

1. *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*,
by Thomas Eakins (1844-1916),
American. Signed and dated
1871. Oil on canvas, 32½ x 46¼
inches. Alfred N. Punnett Fund
and Gift of George D. Pratt,
34.92



“The Champion Single Sculls”

After studying in Europe for nearly four years, the twenty-six-year-old Thomas Eakins returned to Philadelphia, his birthplace, in 1870, where he spent the rest of his life depicting the realities of his milieu with great force and beauty.

It has been thought that the first public exhibition of his work took place in 1874, but recently discovered evidence makes it clear that his first showing occurred nearly three years earlier, in 1871. This showing was not held in the place one would expect – the Academy of Fine Arts, the center of the Philadelphia art scene. The Academy had closed in 1870, preparatory to reopening in a new and larger building. While the Academy was being “torn out,” the Union League Club, in its august fastness on South Broad Street, decided that something should be done in the way of art exhibitions to fill the gap. The League leapt into the breach with the “First

Art Reception of the Union League,” held during the evenings of December 8, 9, and 10, 1870. More than forty artists were shown, mostly Philadelphians, but Eakins was not among them. Another exhibition was announced for the following January; it did not actually open until February 9, when 113 artists were represented – but still no Eakins, although the work of many of his friends, including his Academy teacher, Christian Schuessle, elicited much favorable comment in the local papers. “There was hardly one in the whole collection that was not well worthy of praise,” *The Press* of February 13 commented.

The winter continued without a suggestion that an artist named Thomas Eakins lived in the city, until April 26, 1871, when the League’s third and final exhibition opened. There two Eakins works, called “Portrait” and “The Champion Single Sculls,” were included, thus qualifying for the distinction of



2. *Max Schmitt, possibly at twenty.*
Photograph from Max Schmitt’s
daughter

being the artist's first publicly exhibited works. Their primacy is confirmed by *The Daily Evening Telegraph* of April 29, 1876, where Eakins was described as "a thoroughly accomplished artist who has, during the four or five years that have lapsed since he first exhibited in Philadelphia at one of the Union League receptions, been steadily growing."

Can the two Eakins pictures shown in the League exhibition be identified with paintings known today? The "Portrait" cannot. The exhibition catalogue lists it as being owned by "M. H. Messhert." We know from other sources that the Messcherts were friends of the Eakinses, and it is certainly possible that this portrait was of Mr. Messchert himself—perhaps Eakins's first commission. Be that as it may, today this portrait cannot be found among the artist's catalogued works, and seems to be lost.

"The Champion Single Sculls," however, may very probably be the picture now in the Metropolitan Museum, called Max Schmitt in a Single Scull (Figure 1). The reviews of the League picture strongly suggest the Museum's painting. *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* reported: "There are other portraits, by Sully, Rehen, Mrs. Holmes, Street and Thomas Eakins. The latter artist, who has lately returned from Europe and the influence of Gérôme, has also a picture entitled 'The Champion Single Sculls' (No. 137), which, though peculiar, has more than ordinary interest. The artist, in dealing so boldly and broadly with the commonplace in nature, is working upon well-supported theories, and despite a somewhat scattered effect, gives promise of a conspicuous future. . . . A walnut frame would greatly improve the present work." The *Inquirer's* critic was less impressed: "Thomas Eakins shows two," he wrote, "a portrait and a river scene, entitled 'The Champion Sculls.' While manifesting a marked ability, especially in the painting of the rower in the foreground, the whole effect is scarcely satisfactory. The light on the water, on the rower and on the trees lining the bank indicates that the sun is blazing fiercely, but on looking upward one perceives a curiously dull leaden sky."

It is clear, however, that Max Schmitt in a Single Scull is not a summer scene. The trees are bare or brown-leaved, indicating an afternoon in late fall or early spring. The picture, dated 1871, might have been begun the preceding autumn, planned for the League's February exhibition, which, even more than the December show, stressed the work of local artists, but was only finished in time for the April show.

Eakins often went sculling on the Schuylkill with his friend Max Schmitt (Figure 2), whose wife was a penmanship pupil of Eakins's father. In fact, the occupant of the second scull in the Metropolitan's painting (Figure 3) is Eakins himself. He was not a "champion," although Schmitt was: Schmitt was listed as the single scull champion of the "Schuylkill Navy" in *The Rowing and Athletic Manual for 1875*. Sculling had long engaged—and still engages—the particular attention of Philadelphians, and was a favorite subject for Eakins throughout his career: he painted at least fourteen sculling pictures. It is appropriate that this scene should have been one of the first two pictures to bring his name to public attention.

GORDON HENDRICKS



3. Self-portrait by Eakins. The scull is signed "EAKINS 1871."
Detail of Figure 1