

11a John Biglin in a Single Scull, c. 1873

Thomas Eakins was in the vanguard of the army of Americans who invaded Paris during the latter part of the nineteenth century to complete their artistic education. After returning to his hometown of Philadelphia in 1870, Eakins never left the United States again. He believed that great artists relied not on their knowledge of other artists' works but on personal experience. For the rest of his career, Eakins remained committed to recording realistic scenes from contemporary American life.

During the three years Eakins was abroad, competitive rowing on the Schuylkill River, which runs through Philadelphia, had become the city's leading sport. In England, rowing had long been regarded as the exclusive activity of gentlemen, but in Philadelphia anyone could take part, since rowing clubs made the expensive equipment available to all. Those who chose not to participate could gather on the banks of the river to cheer the oarsmen on, and rowing competitions became some of the most popular sporting events of the century. Eakins was an enthusiastic rower himself, but after his time in Paris he regarded the activity less as a form of recreation than a fertile source of subject matter that combined his dedication to modern life with his interest in anatomy. Even before he embarked on a classical European education that involved drawing from the nude, Eakins had studied human anatomy as part of his artistic training. Fascinated by the mechanics of movement, he was naturally drawn to athletes in action.

At first Eakins painted only acquaintances, but in 1872 the Biglin brothers came to town to compete in a championship race. They were both professional rowers, and John Biglin was a superstar, unmatched as a single sculler (a rower who pulls an oar in each hand) and believed to possess the ideal rower's physique. Here, Biglin appears in his scull, or racing shell, in the heat of competition, his face fixed in concentration as a second shell streams forward on a parallel course. Eakins has chosen the critical moment when the oarsman reaches the end of a backward stroke and prepares to dip his oars into the water; his next stroke will propel his racing shell ahead of the competition and right out of the picture's frame. The river is full of activity on this bright summer day, with a fleet of sailboats and a crew team visible in the distance, but our attention is focused on Biglin, whose body and scull form an elongated triangle in the center of the picture. The composition itself, with broad, even bands of sky and water, emphasizes the horizontal and imparts a stillness to the scene that counteracts the excitement of the competition.

When Eakins painted *John Biglin in a Single Scull*, he had only recently begun to work in watercolor. However, he applied himself to mastering the medium with the dedication and self-discipline he admired in the athletes he portrayed. Unlike oil paint, watercolor does not allow for error: it can't be scraped off the surface and painted over if the artist makes a mistake or changes his mind. Many painters enjoy the spontaneity of the watercolor technique, but Eakins worked to ensure that everything came out right on his first attempt. To establish the exact position of the rower, he first made an oil painting that could be corrected, if necessary. And to place the reflections accurately in the water, he made detailed perspective drawings almost twice the size of the final work.

The painstaking process seems to have paid off. Eakins sent a replica of *John Biglin* to his Paris teacher, Jean-Léon Gérôme, to demonstrate the progress he'd made since returning to Philadelphia. Gérôme praised Eakins's watercolor as "entirely good." "I am very pleased," he wrote, "to have in the New World a pupil such as you who does me honor."



11-A Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), *John Biglin in a Single Scull*, c. 1873. Watercolor on off-white wove paper, 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (49.2 x 63.2 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1924 (24.108). Photograph © 1994 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at the background as well as the foreground of this watercolor painting.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Ask students to find these elements.

Sailboats: *They are located in the far distance.*

Tower: *It is found in the center distance.*

Second scull: *It is located on the far left.*

Crew team: *A crew team is located in the left background.*

E | M | S

Describe the rower's arms.

They are very muscular.

What did Eakins need to know in order to accurately draw and paint this man's arms?

He had to understand human anatomy and also had to closely observe how the man looked and moved as he rowed.

E | M | S

How did Eakins show distance in this painting?

Distant objects, including water ripples, are less detailed, smaller, lighter, and bluer than objects in the foreground.

Where are the spaces between the ripples largest?

The spaces between the ripples are largest in the foreground, where they are closest to the viewer.

E | M | S

In watercolor, artists sometimes purposely leave areas blank to reveal the white color of the paper.

Where do you see very white areas that are probably the paper?

These areas are located in the highlights on the waves in the foreground, the clouds, and the lightest part of Biglin's shirt.

E | M | S

Ask students what geometric shape Biglin's head, body, boat, and arms form, and ask them to point out the shape.

They form a triangle.

INTERPRET E | M | S

Have students extend their arms and lean forward and pretend to row as John Biglin does in the painting. Ask them how his hands and arms might move in the next few seconds.

E | M | S

Ask students which direction the boat is moving. *It is moving to the right.*

Which boat is ahead in the scull race? *John Biglin's scull is ahead.*

Imagine where the second boat could be within a minute or two.

Biglin could leave it behind, or the other scull could catch up with Biglin and soon pass him.

E | M | S

Have students describe this man's expression. What can you tell about his character from this painting?

He seems serious and determined.

S

What does this picture suggest about Americans' leisure activities in the late 1880s?

John Biglin's dress suggests that he is not wealthy. There are many boats on this river in Philadelphia, a large American city.

Many Americans had time to pursue water sports.

Why is Biglin the only single scull rower shown in the painting?

The subject is Biglin as an individual, challenging himself as much as competing against others.

CONNECTIONS Geography: rivers
Science: anatomy

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: Eakins's letters home to his family (middle, secondary); *Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain (middle); and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain (secondary)

Arts: photography; Realism