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Lincoln portraits hide as much as they reveal

By Topper Sherwood
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Hours before delivering a brilliant speech on slavery at New York's Cooper Union, Abraham Lincoln walked into the Broadway studios of Republican supporter Mathew Brady. There, on Feb. 27, 1860, the ruffled and ungainly attorney submitted to the photographer's efforts to make him appear presidential. In producing the image, Brady applied a new technology that printed the candidate's almost full-length portrait onto thousands of pocket-sized calling cards. After the 1860 election, Lincoln credited Cooper Union—and Brady's work—for putting him in the White House.

"Lincoln and photography came of age at roughly the same time," observes Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery Curator David Ward. "Lincoln rose to prominence during the 1850s, when photography was becoming portable, cheap and technologically simpler."

A 25-year veteran of the Portrait Gallery, Ward is curating a special exhibition of Lincoln portraiture to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth on Feb. 12, 2009. In a single room, visitors will see more than 30 artifacts related to Lincoln—items rarely, if ever, assembled in one place.

The exhibition's title, "The Mask of Lincoln," is, most obviously, a reference to two life castings of Lincoln's face, one done in 1860 by sculptor Leonard Volk and the other done in 1865 by Clark Mills, also a sculptor. The plaster masks serve as physiognomic book-ends to Lincoln's presidency, the earlier mask showing "a face full of life, of energy, of vivid aspiration," according to White House secretary John Hay. Hay described the later mask as having the features of "one on whom sorrow and care had done their worst..."

Contrary to popular belief, no death mask was made of Lincoln's face after his assassination. The two "life" masks both required Lincoln to lie down, have his face covered in wet plaster, and remain motionless as it dried.

"Anything but agreeable," Lincoln said of the process. He was pleased with the first mask, declaring it "the animal himself."

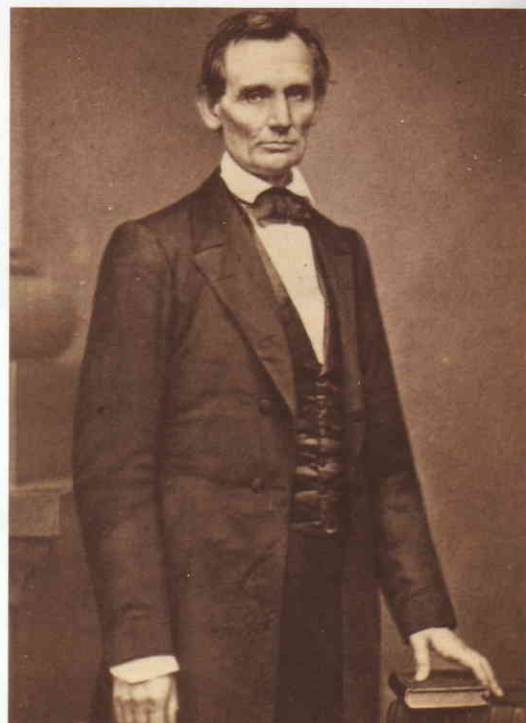
Volk used the 1860 mask as the basis of a number of renderings of Lincoln, including a full-length statue commissioned for the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield.

Plaster life masks were popular in the 19th century prior to the widespread use of photography, Ward explains. It was a time when "people wanted to see who they were dealing with. Handshake deals were still common, and everyone knew their bankers personally—people didn't get their money from ATMs."

Phrenology and physiognomical science also were in vogue, and many believed that the physical features of a face revealed such personal characteristics as intelligence, honesty, determination—and their opposites.

Least understood

"The Mask of Lincoln" also refers to the fact that Lincoln, among all U.S. presidents, remains one of the least understood—perhaps by his own design, Ward explains. Facing a deeply divided electorate and cabinet, Lincoln often chose not to speak his thoughts. When he did make public remarks, they were rarely extemporaneous.



Still, Lincoln knew it was important to be seen by the public. Advances in the technology of photography were allowing a burgeoning U.S. population to see images that were dramatically more true-to-life than traditional paintings and prints. Lincoln visited the studios of Brady and Brady's associate Alexander Gardner relatively often—starting almost immediately on his arrival in Washington, D.C., to take office in February 1861.

One of the earliest of these images, Ward says, shows Lincoln seated at a writing desk. It is the first photo in which Lincoln is shown wearing a beard.

"Lincoln had this photograph taken not only to show people what he looked like," Ward explains, "but to project himself as a figure of power and authority—to establish himself as president. At the same time, he knew the limitations of the art, and was hiding himself behind the ubiquity of these pictures." According to Ward, Lincoln's photographs seem to hide as much as they reveal.

Historic location

The National Portrait Gallery is well situated for a Lincoln exhibition. It is housed in the landmark Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture, formerly the National Patent Office Building where Lincoln's second inaugural ball was held in March 1865. Gardner's studio, where the president sat for so many of his photographs, was just down the street. Still, Ward says, Abraham Lincoln remains a difficult and elusive subject.

"Even as we stand here, Lincoln is receding deeper into the past," the curator says, referring to the process of wading through generations of evidence and interpretation to research the exhibition.

Cracked plate

One of the most noteworthy of the Portrait Gallery's Lincoln images is Gardner's "cracked plate" photograph. The 1865 portrait shows the president's face, tired and deeply lined—yet with greater detail and revealing an individual more accessible to the viewer than in any other Lincoln image. Despite the obvious strain that shows on Lincoln's face, he wears a subtle, enigmatic smile. The photo, Ward says, plays a central role in "The Mask of Lincoln."

"I think this is one of the most mysterious and moving pictures in the world," he says. "Lincoln is at end of his career. We see the folds of his skin, the careworn lines of his face, the thinning beard. He commanded during the worst crisis in American history with little help.... And then, you see this small smile..."

The plate was damaged (though some might say "embellished") when it broke in two when Gardner took it out of the camera, creating the "crack" that runs through the top of Lincoln's head when the pieces were combined. The smooth line has come to symbolize, Ward says, "everything from secession to the bullet the president would receive" at Ford's Theater a few weeks after the image was taken.

"What is Abe Lincoln thinking in February 1865?" the curator asks. "We'll never know. But I believe that he didn't want us to know. Lincoln knew the risk of revealing himself too greatly. He was not going to let Americans really know him. He would remain mysterious. He was an exceptional human being." ♦

"The Mask of Lincoln," will be on view at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery from Nov. 7, 2008 through July 5, 2009.

These images of Abraham Lincoln from "The Mask of Lincoln" exhibition (clockwise from top left) were taken by Mathew Brady on Feb. 27, 1860; Alexander Gardner, 1865; Mathew Brady, 1864; and Alexander Gardner, 1861. (All images courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

