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Moment of Beauty: William Rush and His Model

Wood carver William Rush was a subject of several paintings and studies made by Philadelphia painter Thomas Eakins, starting with a painting of Rush in his studio in the early 1800s working on a carving of an allegorical figure of the Schuylkill River. This work created 1876-1877, depicted Rush carving the clothed figure while in the foreground, a nude model stood with a chaperone dressed in gray sewing nearby. Nearly 30 years later, Eakins painted the scene again in the identically titled *William Rush Carving his Allegorical Statue of the Schuylkill*. In 1908, Eakins also completed *William Rush and His Model*. Interestingly, the artist depicted in this work was not Rush, but Eakins himself, dressed in Rush's clothes, holding the carver's mallet and helping the model down from her perch (Illusion).

Timeline:

Painting	Completed
William Rush Carving his Allegorical Statue of the Schuylkill	1877
William Rush Carving his Allegorical Statue of the Schuylkill	1908
William Rush and his Model	1908



We see her frontally now, not nude, not as the inspiration for an ideal allegory, but naked and true. It is the clearest possible statement of Eakins' aims in art: a rigid adherence to both realism and the principles of humanist artistic traditions. Here, Eakins proclaims himself to be an artist of the present (the real), and a painter with a pedigree (the weight of tradition), which he embraces literally by assuming Rush's identity, and by extension through the artistic productions of his career. (Illusion)

The model appears to emerge from the “nothingness” of the background, from the source of all things, the raw material of the universe. She could be the essence and lightness of being; she is the center of the universe of the canvas, beauty being helped down from her pedestal. In dramatic contrast to the muted, muddy gray and brown colors of the background and the earthy portrayal of the sculptor, she almost glows with an energy that radiates life into the otherwise somber arrangement of colors.

At the same time that the piece idealizes the concept of the human figure as the ideal of beauty, it does not idealize the figure itself. The woman is not a classical beauty, and she “moves” with just the grace of just an ordinary woman. The charm and attraction of this work is not only its masterfully realistic portrayal, but also the simple elegance of the relationship of those portrayed. Here is a very human and very divine moment in the artistic process. The artist tenderly helps his model step down as she looks to her next step, her right arm slightly extended to aid her balance. His left hand gently holds her right, in contrast to the firm grip he has on the hammer in his right hand. Here is kindness and respect; here is professionalism. In one sense, her nudity does not even enter into the picture. But in another sense, it is a very important part of the work.

Eakins taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts between 1876 and 1886, where he took the concept of realism to a logical step that scandalized Philadelphia. Insisting that students could best learn by painting what was in front of them, by seeing things as they were, he effected what was to be a positive shift in academic art instruction in America: to the accepted tools such as anatomy lessons and dissection, he added photographic studies of the nude (in this case mostly male nudes engaged in activities such as swimming or wrestling), and the use of nude models in the classroom (Hendricks 16).

For some years there had been considerable resistance to Eakins's teaching methods. A number of the less dedicated students were appalled by the rigorous study of anatomy that he required, including the dissection of cadavers, and by the exacting exercises in perspective he imposed upon them. Other students complained that the course of study was too narrow and restricted. Indeed, Eakins, who had almost no interest in aesthetic theory, showed little enthusiasm for courses in art history, aesthetics, or composition. Nor were there classes in such highly popular subjects as outdoor sketching and illustration. In brief, Eakins enforced upon his students his own methods and his own severe code of artistic ethics--and in a rather overbearing way. (Flam)

Most notoriously, Eakins employed a nude male model in a class containing female students, an incident which became a key factor behind his forced resignation from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. (Thomas Eakins 53)

Defending the use of male models, he asked, "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...the mares and cows?" (The Getty)

With this work, his belief, and his persistence in the face of sometimes severe criticism, Eakins helped put the nude in American art and art classes. Though under-appreciated until the last decade of his life, he has since taken a position as one of the most important painters in the history of American art.

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