The words below were written to his parents by a 21-year-old American art student, just after his arrival in Paris. This was the first and only time Thomas Eakins was ever to leave home. Except for a few short trips, Eakins spent his life in one city — mostly in one house — painting the subjects that surrounded him every day. And these paintings of the people and places Eakins knew so well — portraits of his friends, a corner of his living room, a boating scene set on a nearby river — have made him one of the most important American artists of the last century.

Thomas Eakins was born in Philadelphia in 1844. His father, a teacher, encouraged his son’s interest in two areas — sports and art. In high school, Tom was a good athlete and an outstanding student, excelling in science, math, and drawing. In 1861 (the year the American Civil War began), Eakins entered the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. But when he discovered he couldn’t work from a real model (students drew only from plaster casts) he began attending classes at nearby Jefferson Medical School. After graduating, Eakins went to art school in Paris.

In 1870, when he returned home, Eakins set up a studio on the top floor of the family home and began to work. He painted the outdoor activities he loved — rowing, hunting, baseball. He asked his family, friends (such as the woman in the blue dress, below left, who later became his wife), former teachers, anyone he knew, to pose for him. Eakins went back to the medical school and resumed sketching. There, he met a famous surgeon and asked if he could paint him. Instead of the traditional posed portrait, Eakins painted the doctor during an operation (right). Dr. Gross, scalpel in hand and surrounded by students, pauses to speak to his audience while his assistants work on the patient. Eakins, pleased with the results, submitted the painting to a large exhibition. But he was not prepared for some critics’ reactions. Many objected to the subject which was “not cheerful for

POET OF THE ORDINARY

"I love sunlight, women, men, children, animals, and most everything around me. And some day I expect to paint them exactly as I see them." —THOMAS EAKINS

ladies to look at." The details of the work, especially the blood on the doctor’s hand, made another critic sick. No one wanted the painting and after some years, Eakins finally sold it to the medical school for $200. Today The Gross Clinic is considered to be one of the best paintings of the 19th century.

In 1878 Eakins became a professor at his old school, the Pennsylvania Academy, and in a few years he was director. He immediately redesigned the curriculum. There would be no more plaster casts — from now on students would draw and paint from living figures. Eakins’ ideas were considered radical by many, and in 1886 he was forced to resign because of his use of nude models. He experimented with photography and continued painting, mainly doing portraits — ones that captured the sitter’s character but weren’t always flattering. Therefore he had very few commissions. He once heard the daughter of one of his few clients explaining to visitors that, “Mother was sick when this portrait was painted.” So he did pictures of friends — doctors, professional men, musicians — and usually gave them the painting.

Toward the end of his life, Eakins began getting a little recognition for his work. He had his first one-

Susan MacDowell Eakins (left) not only posed many times for her husband, but was herself an accomplished artist.
A century ago, this work by Thomas Eakins shocked many people. One critic wrote, "Even strong men find it hard to look at."

In this issue, you'll see more of Eakins' carefully composed, highly realistic paintings and drawings; you'll meet other contemporary American realists, and finally you'll use one of Eakins' techniques to help you effectively capture reality in your own work.

art & man 3
Although in 1875, baseball was not televised, it was already a popular sport, and Thomas Eakins regularly attended the games played by his favorite Philadelphia ball club.

When Thomas Eakins painted a portrait of Walt Whitman, the famous poet surely felt the force of his friend’s personality. Eakins was notorious for keeping his subjects in the same pose for hours, becoming very annoyed if they moved. For the artist was totally involved in capturing the essence of a person’s character or occupation. He could find heroic elements in the most “everyday” subjects — a local baseball team practicing, a friend rowing, or a boxing match. Eakins painted ordinary scenes and people, but it was the way in which he composed his pictures that made them extraordinary works of art.

Thomas Eakins had always been interested in sports and in drawing the human figure. But he didn’t want to emphasize violence or physical combat; so he always chose the moment just before the figure went into action. His batter (top, left) is not hitting the ball, but waiting for the pitch; the boxer (right) is not striking his opponent, but resting briefly “between rounds.” The surgeon in *The Gross Clinic* (see page 3) is not operating, but pausing to talk, and Eakins has caught him in a characteristic pose. A great deal is going on in *The Gross Clinic*, but how has Eakins composed or arranged all the elements in it so that your eye seems to focus on the doctor’s face? The lighting is important. The surgeon’s features are lit from above, and his face stands out against the dark background. But the operation itself (to the right) is much more brightly lit than the face. Why doesn’t your eye just stay there? If you look at the assistants’ hands, in what general direction do they seem to point? When you look in the lower left-hand corner of the painting, you can see the patient’s mother pulling back in horror. Follow the imaginary line formed by her gesture up to the doctor’s bloody hand and scalpel — where does your eye go next? Eakins’ triangular composition focuses attention on the doctor’s head, no matter where you first begin looking. Eakins used this compositional device a great deal. Can you find the triangles in these three sports paintings? Where is the focus of attention in each work?

While Eakins did not always do portraits, each of the faces in these paintings is that of a specific person. John Biglin was a professional oarsman whom Eakins saw frequently while rowing on the river near his home.
Between Rounds might be considered a group portrait — the boxer, trainer, referee, timekeeper, and most of the audience were all friends of the artist.

person. And Eakins called attention to these individuals through his backgrounds, made up of an elaborate series of horizontal and verticals. The main figure in each of these works is placed just off center, the head located right on the horizon line (automatically drawing attention to the face). In all these pictures, either the sun is low, or bright spotlights cast long, sharp shadows which move your eye across the composition. The diagonal lines in each painting (oars, ropes, baselines) take the eye off the edge of the canvas — adding a feeling of tension as the viewer waits for some event outside the picture to happen. In each work, the composition is worked out mathematically, but does the result seem at all mechanical? And the expressions and poses of Eakins’ figures — a little apprehensive, awkward, and vulnerable — seem especially human. These sportspersons are not heroes in the sense of being Olympic stars — just real people who happen to be baseball players, boxers, or oarsmen competing and doing their best.
THE REAL THING

WHY ARE THESE THREE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REALIST PAINTINGS ALL SO DIFFERENT?

VISUAL SHORTHAND

American figure painter Alex Katz began doing portraits of his wife Ada nearly 30 years ago, and he hasn’t run out of ideas yet. He has painted her in different sizes, seasons, colors, settings, in crowds and alone, asleep, from various angles; cropped in many ways, and in varying compositions. And each time, although she is still herself, she is seen in a completely new way. The artist explains his preoccupation with the same subject: ‘‘I like to be restricted. When I was young I used to ride my bike 20 miles looking for things to paint. Then my father asked, ‘Why don’t you paint your own backyard?’ He was right. Now I stick close to home. I like seeing how I can paint the same thing differently, instead of different things in the same way.’’ But it is not Katz’ limited subject matter that is so unique — it is the way in which he depicts reality. Compare The Red Smile (above) to the other two paintings on the right. Can you find any brushstrokes, modeled surfaces, or even many details in Katz’ painting? The artist usually paints people in landscapes, but both the figures and the backgrounds are so flat, simplified, and closely cropped that the subject seems to become almost abstract. Alex Katz’ paintings demonstrate that realistic art doesn’t always have to be photographic.
THE EYE OF REALITY

Like Thomas Eakins, young American realist Rackstraw Downes has created a world that appears even more real than the actual scene. Photorealists paint from photographs, but Downes does his huge panoramic landscapes from life, sometimes working for years to capture a specific setting, such as this highway complex just outside his New York City home. His long, sloping vistas are reminiscent of the curve of the earth and the scanning motion of the eye — with the center of vision seeming to come forward in the middle and recede at the edges. Like Eakins, Downes did many exact perspective drawings for this work. But since his field of vision was much wider, he slightly distorted each diagonal in order to exaggerate the curving effect. The artist's colors are lifelike and his technique so photographic and impersonal, it is hard to tell from a reproduction that this is an oil painting and not a photo. The result is a world so detailed and complete, you might feel you could almost enter and inhabit it.

HER OWN BACKYARD

American landscape painter Jane Freilich has also painted mainly one subject for over 20 years — the view from her Long Island studio window. In works like this (left), the artist sees not the reality of Eakins' solid, frozen moment in time or Alex Katz' flat, simple forms, but that of light moving over the surface of objects. And she paints this effect using small active brushstrokes and brilliant colors. In Broad Daylight is framed by the window and curtain and divided into three areas, or planes. The long, purple shadows cast by the vases in the foreground pull the viewer's eye through the window, past the bushes (middle-ground), and into the distant background fields. Freilich's painting may seem looser and more impressionistic than those of the other two artists, but her images are just as carefully composed.
"There is so much beauty in real life, it's well worth while to try to capture it in art."
SCULL BY THOMAS EAKINS

"LECTIONS THAT IT IS GENERALLY
ET THEM RIGHT."—THOMAS EAKINS
ABOUT THE MASTERPIECE

SCULPTURE IN PAINT

"IN MATHEMATICS, THE COMPLICATED THINGS ARE REDUCED TO SIMPLE THINGS. SO IT IS IN PAINTING."—THOMAS EAKINS
The Biglin brothers were champion oarsmen whom Eakins painted many times. Compare the horizontals of the work above with the diagonals in the one below. Which painting seems more active? What if the flagpole below were removed or straightened?

When Thomas Eakins was studying in Paris, he must have seen the work of a group of French painters who were interested in using color to create the feeling of sunlight. (Later, some members of this group were to become better known as the Impressionists.) Eakins also wanted to capture the effects of light, but his painted sunlight did not seem to dissolve objects, it made them appear more solid. Eakins wanted to paint pictures that looked more real than the actual scene. So he developed a process which enabled him to create paintings (like the one on pages 8-9) with a heightened — almost superreal — feeling of reality.

Eakins got the idea for his first large painting — this month's masterpiece, Max Schmitt in a Single Scull — because of his love of sports. The artist enjoyed rowing small boats called sculls (can you find Eakins' own self-portrait in the work on pages 8-9?) on a nearby river, which is where he first met his good friend Max Schmitt (the man in the foreground).

Since Eakins usually made very detailed perspective drawings for his paintings, he must have done some for Max Schmitt in a Single Scull. Unfortunately, these have been lost. However, the artist planned and painted a number of other scenes of figures rowing, such as the ones shown here. He would start by doing quick sketches directly from the scene, then go to his studio and plan his composition on an enormous sheet of paper. In all these rowing pictures (including Max Schmitt), he divided the paper into equal quarters, putting the figure (or figures) on the center line. Then each detail — every bridge, building, and boat, down to the smallest oarlock — was rendered in perspective, exactly to scale. The oars were placed in carefully calculated positions and each wave and reflection was painstakingly plotted. He did the diagonal perspective lines in blue pencil, the reflections in red, like a mechanical drawing. Projecting objects in exact perspective was one of the most important aspects of Eakins' realism— he even signed many of his paintings in perspective (look on the back of the boat behind Max Schmitt).

After Eakins had transferred this complicated drawing to his canvas, he quickly sketched in the figures and landscape. Then he began to paint. He did the entire background in a thin, light underpainting. He then slowly built up his forms with many layers of thin, transparent color glazes. By heightening the feeling of light and color in this way, and also putting every small detail into sharp focus, Eakins was able to create a superreal illusion of sunlit reality. After spending at least several months painting the background, Eakins then built scale models of the sculls out of a cigar box, and placed rag dolls he had made in them. He reconstructed the scene on top of a mirror, out on his sunny roof and painted in the figures as well as their reflections and shadows.

Thomas Eakins was a unique combination of scientist and artist. He constructed his paintings mathematically so that they were solid, sculptural, and three-dimensional. But Max Schmitt in a Single Scull is not just mechanical and scientific. It is fully felt in all dimensions. Eakins intensified the feeling of reality in this work, but he expressed another emotion, too — a kind of pensive sadness. Max Schmitt sits alone and isolated in the middle of the river, surrounded by sparkling water and trees that are just beginning to turn color. Schmitt is a small, bent, solitary figure — an individual guiding his own course, watching silently as the autumn afternoon fades into evening.
FOR AS LONG AS SHE CAN REMEMBER, EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD SARAH GREGG HAS BEEN SPENDING HER SUMMERS ON A TINY ISLAND JUST OFF CAPE COD. IN ONE OF HER PAINTINGS, SHOWN ABOVE, YOU CAN SEE THE ISLAND’S HARBOR JUST AFTER A STORM, WHEN THE WATER IS STILL AND CALM. SARAH DID THIS SCHOLARSHIP-AWARD-WINNING ACRYLIC PAINTING WHEN SHE WAS A STUDENT AT BEAVER COUNTRY DAY SCHOOL IN BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS. NOW A FRESHMAN AT WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY IN SPRINGFIELD, OHIO, SHE IS THINKING ABOUT A CAREER IN INTERIOR DECORATING OR TEACHING.
Was this painting a class assignment? How did it come about?
The assignment was to take a famous painting and copy it. But I asked my teacher if I could do one of my own. He said okay, so I found a picture of Nashon [the island] I had taken during the past summer and began by using that.

What is the island like? What made you want to paint it?
It’s really pretty and secluded — lots of trees, with no cars or stores — mostly little houses. It’s a special place for me. The day I took the photograph was my last day and I was leaving on the ferry. It had been a good summer, and I remember feeling sad because I was leaving all my friends who were still there. It seemed appropriate that it was cloudy and dreary. It was just after a storm and the water was dead calm — fog was coming over the big house from the ocean, making it look ghostly.

How did you begin the painting?
I sketched the main features on rag board. Then I did the whole background in one color — a light, grayish blue — the color of the sky. After that I did the island and water. The boats I did last because they’re right in front. The painting took a long time — a couple of months. I had to mix a lot of different colors together over and over to get just the right one.

What was the hardest part?
I had the worst trouble with the reflection of the boat. It kept coming out too bright and looked so fake. Then it would be too gray. I did it over lots of times.

Did you ever get discouraged?
Yes, I thought I was going to give up on it. But my art teacher kept saying, “Come on, Sarah, you can do this. It’s coming out beautifully. Just have faith in yourself.” Painting is really frustrating, but you can’t give up on it.

How does the photo compare with the finished painting?
I added bushes and trees that didn’t show up in the photo. But I knew they were there. And I moved the small boat over, so the painting wouldn’t look lopsided. Half of what I painted was from memory anyway because I lost the photo halfway through. Maybe it’s a good thing I did.

Could you talk about the composition in this painting and why it “works”?
It has to do with where your eye goes. The first thing I see when I look at it is the boat — and then its mast draws my attention up to the house. After that, I see the pasture because it’s a lighter green and I notice the little boat. Finally, I look at the clouds. They sort of make the painting for me, because they were the last, most spontaneous thing I did. I was fooling around and pushed the wet paint up into the sky to make clouds.

What is the challenge for you of doing a landscape?
I guess it’s making it look real and, at the same time, giving it some atmosphere that expresses the way you feel. I can only paint landscapes of places where I’ve been. Because then I can describe it through my own eyes and remember the feelings that I had when I was there. Hopefully I can get these feelings across to the people who look at it.

I notice a reproduction of an Eakins painting [See page 11; The Biglin Brothers Turning the Stake] on your wall. Is it one of your favorites?
Yes, my art teacher had this painting hanging in the art studio. I’d look at it constantly — just trying to take it all in. I like the composition — the way there seems to be a continuous line of boats from one side to the other. There are a few bright colors, but everything else is muted. And I like the subject — water, boats, reflections on water. Water and trees — there’s something about them that is so expressive. You can sort of put your own feelings into them.

Do you have any ideas for future paintings?
During field hockey practice, I see this house, a garage, and a clothesline with pink clothes on it. The house is white, and the sun hits it in a perfect spot and throws shadows on the ground. And in back, the field is bright green and the trees are black and orange. So many times I’ve wanted to paint that scene or take a picture, but I never have because I’m always playing field hockey. But I can remember what it looks like, so I’ll paint it one of these days when I have some free time.

Is there any advice you would give to someone who wanted to try painting for the first time?
Look at everything for what it is. Look at each color. If you look hard enough and work at it, you can find it in paint. Keep at it and don’t give up. I’ve learned not to give up on my paintings.
THOMAS EAKINS WAS ABLE TO CREATE SCENES THAT APPEAR SO REAL THEY SEEM ALMOST THREE-DIMENSIONAL. AND ONE OF THE SECRETS OF THIS ABILITY WAS EAKINS' USE OF PERSPECTIVE — A WAY OF PLACING OBJECTS IN SPACE. YOU'VE SEEN HOW EAKINS PLANNED HIS PAINTINGS BY DOING HIGHLY DETAILED PERSPECTIVE DRAWINGS (SOME OF WHICH ARE SHOWN ON PAGES 10-11). NOW, IN THIS WORKSHOP, YOU WILL USE YOUR OBSERVATION TO FIND OUT JUST HOW MUCH YOU ALREADY KNOW ABOUT PERSPECTIVE.

MATERIALS

- 18" x 24" sulfite paper
- Ebony pencils
- Gray pastels
- Paper stumps
- Spray fixative

STARTING OUT

1 Set up a still life using ordinary geometric objects (make sure you include at least one cylinder — bottles, tubes, etc. — in addition to square and rectangular objects). Now sit at eye level and observe your arrangement.

- Notice how the objects at the back look smaller than the ones in front (diminution).
- The nearest objects will seem to overlap the ones behind them.
- Pick an object at an angle — you can see a corner and two sides. Notice how the top and bottom of each side seem to recede from you (convergence).
- When you look at the cylinder from the top, it looks round. But is the top still round when you look at it from the side? (It foreshortens or appears flatter and more oval.)

2 Keeping in mind everything you've noticed, do a blind contour drawing of the still life. (Imagine your pencil is touching an object's edge. Without looking at the paper, move your eyes slowly along the edge, or contour, and move your pencil at the same speed. When objects overlap, look at the paper and begin with the next edge). See the objects as solid shapes. Balance your composition.
SOME SOLUTIONS

Keep your objects large and simple—fill your page, eliminating details. Your format can be horizontal or vertical. Sharp cropping adds drama, making objects seem even larger. Can you find examples of diminution, overlapping, and foreshortening in each of these drawings? What about convergence? Follow the imaginary lines made by the top and bottom of an object’s side that is at an angle.

Notice how the lines seem to go away from you. Can you tell where these lines appear to meet or converge? Can you find a drawing in which the artist has broken the rule of convergence? Does the work still seem solid and “real”? 

3 Decide on a light source and begin to shade and highlight your objects. The shadows they cast will give a dramatic sense of depth and space.
In this issue, you’ve been looking at the work of realistic painter Thomas Eakins. Eakins was also interested in photography, and this spring a number of shows will be opening which feature the work of some well-known modern photographers. W. Eugene Smith took his most famous photos for Life magazine during the 1940s and ’50s. You can see over 250 of Smith’s most memorable images (like the one on the right) in W. Eugene Smith: Let Truth Be the Prejudice, an exhibition now at the International Center for Photography in New York City until April 27. The show will then travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (June 8-Aug. 10); in 1987, it will go to the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth (Jan. 10-March 1); The High Museum of Art, Atlanta (June 2-August 23); Minneapolis Institute of Art (Sept. 12-Nov. 8); and in 1988, the Cleveland Museum, the Indianapolis Museum, and the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.

Photojournalists like W. Eugene Smith told their visual stories in black and white. Today, younger photographers are creating striking color images that also convey a message. In the photo on the left, what is photographer Susan Meiselas saying about this boy who lives in war-torn Central America? Would the photo work as well in black and white? You can see more of Susan Meiselas’ work, as well as that of 11 other new photojournalists, in On the Line: The New Color Photojournalism at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (March 23-June 1). This large exhibition will also be at the Toledo Museum (April 23-June 19, 1988). Other museum dates will be announced soon.

Contemporary photojournalist Robert Frank is famous for his magazine photographs, especially his satirical portrait of America in the 1950s. In addition to this well-known series of images, you can see many of Frank’s more recent photos, films, and videos in a large retrospective exhibition currently at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, until the beginning of April. Robert Frank: New York to Nova Scotia will then travel to the Cleveland museum (July 26-Aug. 31); the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Dec. 1986-Feb. 1987); the Los Angeles County Museum (summer, 1987); and University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley (fall, 1987).