In a time when so many artists studied abroad to learn the style of the great European masters and to follow in their footsteps, Thomas Eakins stood apart. As a man and as an artist, he remained grounded in his American heritage.

Born in Philadelphia in 1844, Thomas Eakins was to spend almost all of his life in the City of Brotherly Love. In 1862, he began his study of art at the Pennsylvania Academy, where he became obsessed with mastering the painting of the human form. This was so important to him, so fundamental to his painting, that he enrolled in an anatomy course at a local medical college.

Between 1866 and 1870, Eakins went to Paris and Spain to study painting, particularly the use of color and the importance of brush strokes. He learned his lessons well. Upon his return to Philadelphia, he began to paint pictures that appeared unconventional to many critics. Eakins loved outdoor activities, and his subjects often included people hunting, rowing, sailing, playing baseball, or even boxing. Eakins disliked the idealized style and subject matter of many of his contemporaries, and he chose instead to portray American life as realistically as possible.

One of Eakins’s most controversial paintings, titled The Gross Clinic, is an extremely realistic composition. The subject for the
painting is an operation being performed by Dr. Samuel David Gross, a prominent Philadelphia surgeon. In the painting, the operation is shown in graphic detail. Never before had such a subject been painted by an American artist, and the public response was not favorable. In fact, objection to the painting was so strong that its exhibition was prohibited during the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876.

During the 1880s and 1890s, Eakins turned to portraiture, still using the realistic qualities of his earlier work. To aid him in his pursuit of realism, the artist used photographs of his subjects to develop the detail in each painting. As a result, his works developed an increasingly realistic style.

Because Eakins’s painting did not sell well, he turned to teaching to support himself. His students, however, recognized the greatness of his work—his use of rich color and his fine style of painting. We too can appreciate his eye for detail and his preference for American over European subjects. Thomas Eakins inspired a whole new trend in realism, but he also should be remembered as an American painter who painted the American subject, prizefighter and all.

1. How did Eakins’s time at the Pennsylvania Academy influence his future work?

2. What types of “unconventional” paintings did Eakins produce after returning from Europe?

3. Why was the painting *The Gross Clinic* so controversial?

4. **Synthesizing Information** Why do you think Thomas Eakins’s art never sold well during his lifetime?

5. **Evaluating Information** How was Eakins different from his contemporaries in his choice of subjects for his paintings?