

LINCOLN LORE

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VOLK'S PLASTIC PORTRAITS OF LINCOLN

No American sculptor has contributed so much to our understanding of how Abraham Lincoln appeared in the flesh as Leonard W. Volk. One single study, the life mask of Lincoln, allows Volk's name to be associated with Houdon, the French sculptor who made the famous life mask of Washington.

Every worthy statue of Lincoln which has been created can trace the source of its facial structure, at least, to the mask prepared by Volk in 1860. What is said with reference to the mask is equally true of the Volk bust and other products of the plastic art which allowed this sculptor to preserve with so much detail, valuable studies of Lincoln.

Many students are not acquainted with the famous series of Lincoln subjects made by Volk and it is the purpose of this bulletin to classify them in such a way as to illustrate how Volk finally evolved his heroic statue of Lincoln.

The Sculptor

Leonard W. Volk was born in Wellstown, New York, November 7, 1828. At the age of sixteen he became an apprentice in his father's marble-cutting shop at Pittsburgh, Massachusetts. In 1848 he removed to St. Louis. Stephen A. Douglas, who was Mrs. Volk's cousin, aided Volk to go to Italy for study. Upon his return he settled in Chicago. Mr. Douglas became his first sitter. Although many important works are to his credit, his Lincoln studies have given him the most renown.

The Mask

The life mask is the most important contribution made by Volk. Lincoln was in Chicago from March 23 to April 4, in 1860, engaged in a suit called the Sand Bar Case. According to Volk it was on Saturday, March 31, that the mask was made, and he relates the story of the making of the cast as follows:

"He (Lincoln) sat naturally in the chair when I made the cast and saw every move I made in a mirror opposite, as I put the plaster on without interference with his eyesight or his free breathing through his nostrils. It was about an hour before the mold was ready to be removed, and being all in one piece, with both ears perfectly taken, it clung pretty hard, as the cheek-bones were higher than the jaws at the lobe of the ear. He bent his head low and took hold of the mold and gradually worked it off without breaking or injury."

The fact that there are no eyes in the sockets and no hair on the front part of the scalp has led people to call this cast a death mask.

The Head

According to Mr. Volk, Lincoln's hair was very long at the time of the sitting and Mr. Lincoln suggested that he should have his hair cut before Mr. Volk made any sketches, but he was discouraged by the sculptor with the result that the idealized head that Volk made from the mask reveals a luxurious growth of hair.

This study which shows Lincoln's face with eyes in natural form and a heavy shock of hair, because of the peculiar form of the mold which is minus neck and back of head, has often been called a life mask in contrast with the real life mask.

The Life-Mask of Abraham Lincoln

This bronze doth keep the very form and mold
Of our great martyr's face. Yes, this is he;
That brow all wisdom, all benignity;
That human, humorous mouth; those cheeks
that hold

Like some harsh landscape all the summer's
gold;

That spirit fit for sorrow, as the sea
For storms to beat on; the lone agony
Those silent, patient lips too well foretold.

Yes, this is he who ruled a world of men
As might some prophet of the elder day—
Brooding above the tempest and the fray
With deep-eyed thought and more than mortal
ken.

A power was his beyond the touch of art
Or armed strength—his pure and mighty
heart. —Richard Watson Gilder.

The Short Bust

The next step in the evolution of Volk's Lincoln was the completion of the head and neck all done from actual measurements. This study has become the most popular of all of Volk's works and replicas have been made by the hundreds. All in all it is the most artistic and satisfying piece of Lincoln plastic portraiture available.

The Full Bust

During the many visits of Lincoln to the Volk studio the sculptor had an occasion to make other casts and measurements of importance which would allow him to produce an authentic full bust of Mr. Lincoln.

He tells about having Mr. Lincoln strip to the waist so that he might make some actual studies of his neck, shoulders, and chest.

From these careful observations, measurements, and plastic work he was able to produce the full bust. Possibly his greatest triumph occurred in 1867 when he exhibited in the Paris Exposition this bust made in statuary marble.

The Right Hand

Volk was in Springfield, Illinois, the day that Lincoln was nominated for the presidency and on the following Sunday morning, May 21, 1860, he made the casts of Lincoln's hands. The afternoon and evening before, the new presidential nominee had shaken hands with thousands of people so that his right hand was somewhat swollen when the sculptor made the mask.

Volk suggested that Lincoln hold something in his hand whereupon Lincoln went to the wood shed and cut a piece off of a broom stick. Lincoln started to smooth off the edges whereupon Volk advised him that he need not bother to do that. Lincoln replied, "I thought I would like to have it nice."

It is to be regretted that Volk did not make a cast of the right hand in its normal state.

The Left Hand

Lincoln students seem to prefer the left hand of Lincoln as a model because it gives a better idea of the actual size and shape in its natural form. While Volk was preparing the plaster for the cast of the left hand Lincoln said:

"You have heard that they call me a railsplitter, and you saw them carrying rails in the procession Saturday evening. Well, it is true that I did split rails, and one day while I was sharpening a wedge on a log, the axe glanced and nearly took my thumb off, and there is the scar, you see."

The Statue

Starting with the mask of Lincoln and then making other important studies the climax of his work came in his heroic statue of the President which he completed in 1876.

Although this work is in plaster its position in the west corridor on the second floor of the state house in Springfield makes it appear to advantage. It is the bearded Lincoln of the administration days and is said to have influenced the famous St. Gauden's work.

An heroic bronze statue of Lincoln by Volk was dedicated at Rochester, New York, in 1892.