



33: Thomas Eakins *William H. Macdowell* (ca. 1904)

Elizabeth Johns

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hen William H. Macdowell posed for Thomas Eakins in 1904, the artist had already painted six or seven portraits of him. They had known each other since at least the early 1880s, when Macdowell's three sons, his daughter Susan, and other mutual friends joined Eakins in a jaunt to the beach community of Manasquan, New Jersey, to make photographs. Taking turns with the camera, the group created idyllic scenes—reminiscent of sculpture from antiquity—of nudes walking together in friendship, posed languorously on the sand, and playing pan-pipes and other flutes near low-lying shrubs.¹

Macdowell, known as a “free-thinker” in the tradition of his hero Thomas Paine, was surely an advocate of this venture. Not only was he something of a rebel and a learned conversationalist about ideas old and new, but, like Eakins, he lived and breathed pictures. He earned his living as an engraver and photographer, meanwhile passing on to his children his intellectual independence. His daughter Susan, who had absorbed her father's fascination with photography and had also become a highly skilled painter, married Eakins in 1884. She had first met the artist in 1876, when his *Gross Clinic* had been exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial; subsequently she became his student.

Thus when Eakins stood at his easel to paint Susan's father in 1904, he had known Macdowell for a quarter of a century or more. That period of time had seen many changes in both their lives. In 1885, only a year after he had married Susan, Eakins had been forced to resign from his prestigious position as Director of Instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. At issue was his use of nude models for both male and female students as well as his encouragement of his students to pose for each other in the interest of economy. The blow to Eakins was severe—professionally, economically, and emotionally. Given Macdowell's unconventionalism, one can imagine his solid support, like that of Susan, for the artist. However, the recriminations from a few of Eakins's former students were bitter, resulting in estrangements that affected him the rest of his life.

Thereafter many of his portraits seem steeped in melancholy, even regret, that seem to have emanated from the artist himself. Because he chose virtually all his sitters, asking them to pose for him because as artists or musicians or scientists they were “worthy of being remembered,” he may have been drawn expressly to those who had known disappointments.

Surely in at least one respect Macdowell fits that description. Two years before Eakins painted this last portrait, Macdowell's wife (and Susan's mother) had died. The portrait photographs that Susan or others of the Eakins circle had taken of Mrs. Macdowell about 1890, when she was in her mid-sixties, show her to have been a small, solemn person, her face already creased with age, her hair swept back in a plain, practical style. In only one photograph, a profile, does she wear a hat, and this one quite fancy, complementing an elaborate plaid dress. As Mrs. Macdowell was some eight years younger than her husband, her death while he himself was still robust must have been a terrible blow.

Eakins's earlier images of his father-in-law present him as serious, but also as a character. In several photographs and in at least two painted portraits, Macdowell looks away from the viewer, wearing a heavy coat with collar turned up and a wide-brimmed hat somewhat rakishly set on his head. In 1904, however, in the portrait at the Memorial Art Gallery, Macdowell is formally dressed and looks directly toward the painter and viewer. He marks his unconventionalism in actually wearing two coats—his suit coat and an outer coat—with the result that the portrait reveals more than one set of buttons. He casts his eyes slightly downward, preserving the sense that it is his interior vision—

Thomas Eakins,
1844–1916
William H. Macdowell, ca. 1904
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
41.26

Thomas Eakins
 William H. Macdowell,
 1880s
 Albumen print, 3 1/8 x 2 1/4 in.
 The Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, Gift of Julius Ravzin,
 1979 (1979.547.1)
 Photograph ©2005 The
 Metropolitan Museum of Art



perhaps his memories—that matter to him now. His face is narrow and long, the cheek bones made obvious and the deep lines in his forehead accentuated with Eakins's knowing modeling. Dark areas near his nose and eyes mark the ravages of age—Macdowell was then in his late eighties. Gray mixed with white, his mustache and beard seem to have been trimmed for this occasion, in contrast to their near-wildness in earlier photographs. Perhaps he and Eakins had decided that this would be the last time he would sit for Eakins. And indeed it was.

It is tempting to compare this portrait with Eakins's self-portrait of two years earlier (1902), which he presented to the National Academy of Design on his election to Associate. Only slightly larger than his portrait of Macdowell, this image, too, shows the sitter dressed formally, his hair somewhat kempt and his beard and mustache neatly trimmed. Although

Eakins, born in 1844, was almost thirty years younger than Macdowell, in this self-portrait at age fifty-eight he comes close to looking as worn, as ravaged by time, as his father-in-law.

Susan kept all Eakins's portraits of her father, with the exception of one that belonged to her brother William G. Macdowell. After Susan's death in 1938, the portraits she owned passed into the hands of dealers; in 1941 the last of Eakins's portraits of Macdowell, and perhaps the most absorbing, was purchased for the Memorial Art Gallery.

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