late nineteenth-century audience to justify. In a time-period where organized sports were heralded as necessary for young boys to develop good American values, what kind of message did The Swimming Hole convey? These men are not at the YMCA or another supervised space; their play is uncontrolled and undisciplined,
they even lack the basic organizational units of clothing or sporting uniforms. In a single scene, Eakins denied all of the values of masculinity, athletics and nationalism that his time period purported. Yet, his intentions remain unclear; "Eakins was either oblivious to the trouble he had stirred up in his Swimming painting, or he was careless, even disdainful of public opinion and the concerns of board members."  

Either way, it is clear that The Swimming Hole made quite an impression upon its Philadelphia audience, whether or not they were willing to admit it.

While it may be impossible to understand the true intentions behind the painting, much is known about Thomas Eakins' interests as they relate to The Swimming Hole. On one hand, the board at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts had long been concerned with Eakins' interest in the nude. His teaching methods had previously come into question as well: on one occasion he pulled the loincloth from a male model's genitals in a mixed-sex anatomy class.  

It is clear how this type of behaviour would have been considered inappropriate, especially within a society known for its puritanical beliefs. Yet despite contestations of impropriety, Eakins' enthusiasm for the nude was earnestly academic. He approached his subjects with scientific precision, as proven by the meticulous preparatory work left behind in his name, and also he spent time documenting human sequential movement through stop-motion photography with Eadward Muybridge. Famous for his photographs studying the motion of horses, Muybridge's influence on Eakins can be felt in The Swimming Hole, as many art historians have pointed out that the placement of each figure seems to reflect a frozen stage in the progression of a man diving into water.

Eakins' interest in photography and his dedication to detail in the study of the nude would undoubtedly have led him to create preparatory photographs of his male students swimming at Dove Lake, the local site that would famously become the setting for The Swimming Hole. Luckily, these photographs have survived, leaving historians with a group of images that provide a peculiar parallel to Eakins' painting. Yet Eakins did not remain completely faithful to his photographs. In his article, "The Male Body in Another Frame: Thomas Eakins' The Swimming Hole as a Homoerotic Image," Michael Hatt describes the photographs in relation to their final product:

The photographic nudes are further formalized and idealized in the painting. Bodies are turned to remove the penis from sight, poses are stabilised, and models from the lexicon of the academy are invoked – the clearest example

7 Kirkpatrick, The Revenge of Thomas Eakins, 293.
8 Martin A. Berger, Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 106.
is the figure lying on the rock, based on the famous antique statue of The Dying Gaul.\textsuperscript{10}

This process of idealization was most likely an attempt on Eakins' part to justify his male nudes, to "allow 'nude' to function as a pure, undifferentiated sign,"\textsuperscript{11} yet as I have already discussed, his Academy audience did not find his methods acceptable.

Despite its uneasy beginnings, public opinion of The Swimming Hole took a turn for the better in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Once the painting had gained enough distance from its original audience, its public meaning began to change. Suddenly, instead of an uneasy portrait of a professor and his students, The Swimming Hole came to represent an authentic image of historical America: a channel of nostalgic longings for a pure, pre-industrial time. One critic, praising Eakins' painting, wrote in 1921:

I think you will feel that the dramatis personae of the swimming pool are real men and boys. Despite their nudity we recognize them as belonging to the early [eighteen] seventies. There is something about the way they wear their hair which gives the date. The man half lying on the dock is unmistakably an American. It is an invaluable statement of historical fact. So men looked and so men acted in these our United States during the lifetime of Thomas Eakins.\textsuperscript{12}

 Barely four decades after the painting's completion, The Swimming Hole's meaning had drastically transformed. From the uneasy critical reception that marked The Swimming Hole's unveiling in 1885, we have come to understand that swimming in the nude with one's students was not behaviour deemed appropriate during Eakins' time. Yet in the early 1920s, these activities were suddenly seen as an essential part of nineteenth-century society. This change in attitudes can be charted through a variety of different avenues. On one hand, the space (both temporal and physical) bought with forty years of time helped to distance The Swimming Hole from its origins at the Philadelphia Academy, burying the uncomfortable familiarity of its swimmers. The Swimming Hole would have been a powerful agent of nostalgia for its 1920s viewers as well. Eakins' remarkably realistic painting style would have undoubtedly seemed more authentic and traditional in the eyes of conservatively minded art critics of the 1920s, acting as a great contrast to the growing influence of abstraction of contemporary modernist work.

\textsuperscript{10} Hatt, "The Male Body in Another Frame," 16.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 17.
Yet the newfound affirmation of Eakins' subject matter in *The Swimming Hole* is also indicative of the anxieties towards urban society that were building in the 1910s and 1920s. The painting's idyllic quality (young, virile, athletic men, active in the American landscape) must have struck a nostalgic chord with its early twentieth-century audience, allowing them to fantasize about an idealized American past: a pure, innocent, pre-industrial time unburdened with concerns of urbanization and modernity. This notion is remarkably ironic given our current understanding of Eakins' painting. Firstly, as I have already discussed, *The Swimming Hole* is nowhere near an unadulterated image of Eakins' society; as seen from his preparatory photographs, he manipulated the poses of his painted swimmers in order to stabilize and formalize them. It almost seems amusing to consider the critic quoted above, who claimed that "The man half lying on the dock [in *The Swimming Hole*] is unmistakably an American," when we have come to understand this figure as a reference to the Hellenistic sculpture of *The Dying Gaul*. Secondly, despite its beauty, Dove Lake was by no means a natural American setting. It was a man-made reservoir created for the use of a nearby copper rolling mill, something to which both Eakins and his contemporaries would have been well aware. Yet this sort of local knowledge evaporated as the painting reached the 1920s, allowing its meaning to transcend from a study of figures to a historicized allegory. Thus *The Swimming Hole* came to represent the America that "was": a constructed and idealized social history meant to alleviate concerns of urbanization by harkening back to the "good ol' days." For the remainder of this paper, however, I shall return to an examinations of the initial reception of Eakins' painting in 1885, for the reactions evoked by the Philadelphia audience provide an appropriate contextualization for examining Eakins' painting in terms of homoeroticism.

As seen from its various critical receptions, one of the most problematic aspects of Thomas Eakins' *The Swimming Hole* was his ambiguous use of the male nude and the implications therein. Many critics and art historians have come to define the painting as homoerotic, and I will explore this concept in the final portion of this research paper. Firstly, the term "homoerotic" is one laden with various meanings and connotations, thus a stable definition of the word is necessary. To borrow from Michael Hatt's research, the homoerotic acts as a barrier between the homosocial and the homosexual, calling attention to each realm yet simultaneously acting as a concrete boundary between both. Consequently, the frame of homoeroticism works "to draw attention to, not simply the division, but the dangerous closeness of the social and the sexual." This awareness of the menacingly short distance between social and sexual emotions is read in Eakins' figures: their bodies interact within the same space, yet at the same time, each nude seems self-contained, detached from his fellow swimmers and locked in a stiff

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17 Ibid., 13.
formalism which seems to acknowledge the awkward space between homosocial and homosexual realms that the painting occupies. Michael Hatt also argues, quite succinctly, that *The Swimming Hole*’s initial failure in the eyes of its Philadelphia audience is due to Eakins’ unsuccessful completion of the male nude. Throughout art history, the justification of the male nude has been granted through the artist’s ability to mitigate the potential desirability of its form. Hatt outlines four main strategies employed to this end: the inclusion of the male nude within an acceptable discourse (such as athletics or medicine), the scripting of the gaze as female, the nude’s reduction to a purely aesthetic form and the employment of hierarchies to create a sense of superiority over the nude. Yet Eakins’ nude swimmers do not meet any of these criteria: their legitimacy is compromised within the framework of art history at large. Thus if the nudes fail to be academicized, they invite the possibility of being read as merely pleasurable to the male viewer. It is valuable to note here that the female viewer’s place within this issue is moot; a female receiving pleasure from gazing upon Eakins’ nudes deproblematizes them by readmitting them into the sphere of socially normative heterosexuality.

The homoerotic environment shared by the figures in *The Swimming Hole* also becomes problematic when considering nineteenth-century ideals of athleticism as they relate to the development of American masculinity, a connection that I discussed with reference to the YMCA at the beginning of this research paper. Michael Hatt touches on this issue within his article, noting that the uncontrolled setting occupied by the figures in *The Swimming Hole* allows for the possibility of unregulated desire to surface within the male viewer. I would like to expand on these ideas through the inclusion of Luther Halsey Gulick Jr.’s theories discussed above. If proper athletics within the controlled setting of the YMCA leads to the development of the moral American citizen, then the unregulated play of Eakins’ swimmers can be viewed as decidedly un-American. Yet Eakins’ ambiguous painting strategies further complicate this issue; the free play of his figures is halted by their stiff, formalized construction. Even earlier paintings by Eakins do not create spaces that carry the same degree of problematized homoeroticism. *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* from 1871 is a celebration of socially normative athleticism within the form of the male rower. Issues of gazing upon the naked male body do arise in Eakins’ *Salutat*, yet this painting still remains within the relatively controlled space of the boxing ring. Nothing else within Eakins’ body of work seems to equal the idyllic “naked romps,” to use Michael Hatt’s words, depicted in *The Swimming Hole*, which undoubtedly caused its uneasy reception and rocky history.

Thomas Eakins’ *The Swimming Hole* holds a very bizarre place within art history, and whether or not this was his intention remains unclear. The painting acts as a site where conflicting issues of American nationalism, athletic morality and

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19 Ibid. 16.
20 Ibid., 16.
homoeroticism engage with one another, yet ultimately they do not converge to create a cohesive message. This ambiguity can be seen as Eakins’ intended strategy or his ultimate weakness as a painter, yet the fact remains that he created an image that continued a life of its own far past Eakins’ lifetime. Acting as a filter for various societal ideals, The Swimming Hole has proved capable of shifting its meanings and inspiring debate for over a century after its completion, and regardless of intent, this is quite a feat.
**Works Cited**


