

# LINCOLN LORE

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## HEALY'S PORTRAITS OF LINCOLN

The famous Healy portrait of Abraham Lincoln was bequeathed by Mary Harlan Lincoln, the widow of Robert Todd Lincoln, to her daughter, Mary Lincoln Isham. The bequest specified that after the death of Mrs. Isham the portrait was to become the property of the United States government contingent upon the government's arranging to have the picture hung in an appropriate place in the White House.

The death of Mrs. Isham caused the availability of the painting to be called to the attention of President Roosevelt who, on March 22, agreed to the requirement of the will, thereby allowing the government to acquire the valuable canvas. The Healy portrait which has now become the property of the nation has caused a renewed interest in the history of the painter and his famous work.

George Peter Alexander Healy was born in Boston on July 15, 1813. He studied art in Paris for several years. From 1855 to 1867 he lived in Chicago, later making his residence in Rome and still later in Paris. In twenty years he made nearly six hundred portraits, including those of the world's most distinguished personalities contemporary with his day. Healy was back in Chicago in 1892 and was still actively engaged in his art at eighty years of age. He passed away on June 24, 1894 in Chicago.

The story of the painting is not so easily told as the brief biographical sketch of the artist who made it, for there are, in reality, four Healy portraits of Abraham Lincoln. There is one point, however, on which most critics are agreed—the painting originated as a study of one of four characters who appeared in Healy's painting called "The Peacemakers". This historical group contained figures of Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, and Porter in conference at City Point. Thus the primary object in the original work was to create a Lincoln for this particular group.

"The Peacemakers" was created in Chicago about 1866 or 1867 according to Robert Lincoln who also stated that Leonard Swett, an old friend of Lincoln, posed for the portrait. A contributor to the *Indianapolis Journal* in 1879 in describing Swett said, "Mr. Swett, by the way, bears a very close resemblance to Lincoln in stature, in gesture, in face, in temperament, in genial qualities, and in the very texture of his mind."

When fire swept the building of the Calumet Club at Chicago in 1893, "The Peacemakers" painting was destroyed. A fine copy of the original but greatly reduced in size now hangs in one of the halls of the Chicago Historical Society building.

Just when Healy conceived the idea of making a separate study of the Lincoln in the group is not known, but, before he was through bringing out separate copies of his "Peacemakers" Lincoln, four of them were on display. Just which one was the earliest production seems impossible to determine. They will be designated in this discussion by the names of the public buildings with which they have been or will be most often associated: (1) The White House portrait, (2) The Chicago Historical Society portrait, (3) The Minnesota Capitol portrait, and (4) The Newberry Library portrait.

### 1. The White House Portrait

The White House copy, the most famous of the four studies, was done in Paris and was forwarded to America in 1869, during Grant's administration, for approval by the government. Another Abraham Lincoln portrait, one of

the nine studies of the Emancipator done by Cogswell, was given the preference over Healy's work by President Grant, however, and the Cogswell painting was hung in the White House. The rejection of the Healy portrait by the government placed the portrait on the market and it was purchased by Robert Lincoln.

The most noticeable difference between this painting and the original study in "The Peacemakers" is the ornate chair which has replaced the plain spindle armchair. There is also a somewhat different expression on Lincoln's face, and the hair arrangement is changed slightly, but the position of the body is identical with the group study. As it has already been observed, this painting since coming from the artist has been in possession of the Lincoln family continuously until its present acceptance by the United States government.

### 2. The Chicago Historical Society Portrait

Healy had a custom of making a duplicate of his famous studies, but just how these were made is not clear. Possibly some of these duplicates were the original studies and the finer and more important work followed. Not only was the Calumet Club fortunate in having Healy's historical portrait, "The Peacemakers", but it also had a painting of Lincoln similar to the one which Healy sold to Robert Lincoln. It escaped destruction at the Calumet fire and when the club liquidated in 1914 it was purchased by Mr. Ralph C. Otis who in 1931 presented it to the Chicago Historical Society. It is hung in a very appropriate place, and is the very center of interest in the Lincoln Hall.

### 3. The Minnesota State House Portrait

A brief biography of Healy was written by his daughter Mary (Madame Charles Bigot) in 1895. She states that Elihu B. Washburne was a close friend of her father, and that he conceived the idea of forming an historical art gallery. He acquired from Healy what appears to be an identical copy of the President's portrait used in "The Peacemakers" with the exception of a slight variation in the back of the plain chair in which Lincoln was seated.

Upon the death of E. B. Washburne, the Lincoln portrait was acquired by his brother, William Drew Washburne, who in turn left the portrait to his son, W. D. Washburne, Jr. When the estate of the latter was appraised it was observed that the Healy Lincoln was listed among the assets. It was discovered hanging in the Minnesota State House above the speaker's chair. It was placed there at the time W. D. Washburne, Jr. was serving in the house of representatives.

### 4. The Newberry Library Portrait

It was fortunate indeed for the Newberry Library of Chicago that Healy made more than one study of many of his famous paintings. In the Healy biography written by his daughter it is stated that "The artist kept a duplicate. These duplicates belong to the Newberry Library of Chicago" and further that "His admirable portrait of Lincoln is in the Newberry Library at Chicago." This copy is similar to the one made for Mr. Washburne, but it is not known for a certainty which of these two, if either, preceded the two in which Lincoln is seated in an ornate chair.

Alexander H. Wyant, the famous landscape artist, made at least one attempt at portrait painting. Shortly after Healy finished the remarkable study of Lincoln now in possession of the government, Wyant made a small 9 x 12 copy of it and for the past ten years this reproduction has occupied a place over the desk of the editor of *Lincoln Lore*.