

“Conservation work is like a doctor doing an exam and arriving at a diagnosis and recommending a course of action.”  
–Mark S. Tucker



Your eye instantly locks on the only man standing in the forefront, a forceful figure illuminated by an unseen skylight. In a life-size portrait dominated by muted, somber tones of black and brown, your eye travels to the brilliant red blood coating the hand of the Jefferson surgeon, then follows his scalpel to an operating table and the bleeding incision in the left thigh of a young man, ill-fitting socks sagging on his feet.

Viewers seeing the painting – first known as the *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross* and now as *The Gross Clinic* – gasped in the late 19th century. For the first time in more than 80 years, today’s viewers fully understand why.

A two-year conservation effort that ended this summer restored details blurred by an overzealous cleaning in the early 20th century while the painting belonged to Jefferson Medical College and reinstated the delicate balance of light and tone that gives realist Thomas Eakins’ masterpiece force. For the first time in generations, viewers now can truly grasp what a *New York Tribune* critic meant in 1879 when he wrote:

“(The painting is) one of the most powerful, horrible and yet fascinating pictures that has been painted anywhere in this century. ... But the more one praises it, the more one must condemn its admission to a gallery where men and women of weak nerves must be compelled to look at it. For not to look is impossible.”

#### THE FIRST STEPS

The Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) purchased *The Gross Clinic* from Thomas Jefferson University for \$68 million in 2007, and the organizations’ curators and conservationists immediately began discussing restoration. At the least, they decided, they needed to strip the varnish applied during the last restoration almost a half-century earlier. In removing the varnish, they also would remove the repairs made in 1961 because restorers do their work on a thin layer of varnish, not directly on the canvas.

Mark S. Tucker, the Aronson Senior Conservator of Paintings and vice chair of conservation at the museum, took the lead. From his vast knowledge of Eakins and his experience in restoring the painter’s work, he knew from the beginning that much had been lost beyond the damage repaired 50 years ago. But what? After the varnish was stripped, the detective work began.

# The Art of Healing: *The Gross Clinic* Reborn

### THE DETECTIVE WORK

“Conservation work is like a doctor doing an exam and arriving at a diagnosis and recommending a course of action,” Tucker said.

The conservation team – which included Tucker, Kathleen A. Foster, the Robert L. McNeil, Jr., Senior Curator of American Art at the museum, and their colleagues at PAFA, conservator Aella Diamantopoulos and curator Anna Marley – found few preliminary *Gross* paintings by Eakins to guide its diagnosis. But the team found two items perhaps even more important at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, an ink wash replica Eakins did in 1875–76, showing precisely how the light and dark colors related to each other, and an enormous black and white photograph taken in conjunction with an Eakins exhibit in 1917, a little more than a year after the artist’s death. Both showed the same relationship between light and dark.

The team discovered that the relationship had changed dramatically by 1929, when Eakins’ widow, Susan, complained bitterly in a letter to Jefferson Dean Ross V. Patterson about a “fancy red light” in a small color reproduction commissioned by the College,



Jefferson President Robert L. Barchi, MD, PhD, with conservator Mark Tucker and curator Kathleen Foster at a recent reception at the museum.

**Before:** Eakins' self portrait on the right edge of the painting.

**After**

possibly as a gift to donors, according to F. Michael Angelo, the University’s archivist and head of Jefferson’s Historical Research Center.

The ink wash and photo show *Gross*’ son, surgeon Samuel W., and orderly Hughey O’Donnell standing in a dark tunnel, eyes on the surgeon. The reproduction shows a lightened, reddish area behind the two men, an ominous note that competed with *Gross* and the surgery for the viewer’s eye.

An overzealous restorer working between 1917 and 1929 apparently scrubbed away the thin layers of darker paint Eakins used

to tone down the reddish undercoat in the tunnel, Tucker said.

Angelo was unable to locate any documentation for the cleaning. He and Foster speculated that it occurred in conjunction with JMC’s founding centennial in 1924 or the completion five years later of the College Building, where the painting hung at the top of the stairs, viewable through a large window from the street.

More damage became apparent when Tucker took the Met photo and enlarged it to the scale of the painting.

“What looked like nonsense in the painting, like a random selection of brush strokes, you could see in the photo were the folds of fabric in the students’ clothes,” Foster said. “We could even see lost follicles of hair on people in the background.

“Without the historical records, we would have gently guessed and we wouldn’t have had the courage to do what we did.”

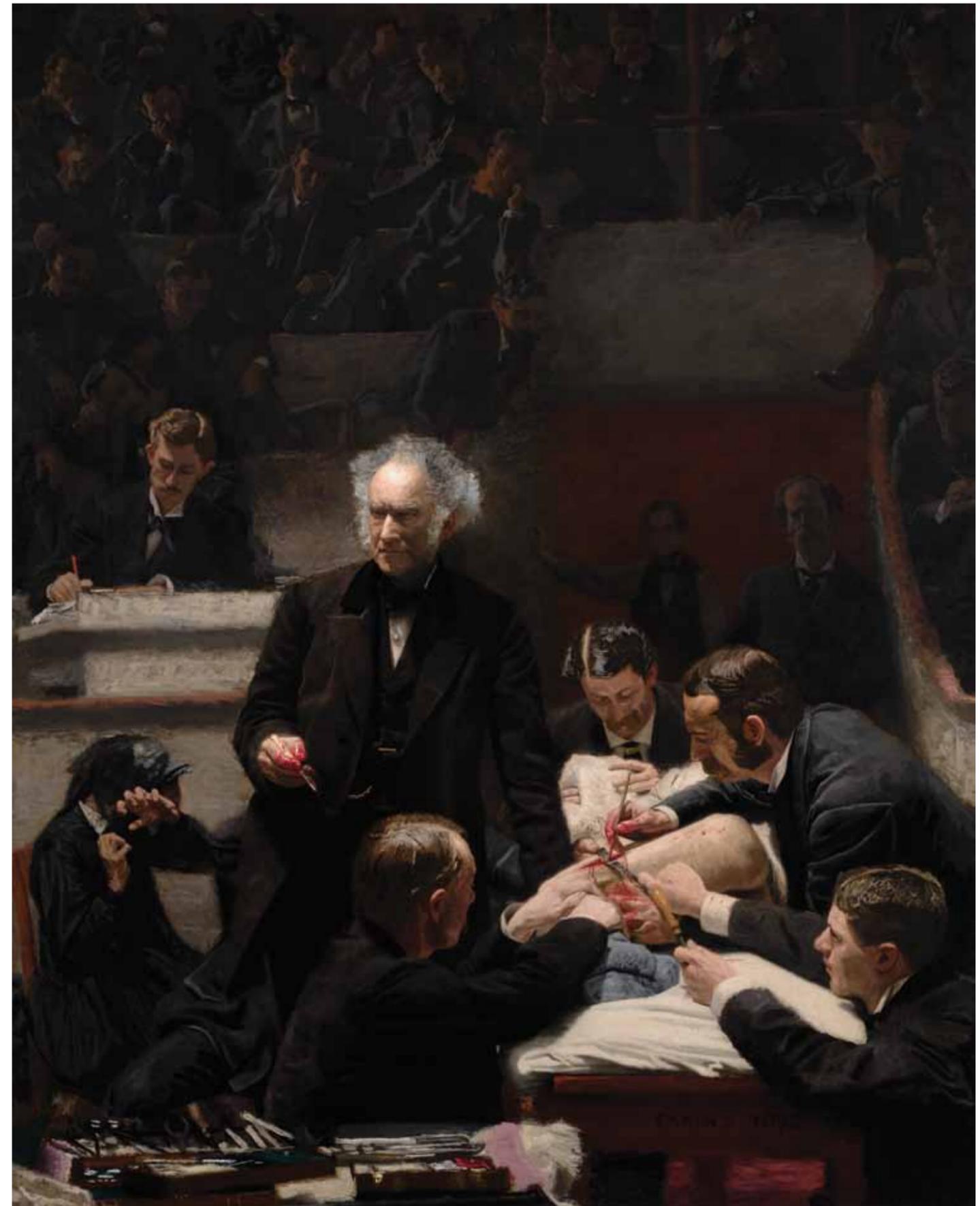
Foster emphasized that the treatment of *The Gross Clinic* under Jefferson’s care was standard for the time. “About 99 percent of Eakins’ paintings have been overcleaned and subtleties lost,” she said. “Only in the last 40 years have people become smarter in treating these pictures.”

PMA also has restored Eakins’ other medical masterpiece, *The Agnew Clinic*, commissioned for \$750 by the University of Pennsylvania Medical Class of 1889 to honor D. Hayes Agnew, MD, who was retiring. The painting hung for nearly a century in the Medical Laboratories Building (now the John Morgan Building) at Penn until 2002, when it suffered very minor damage during a steam leak. The painting has been on loan to PMA since. *The Agnew Clinic* appears during the exhibit with *The Gross Clinic* for the first time in Philadelphia.

### THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

After studying the *Gross* documentation, Tucker and his conservation team, using brushes of just a few hairs, restored the somber light to the tunnel, toned down railings, filled in blurred faces and sharpened details. Though cast in darkness, the students’ features became clear, and Eakins’ face, in the audience on the right, discernable. The yellow tint lifted with the old varnish.

The conservators went as far as they could go with the documentation on hand, knowing at each stage they could remove the work if they felt they had overstepped their boundaries, Tucker said.



Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (*The Gross Clinic*), 1875 (post-conservation image). Thomas Eakins, American, 1844 – 1916. Oil on canvas, 8 feet x 6 feet 6 inches (243.8 x 198.1 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Alumni Association to Jefferson Medical College in 1878 and purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2007 with the support of more than 3,500 donors.

“It’s as close to the painting that Eakins finished in 1875 as we could make it without a color photograph,” Tucker said.

#### EAKINS’ PREPARATION

Eakins’ connection to Jefferson’s medical education began in 1864, while studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, an art museum and the nation’s oldest art school. His “artistic anatomy” class, taught by renowned Jefferson surgeon William W. Keen, left him hungry for a deeper understanding of the human body, leading him to enroll in anatomy at Jefferson for one series of classes in 1864 and for another in the 1870s. Eakins also had access to the clinics and presumably saw Gross operate several times. (Today, academy students have the option of sketching dissections at the Drexel University College of Medicine.)

Eakins submitted his 8-by-6.5-foot painting – which he declared his masterpiece before even finishing – to the art committee of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, essentially the first world’s fair. While accepting five other Eakins paintings, the committee rejected the portrait, and it was relegated to a corner of a U.S. Army hospital replica during the centennial. The Jefferson Medical College Alumni Association purchased the painting two years later for \$200 – the equivalent of \$4,537 in today’s dollars – and gave it to the College.

#### SOARING VALUE

According to records unearthed by Angelo, Samuel T. Freeman and Co. appraised the painting in 1939 at \$75,000, or about \$1.15 million today. The next appraisal, about a decade ago, put the value at \$55 million. In the intervening years, the College had expanded into a university and broadened its degree programs to include research and the health professions. The school sorely needed to physically expand while increasing scholarships and professorships.

The appraisal compelled the board of trustees to re-evaluate, and the members decided that Jefferson’s mission – healthcare education and research – took precedence. Without an art education program or museum, the University had neither the expertise nor means to conserve and properly display a painting universally regarded as a masterpiece but seen by only 500 people from outside Jefferson each year.

The board members wanted the painting to go to a museum open to the public, not to a private collector, but they also knew that

PMA and PAFA lacked the resources to offer a fair price. The board asked Marc Porter, president of the auction house Christie’s, to find a buyer, and he approached Alice L. Walton, chair of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark. Walton formed a partnership with the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and they offered \$68 million.

In respect of the painting’s importance to Philadelphia, Porter and Brian G. Harrison, chairman of the University’s board, put an unprecedented clause in the sales agreement, giving Philadelphia institutions a chance to match the offer.

“To say that we never intended for the painting to remain in Philadelphia is just wrong,” President Robert L. Barchi, MD, PhD, said. “It was our fiduciary responsibility to get a fair price, but we always hoped the painting would stay in the city.”

The museum and academy decided to try to buy the portrait together and started a frenzied round of fundraising that generated \$30 million in 40 days; a bank provided the remainder as a loan. A little more than a year later – after each institution sold an Eakins’ painting and the museum sold two sketches – the museum and PAFA paid off the remainder.

#### BENEFITS OF SALE

From January 2007 to June 2008, when the conservation process began, 73,000 people saw *The Gross Clinic* at the museum and PAFA, probably far more than the number that saw the painting in its entire 129 years at Jefferson. The University of Pennsylvania strayed from its norm of choosing a book for the freshman Penn Reading Project to focus on the painting during the last school year, immersing 2,500 new college students in the city’s rich medical and artistic heritage and highlighting Jefferson’s eminence. A program for students at JMC and the academy also underscored the intersection of medicine and art and the role of Jefferson professors.

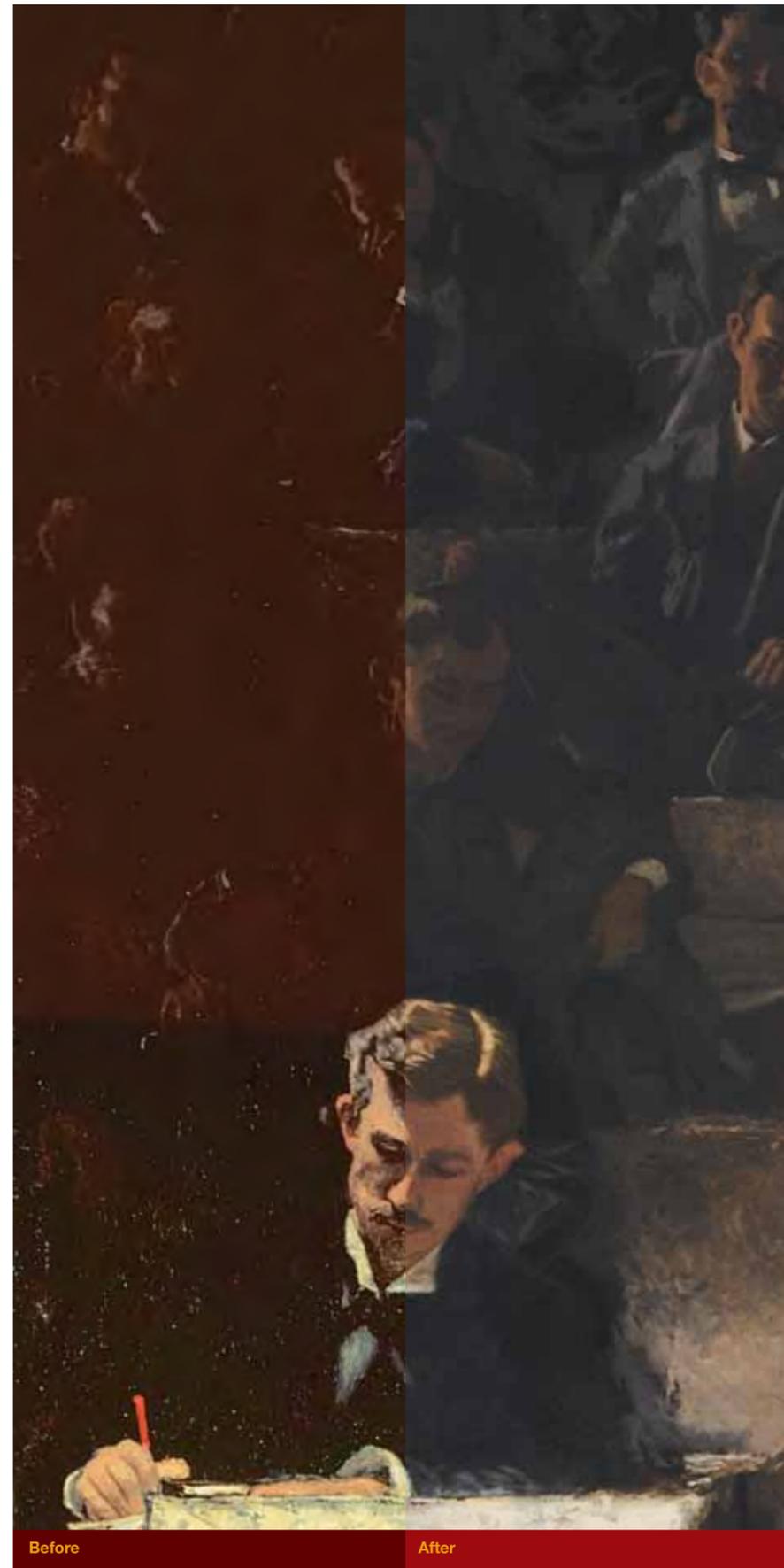
In August, the first month of the new exhibit, 8,400 visitors saw the restored painting.

Each of these visitors also saw a descriptive panel, which will accompany *The Gross Clinic* whenever it is displayed, documenting the painting’s unique relationship to Jefferson Medical College and its alumni.

The benefits for the University have been no less impressive. The proceeds of the sale went into a special Eakins Legacy Endowment Fund to further the educational mission of the University in perpetuity. In



*The Gross Clinic* at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition



the brief time of its existence, the fund has allowed Jefferson to create three endowed professorships and 20 scholarships; by taking advantage of a three-year matching program that ended last summer, donors created nine more new professorships and 20 additional endowed scholarships.

The museum exhibit closes Jan. 9 and the academy’s exhibit, *Anatomy/Academy*, will open three weeks later. The academy’s exhibit will focus on the link between medicine and art during Eakins’ time, when Philadelphia was the center of education for artists and physicians in the United States.

The exhibit will include dissection drawings by Eakins and rare books from the 1870s and 1880s on loan from Jefferson along with Gross’ scalpel, also appearing at the PMA exhibit. PAFA will offer lunch lectures as well as a graduate student symposium.

#### THE LEGACY

When Eakins painted his portrait in 1875, Samuel D. Gross, MD, was at the height of his renown, revered as a Jefferson surgeon and teacher, internationally celebrated as an author and widely respected as a founder of local, national and international medical societies (he also founded the JMC Alumni Association). *The Gross Clinic* shows the surgeon removing bone from an osteomyelitis patient, who would have lost his leg to amputation in the hands of a less-skilled physician.

In 2002, a critic for *The New York Times* called *The Gross Clinic* the greatest painting produced by a 19th-century American artist. Foster and Marley will go only so far as to call it “one of the greatest.”

“It’s the very best painting by Philadelphia’s greatest artist,” Foster said. “It’s great because of its courage and its skill, because of Eakins’ treatment of this complicated figure group and the light and because it conveys American power and progress. And the full force of its greatness is finally visible.” ■