

LINCOLN LORE

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CARPENTER'S EMANCIPATION PAINTING

One year after the final Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Francis B. Carpenter was making his preliminary plans for the creation of an imperial painting depicting the first reading of that most important State document of the nineteenth century. He arrived in Washington on February 4, and the following day secured from The Honorable Owen Lovejoy a note of introduction to the President.

On Saturday afternoon, February 6, 1864, Carpenter conferred with the President about possibilities of developing the contemplated study, and Lincoln immediately gave his permission to proceed with the painting. At this initial meeting the story of the first reading of the Proclamation before the Cabinet was reviewed by the President and the place which each Cabinet member was to occupy in the picture was decided upon. Mr. Carpenter gives us the story in these words:

"There were two elements in the Cabinet, the radical and the conservative. Mr. Lincoln was placed at the head of the official table, between two groups, nearest that representing the radical, but the uniting point of both. The chief powers of a government are War and Finance: the ministers of these were at his right,—the Secretary of War, symbolizing the great struggle, in the immediate foreground; the Secretary of the Treasury, actively supporting the new policy, standing by the President's side. The Army being the right hand, the Navy may very properly be styled the left hand of the government. The place for the Secretary of the Navy seemed, therefore, very naturally to be on Mr. Lincoln's left, at the rear of the table. To the Secretary of State, as the great expounder of the principles of the Republican party, the profound and sagacious statesman, would the attention of all at such a time be given. Entitled to precedence in discussion by his position in the Cabinet, he would necessarily form one of the central figures of the group. The four chief officers of the government were thus brought, in accordance with their relations to the Administration, nearest the person of the President, who, with the manuscript proclamation in hand which he had just read, was represented leaning forward, listening to, and intently considering the views presented by the Secretary of State. The Attorney-General, absorbed in the constitutional questions involved, with folded arms, was placed at the foot of the table opposite the President. The Secretary of the Interior and the Postmaster-General, occupying the less conspicuous positions of the Cabinet, seemed to take their proper places in the background of the picture."

For nearly six months Carpenter was given free reign in the White House, and he had an unusual opportunity to see Lincoln and his Cabinet members in many different moods. On July 22, at the close of the regular session of the Cabinet, the members adjourned to the State dining room where the painting of the famous canvas, now nearing completion, was on display. Carpenter called the painting "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation Before the Cabinet by President Lincoln."

According to Carpenter, the popular interest in the painting was so great at this time that it was placed in the East Room and the public was allowed to view the work. It was on display for two days, and several thousand people viewed this first showing of the famous historical study.

The canvas was fourteen feet six inches long and nine feet in height. Notwithstanding its large dimensions it was displayed in many of the larger cities of the country, the frame being so constructed that each end folded in to-

ward the center making its actual packing size about eight feet by nine feet.

It was this original painting which Ritchie engraved and which was offered to the public by Derby and Miller, the publishers. It was ready for distribution by May 1, 1866, and was available in three different forms: Artist's proofs signed, \$50.00; India Proofs, \$25.00; and Prints, \$10.00. The engravings were twenty-one inches by thirty-two inches and printed on heavy plate paper. They were sold in large numbers and even today are by no means considered scarce items.

The original canvas was eventually acquired by Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson of New York City who presented it to the United States Government in 1878. The Senate and House joined in thanking Mrs. Thompson for her generous gift and accepted it for the people of the United States. A committee was appointed "to cause said painting to be placed in an appropriate and conspicuous place in the Capitol," and further ordered to "carefully provide for its preservation." The famous painting was hung in the east staircase of the House wing of the Capitol.

One may be surprised to learn, however, that during the interval between the making of the engravings by Ritchie and the acquisition of the canvas by Mrs. Thompson the figure of Abraham Lincoln in the painting was changed considerably. Those who may have the Ritchie engraving do not in fact have an exact facsimile of the Carpenter painting which eventually came into possession of the government.

In the original canvas the side of the chair occupied by Lincoln was set parallel with the table and the position of Lincoln's body was directly to the front with head slightly turned to the left. In the re-worked Capitol painting the chair in which Lincoln is seated is placed at an angle of forty-five degrees with the table. The position of the body is changed and the height of the body is raised to give Lincoln a more prominent place in the group. The whole tendency is to make a more stately Lincoln and a more commanding presence. The features of Lincoln are also greatly changed with an approach toward the idealistic.

Another change in the Capitol painting which is noticeable immediately upon comparison with the Ritchie engraving is the position of one of the manuscripts. In the original work Lincoln appears holding the Proclamation in his left hand which rests in his lap, but in the Capitol copy, although still holding the paper in his left hand, it reclines upon the table.

The inkstand and the quill pen at Seward's right hand in the original study have also been shifted, the former moved to the other side of the table and the pen placed in Lincoln's right hand. Other changes of minor importance are noted in the Capitol painting. The picture on the mantle has become a framed profile bust of Lincoln and one or two accessories not in the original work have been added.

There is extant a picture of the original canvas, in transition stage, which shows still another head of Lincoln. It is interesting to note, however, that in this reproduction the quill pen held in Lincoln's right hand in the final copy is placed in the inkwell, but the inkwell occupies a different position on the table than shown in the original copy.

Regardless of these many changes from the original, for which it is difficult to account, Carpenter's imperial canvas, "The First Reading of the Proclamation of Emancipation Before the Cabinet," will ever occupy a prominent place among the historical paintings of the Nation.