Art in the Age of Magnetic Reproduction

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I have a *Gross Clinic* magnet on my refrigerator. That's right—a reproduction of Thomas Eakins's celebrated 1875 painting helps keep coupons, family photos, and wedding invitations in their place. When I reach for the yogurt I see Dr. Samuel Gross leading a surgical procedure to remove infected bone from his patient's thigh. If I glance up while chopping carrots, I see a body on an operating table. How did an image that was once deemed too gory for display in an art gallery come to be a regular view during meal prep?

My dad gave me the magnet a few years ago. He knew that I had been studying the painting, so when he saw the magnet in the gift shop at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, he couldn't resist. He'd picked out other magnets for me in the past—usually from national parks where he'd gone hiking. But this one surprised me. I did an amused double-take when he put it in my hand. It wasn't that a famous artwork had been reproduced on an everyday object—anyone who's been to a museum gift shop has seen the likenesses of notable works of art printed on mugs, t-shirts, umbrellas, and more. I was struck instead by this particular image. In *The Gross Clinic*, doctors perform an innovative operation while an audience observes from their seats in the surgical theater. Visually, the striking contrast between deep shadows and bright highlights directs a viewer's attention to the lead surgeon and the patient. A team of doctors hold the patient still, keep him sedated, and probe the incision in his leg. There is blood on Dr. Gross's hands. A cringing woman averts her eyes. The medical team focuses on their work. This is undeniably an intense scene. It's apparently also one that makes a good souvenir from a visit to the museum.

The Gross Clinic has taken on different meanings since Eakins completed it. It has been rejected from and embraced in fine-art settings. It has been used to tell stories about the artist, the period when he lived and worked, the history of art, and Philadelphia. Eakins conceived of the painting as a submission to the Centennial Exhibition, the 1876 world's fair held in Philadelphia. The organizers of the festival, concerned about the raw imagery, decided that it was more appropriate for display in a medical exhibit than in an art gallery. By the time Eakins died in 1916, the painting had been included in prominent art exhibitions, and essays memorializing the artist gave the painting high praise. For more than 120 years the painting was part of the collection of Jefferson University, the medical school where Dr. Gross had been a beloved faculty member. In 2006, when Jefferson University announced plans to sell *The Gross Clinic*—potentially to an out-of-state collector—the painting acquired yet another layer of meaning. Local audiences who helped the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts jointly purchase the painting embraced it as a city icon that belonged in Philadelphia and nowhere else.

The fundraising and public relations campaign to keep *The Gross Clinic* in Philadelphia is one of the key episodes I examine in *Contested Image: Defining Philadelphia for the Twenty-First*

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Century. The book demonstrates how passionate, wide-reaching public conversations about where art belongs in the city were tied to Philadelphia's changing reputation around the year 2000. By examining the public discourse surrounding *The Gross Clinic* sale and by looking closely at the painting itself, I show how the identity of the painting and the identity of the city became intertwined.

This important part of the painting's recent history affects how viewers today encounter *The Gross Clinic*. In the museum, visitors are invited to connect the story of the sale with their understanding of the artwork because the credit line on the object label acknowledges the thousands of people who contributed to the fundraising campaign. At home, there's no credit line to provide that context, but the magnet itself reframes the nineteenth-century artwork depicted on its surface. The diminutive scale—just 9 by 6.5 centimeters—and the flatness of the print discourage close looking. When I see the magnet, I recognize the image as *The Gross Clinic*, but I don't look carefully the way I would look at the actual painting. Downplaying the artwork as object shifts the emphasis to what it represents: Eakins's artistry, medical excellence, a trip to the museum, the city of Philadelphia. When I look at the magnet, I don't see the bloody wound. I see a reminder of a place (Philadelphia) and an activity (visiting the museum, raising money to keep the painting local). In that way it's not so different from the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone magnets that hang on the door nearby.