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The Material Culture of Military Medicine

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If we associate any American portraitist with scientific and medical subjects, that artist is Thomas Eakins (1844–1916). Ultimately regarded as one of America's finest realist painters, Eakins revealed personalities so committed to their intellectual and professional endeavors that he chose to portray them with the esoteric tools of their trade—Washington University engineering professor William D. Marks with his chronograph in 1886, or Johns Hopkins physics professor Henry Rowland with his ruling engine for diffraction gratings and spectroscopy in 1897. Eakins is probably best known and most revered for his fierce portraits of surgeons and their patients in heroic settings, those of the Dr. Samuel Gross Clinic (1875) and the Dr. D. Hayes Agnew Clinic (1889). In each case, the tool of choice was a scalpel, poised for demonstration by the portrait's principal individual subject.

Instead of choosing such a symbol for Dr. John Hill Brinton (1832–1907), Eakins relied on the image of finely rendered books to complement his portrait of the Philadelphia

physician (Fig. 1). His allusion was to teacher and academic physician—a rarified scholar whose garb and tools failed to betray his military medical background, which had been steeped both in the sinews of Civil War battle and in the impulse to foster this nascent national medical museum. Brinton joined the Army in 1861, leaving his position at Jefferson Medical College. Recognized for his organizational ability and collecting impulses, Surgeon General William Hammond charged Brinton



FIGURE 1. Dr. John H. Brinton. Thomas Eakins, 1876. Oil on canvas, 81 × 60 inches. On loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, from the National Museum of Health and Medicine, Silver Spring, MD.

National Museum of Health and Medicine, U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command, 2500 Linden Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

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with the collection and arrangement of items for the new Army Medical Museum (now the National Museum of Health and Medicine) in 1862. Brinton initiated the Museum's masterwork, the "Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion" and became an effective advocate for the Museum's role in disseminating contemporary medical knowledge learned in the battlefield, including characterization of gunshot wounds. After the War, Brinton returned to his familial home in Philadelphia and to the Jefferson Medical College, where he taught anatomy and later became Chair of Surgery. Eakins had been among his students.^{1,2}

Eakins completed his reverential image of Brinton in 1876, relatively early in his career as painter, sculptor, and teacher. The painting is owned by the National Museum of Health and Medicine and hangs now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

REFERENCES

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2. Sewell D. Thomas Eakins. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001.