

LINCOLN LORE

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THE TRAVERS OIL PAINTINGS

The paintings of Abraham Lincoln made from life have a very definite function in helping one to visualize just how Abraham Lincoln must have looked. Those who have left us reminiscences of the President are continually referring to his animated features and the inspirational climaxes which seemed to enlighten his whole countenance.

The photographer of the early day with his primitive equipment was not able to register those emotional appeals which so often found expression on Lincoln's face. Of necessity, all subjects who came before the camera were stilted, formal individuals who could neither laugh nor even smile. So our ancestors have come down to us in daguerreotype, ambrotype, and early prints as solemn, staid, and expressionless individuals.

It is the portrait painter who worked from the living subject, rather than from some photographic likeness, who has made a lasting contribution to our composite portrait of Abraham Lincoln.

When the controversy was being waged over George Grey Barnard's statue of Lincoln, several portraits were brought forward to prove that Abraham Lincoln was not the grotesque figure visualized by the famous sculptor. The *Art World* became quite active in the controversy and in the issue for October 1917 submitted the likeness of a full length painting of Lincoln by W. F. Travers. The story of this painting is of peculiar interest and should have a place in any compilation of famous Lincoln portraits made from life.

W. F. Travers, a portrait painter living at Frankfort-on-the-Main, Germany, came to America during the Civil War for the purpose of enlisting in the northern army. He was enrolled in New York but a physical examination found him unfit for service. He then made his way to Washington and conceived the idea of making a portrait of the President.

Mr. Travers eventually succeeded in getting an interview with Lincoln and several sittings were arranged late in the year 1864. His sketches made with some detail were taken back to his studio in Germany and about two months after the death of the President the full length portrait was finished. The bust portrait followed.

The portrait of Lincoln standing was acquired by United States Consul, William P. Webster, and at the time of the Centennial Exposition in 1876 was sent to America to be exhibited. It is said that when Mrs. Lincoln first saw the portrait in Memorial Hall, Philadelphia, she was so overcome by its lifelike appearance that she fainted and was carried from the hall.

After Mr. Webster's death in 1877 the portrait was purchased from his estate by Albert Berger. Ten years later there was a movement on foot to acquire the portrait for the government, and Ward H. Lamon wrote a letter commending the canvas to the Honorable William M. Evarts, chairman of the library committee. The letter follows:

"Washington, February 20, 1888.

"Dear Sir: I have been frequently asked to express my opinion of what is known as the Travis painting of Abraham Lincoln, and I am informed that your honorable committee is now considering the expediency of purchasing the portrait for the purpose of giving it a permanent place in the Capitol.

"While I can lay no claim to special skill and accuracy in the matter of art criticism, yet in my judgment the Travis portrait is the most lifelike picture of Mr. Lincoln that I have ever seen on canvas. I have examined many paintings of Mr. Lincoln, and in almost every instance I have found that the artist has sacrificed accuracy to ornamentation. The Travis portrait presents a real likeness of the man, with his rugged features and irregularities of personal appearance, true to life. The face in this portrait is remarkably lifelike, and I venture to say that if the face be covered and hidden from view, there is not a man who knew him intimately that would not instantly recognize the trunk and limbs on the canvas as being those of Abraham Lincoln.

"I have the honor to be, your obedient servant,
"Ward H. Lamon."

For several years attempts were made to get an appropriation for the acquisition of the painting, and there is before the editor at this writing the original printed reports prepared for both the Senate and House of Representatives asking that the sum of fifteen thousand dollars be made available for the purchase of the Travers work. The Senate report is dated March 29, 1892, and the House report May 29, 1896.

Apparently the effort to interest the government in the portrait failed, for in 1907 George Prince, a Washington photographer, was in possession of the picture. As late as 1935 it was in possession of the estate of the late Percy A. Rockefeller.

The bust portrait of Abraham Lincoln by Travers is not so well known as the full length study and until 1931 was still in possession of the artist's family in Frankfort-on-the-Main. It has since been purchased by Paul Bottenweiser and brought to this country.

Several dealers have listed this Travers canvas, and no less than three of them offered to dispose of the painting to the Lincoln National Life Foundation as late as 1935.

A photographic copy of the full length Travers painting may be found in Wilson's *Lincoln in Portraiture*, but it is not likely that the bust portrait has been published.

Note: The government reports refer to the painter as George W. F. Travis. One of the correspondents acting as agent for the sale of the portrait gives the name of the artist as W. F. K. Travers, while the *Art World* uses the name W. R. Travers in text and W. F. Travers in the note under the picture. In Wilson's book on *Lincoln in Portraiture* the name appears as William F. K. Travers.