

LINCOLN LORE

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SIX PORTRAITS OF LINCOLN FROM LIFE

The death of Douglas Volk, which occurred at Eyreburg, Maine, on February seventh, removed from the fraternity of portrait painters one of America's best-known artists. Some of his outstanding works were his studies of Abraham Lincoln. He was but two years of age when his father, Leonard Volk, made the famous life mask of Lincoln. From his very earliest days the son of the famous sculptor had been a great admirer of the Emancipator. Although named for Stephen A. Douglas to whom his father was related, Douglas Volk has produced during the past few years some fine interpretations of the little giant's most formidable opponent. At the time of his death he was at work on still another study of Lincoln. As a memorial to his efforts, this issue of Lincoln Lore presents the story of Lincoln's first portraits made from life.

It is said that more than twenty artists went to Springfield, Illinois, to study Lincoln after he was nominated for the presidency. These early portraits from life, which have been made available through various reproduction processes, contribute something definite to our understanding of Lincoln's personal appearance. One-half dozen of them which have been recognized as outstanding among the beardless Lincolns are mentioned here.

Thomas Hicks

One of the earliest, if not the first portrait made of Lincoln from life, was done by Thomas Hicks who was in Springfield working on a Lincoln picture as early as June 12, 1860. Inasmuch as he completed the picture on June 13, it is quite likely he had been working several days on it. On June 14 Lincoln gave Hicks a short autobiographical sketch.

Upon the completion of the painting Mrs. Lincoln is said to have remarked:

"Yes, that is Mr. Lincoln. It is exactly like him and his friends in New York will see him as he looks here at home."

A lithograph by Grozelier produced from the Hicks painting was published by W. Schaus. It makes Lincoln look very young, at least ten years younger than any other reproduction. It might be designated as "The Youthful Lincoln."

Charles A. Barry

A group of Boston citizens including the governor of the state selected Charles A. Barry, a local artist of note, to go to Springfield and make a portrait of the Republican nominee for the presidency. He arrived in Springfield on the last Saturday in June, 1860, and presented his letter of introduction from Governor Banks.

After reading the letter of introduction Lincoln said, "They want my head do they? Well, if you can get it you may have it; that is, if you are able to take it off while I am on the jump."

Barry produced a crayon drawing which was put on stone by J. E. Baker and lithographed by J. H. Bufford. It has been designated by some Lincoln students as "The Greek God."

Thomas M. Johnson

Another Boston man, Thomas M. Johnson, was sent to Springfield in July, 1860, by C. H. Brainard, a lithographer, to do a portrait of Lincoln. He arrived on July 19 and started to work the next morning. He was a member of a large family of artists, his father, mother, brother, and sisters all being gifted in art.

Johnson wrote several letters to his father about the appearance of Lincoln, commenting that he considered his face and head "beautiful in the extreme when compared with all the pictures that have been published over his name."

While his portrait was made from life, he depended much on an actual photograph of Lincoln for outline

work, using one that Lincoln sat for about that time. The photograph is usually credited to the year 1858 and has become known as Meserve number 9, although it appears as if it was made in 1860. Johnson's painting closely resembles the photograph Lincoln is said to have presented to Harriet Chapman.

Alban J. Conant

Out of the west came another artist to study Lincoln, commissioned by William McPherson of St. Louis. He arrived in Springfield in the Fall of 1860, about two months before the election, and was greatly surprised at the personal appearance of Lincoln, after what he had read about him in the press. He said:

"My first sight of him was a revelation. This beaming expression of the man who stood transfigured before me was one I was resolved to do my best to transfer to canvass."

When he was finished, like most of the other artists, he was anxious to get Mrs. Lincoln's reaction. She said, "Oh! that is excellent, excellent. It's the best likeness of him ever taken. He looks there as he does when his friends are about him."

The Conant portrait was sold to the A. Smith Cochran Historical Collection in 1911. The original study shows Lincoln in a pleasant mood, and the painting is usually designated as "The Smiling Lincoln."

Henry J. Brown

The artists who were commissioned to do Lincoln from life kept busily at work right through the summer months. On August 13, Henry J. Brown was in Springfield working on a miniature for Judge John M. Read of Philadelphia.

On August 20, 1860, John G. Nicolay, one of Mr. Lincoln's secretaries, wrote a letter to a friend in which he mentioned the work done by Brown. He said in part:

"Did you ever see a real pretty miniature? . . . A regular miniature painted on ivory? Well, a Philadelphia artist has just been painting one of Mr. Lincoln which is both very pretty and very truthful, decidedly the best picture of him I have ever seen . . . I had a long talk with the artist today. He says that the impression prevails East that Mr. Lincoln is very ugly. He was very happy when on seeing him he found that he was not at all such a man as had been represented . . . He will go back home as agreeably disappointed in Mr. Lincoln's manners, refinement, and general characteristics as in his personal appearance."

Mr. Lincoln sat for two ambrotypes for Brown to assist him in his work, and the influence of these photographs is recognized in the production. The original miniature was last known to have been in the possession of Robert Lincoln.

George Frederick Wright

The dates on which Wright did his study of Lincoln cannot be determined definitely. Some accounts claim it was made after Lincoln was elected to the presidency, but, if that be true, the artist failed to take account of the beard which Lincoln was growing.

Wright was from Hartford, Connecticut, and is said to have been in Springfield on another commission when he found an opportunity to do a portrait of Lincoln. It is a very satisfactory study, portraying Lincoln as a melancholy man and contributing certain features not to be found in other paintings.

Just what became of this picture after it was finished it is rather difficult to confirm as there are two or three traditions with respect to it. One claims it was presented to Lincoln by William Butler; another states that it was the only painting of himself that Lincoln ever purchased. It was exhibited in the Illinois Host Building at Chicago during the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933 and is now in possession of the University of Chicago.