

# For the People

A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association  
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## Lincoln Portraits: An Interpretive Framework

by Michael Fowler \*

Many American artists and writers have returned repeatedly through the years to convey something of the life and character of Abraham Lincoln. Biographies, paintings, articles, sculpture, and film about the man continue unabated to the present. They record, reinterpret, memorialize, somehow represent aspects of the great Emancipator, the savior of the Union, the man of the people, or some other type or archetype. The richness and volume of interpretive production attest to the continued fascination that much of America has for this historic figure.

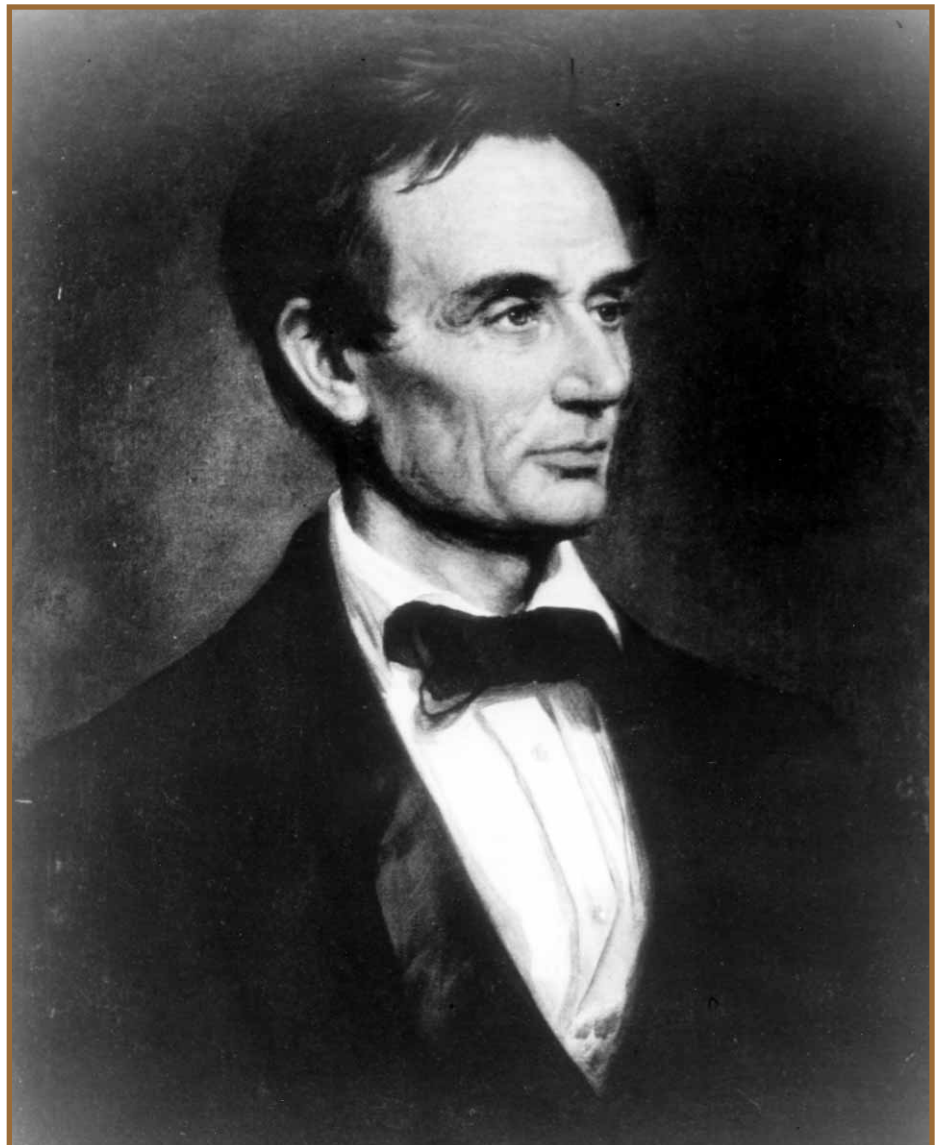
Paintings of Lincoln are the focus of this present study. To incorporate other media, especially for the scope and intent of this research, would simply be prohibitive in length and breadth. Paintings were also selected as the focus due to the artistic experience of the author and because it is a familiar and approachable medium to many. It also has historically afforded a great deal of flexibility and versatility of expression for the novice as well as the professional artist, besides containing the ever-attractive elements of color.

But while paintings of Lincoln appear at least as varied in style and approach as are the written portraits, they have, according to some, fallen short as communicators of at least Lincoln's likeness. Merrill D. Peterson's *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994) explores the history of Lincoln's place in American thought and imagination. He frames his study within some of the above-mentioned archetypes, which Lincoln has taken

on through the years. As he discusses contributions that artists and writers have made memorializing Lincoln, Peterson notes difficulties that portrait artists in particular have had in capturing Lincoln's likeness. He says: "Lincoln, for better or worse, had no

Gilbert Stuart to turn him into an icon" (p. 61). Other authors refer to second-rate painters who have attempted but failed to capture what Lincoln's secretary, John Nicolay, noted even during Lincoln's lifetime:

*continued on page 3*



Abraham Lincoln by George P. A. Healy (1860)

## President's Column

by Don Tracy

February 12, 2001, was an especially good day for Mr. Lincoln in Springfield. It began with a meeting of the Lincoln Legals Advisory Board and ended with the Battle Hymn of the Republic at the conclusion of the Annual Banquet. Between the two, there was the groundbreaking for the Lincoln Presidential Library, which can be seen on C-SPAN, and the Annual ALA Symposium.

Seven score years and one day before, Mr. Lincoln left Springfield never to return. Before leaving, he gave one of his most eloquent speeches, "the Farewell Address," all three versions of which can be found in the *Collected Works*. Thanks to the expert work of Daniel Stowell of the Lincoln Legal Papers and Christine Powell of the University of Michigan, the *Collected Works* is now available online in searchable format through the ALA Web site. Thanks to Stacey McDermott of the Lincoln Legal Papers, the ALA Web site is now current and more complete than ever. Kim Bauer and Thomas Schwartz continue to provide the excellent content. Please check our Web site out and let us know what you would like added or changed. The address is [www.alincolnassoc.com](http://www.alincolnassoc.com).

For the second year in a row, the Banquet was sold out, this time several weeks before the reservation cutoff date. Not bad for a Monday night in

February in a small midwestern town! Thank you ALA members and thank you Michael Beschloss.

One of the many distinguished guests at the Banquet was former Governor Jim Edgar and his beautiful wife, Brenda. This was Governor Edgar's fourteenth ALA Banquet in fifteen years, including all eight while he was governor. At the 1998 Banquet, Governor Edgar officially announced that the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum would, after many years of anticipation, receive its first and most important appropriation. Thank you Governor Edgar.

Comptroller Dan Hynes attended the Banquet for the second year in a row. Hynes and Governor George Ryan are co-chairs of the Illinois Bicentennial Commission and are working with the ALA on initial planning for 2009.

I have received much and lavish praise for this year's Banquet, which I hereby pass on with amplification to the many dedicated directors and members who have contributed so much: Jim Patton (Banquet Chair), Georgia Northrup (Arrangements and Seating), Thomas Schwartz (Invitation Flyer, Program & Virtual Library Report), Harlington Wood, Jr. (Program Photographs), Richard Mills (Lincoln the Lawyer Award Presentation), Susan Mogerman (Presidential Library Report), Bob Eckley (Endowment Announcement), Very Reverend William Privette (Invocation & Benediction), and Greg Walbert (Invitation Flyer design).

One of the many benefits of serving as ALA President is the opportunity to dine with people like James B. Stewart, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Michael Beschloss. All are great speechmakers and charming dinner companions with interesting insights into capital issues and controversies.

After thirteen years of editing the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, during which time the *Journal* has evolved from a small, pri-

vately produced booklet of annual Symposium papers into a semi-annual first-rate scholarly journal published by a major university press, Thomas Schwartz is turning the editorship over to Dr. Bryon Andraesen over a two-year transition. Thank you, Tom, for you many years of service to the *Journal*, for finding such an able successor, and for continuing to serve as ALA Secretary, Newsletter Editor, and Symposium Chair.

If you have not yet renewed your ALA membership, you will soon receive Molly Becker's firm, but charming, "now you belong to the ages," letter. Please renew now so that we can count on your continued support and interest. If you have a question about the status of your membership, you can contact me via e-mail at [dtracy@bhslaw.com](mailto:dtracy@bhslaw.com).

Mark your calendars now for February 12, 2002. As a member, you will receive advance notice of the Banquet details and Symposium program. Clarence Page has tentatively agreed to be the Banquet speaker. Allen Guelzo, Brooks Simpson, and Lerone Bennett, Jr., have committed to the Symposium, and Ira Berlin has been invited to complete the panel. I hope to see you then, if not before.

## Member News

Condolences are extended to the families of Vernon Fernandez and Abraham Lincoln Marovitz. Fernandez was a leader in the historical community of Jacksonville, Illinois, and the recognized authority on Jacksonville history. Abraham Lincoln Marovitz was a distinguished Illinois legislator and judge. Those who attended the 1999 Abraham Lincoln Association Banquet will remember Judge Marovitz's eloquent invocation and benediction. His passing at age ninety-five is a genuine loss. He was everyone's friend and a strong advocate of his namesake, Abraham Lincoln.

Unless otherwise indicated, photographs are courtesy of the Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield

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Newsletter design and layout  
by William B. Tubbs  
[wbt60@earthlink.net](mailto:wbt60@earthlink.net)

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## Lincoln Portraits An Interpretive Framework

*continued from page 1*

the paintings “petrified” some single look, but the picture remained hard and cold” (Mellon, *The Face of Lincoln*, p.6). Peterson concludes that it is the photographs and sculpture, rather than the paintings and engravings, that have “opened a window into Lincoln’s soul” (Peterson, p. 341). Indeed, Frederick Hill Meserve, an early leading and established authority and collector of Lincoln photographs, makes an even more restrictive evaluation: “Of the countless engravings and paintings of Lincoln, many are mere caricatures. The photographs show him as he was” (Meserve, *The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln*, p. 25).

Still, when examined and interpreted for what they are as art objects—by the visible, attestable things within the pieces themselves—the paintings of Lincoln, completed over nearly a century and a half ago, though not always succeeding as faithful likenesses (whatever that may entail), do provide a viable and intriguing venue for examining this man’s unique and complex appearance and character.

At another level, the paintings considered so far in this research include not only the work of skilled portrait artists, but also painters and illustrators known for their work in other genre. Landscape painter Marsden Hartley of the Stieglitz Group in the earlier part of this century and illustrator Norman Rockwell some forty years later have portrayed evocative Lincolns. Those who have pursued professions in music and politics—Woody Guthrie and Dwight Eisenhower, to name two—have also felt the need to weigh in by painting at least one portrait of this American icon.

Such a collection of images, when presented thematically, chronologically, or according to some other schema should also contribute to the viewing interest. Collectively these paintings

can be described as kaleidoscopic as they reflect, refract, and transmit glimpses of the people and times that produced them. While some of the paintings of Lincoln seem dry derivatives of well known photographic poses, others are more interpretative—some refreshingly so. A few seem clumsily drawn, and still others have the decorative flair and charm of folk art.

Some have written informatively—even skillfully—about Lincoln’s portrayal in the visual media of photographs, sculpture, paintings, and engravings. They have emphasized the descriptive and narrative elements, and, appropriately, their historic accuracy. Few if any have written about the way the medium communicates on its own expressive terms. This author, for over twenty years a painter and instructor of art and design, argues that the way a painting is interpreted, as in any work of art, comes at least as much from the choices the artist makes regarding such things as the painting’s size and shape, the relative scale of the subject within the format, its color scheme and value range, and the kind of painting medium used and the way it is applied. The task to find meaning and merits in these portrayals of Lincoln, as in any art analysis and interpretation, should be one grounded at least in the ingredients of the work itself (Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 2000). The viewer can thus be guided to the painting’s meaning by acknowledging these visible elements. The author also reminds that while such an interpretation is not necessarily definitive, at least dialog about it can be based on its visual components (Feldman, *Varieties of Visual Experience*, 1992).

This article represents initial research on the subject. The author has viewed firsthand over eighty paintings with Abraham Lincoln as the main subject—paintings in more than a dozen collections at as many sites.

*continued on page 6*



## The 2001 Abraham Lincoln Association Banquet

Since 1963, the Abraham Lincoln Association has celebrated the February 12 birth of Abraham Lincoln in his hometown of Springfield, Illinois. The tradition began

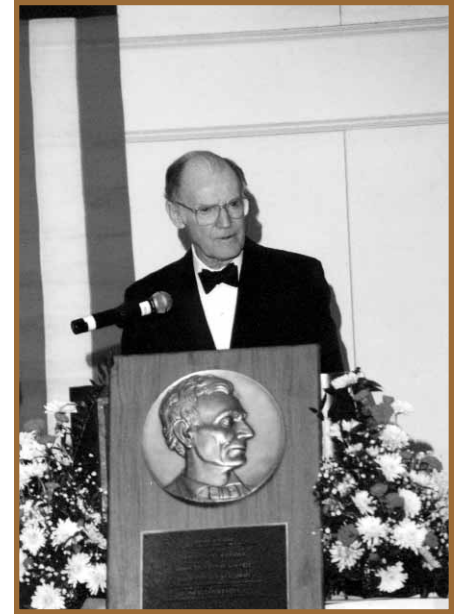
seemingly effortless mastery of the proceedings kept the evening lively and entertaining. The 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band provided music. The evening ended with the

traditional signing of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Proceeds from the Banquet fund the afternoon scholarly Symposium and publications of the Association.



*Michael Beschloss accepts original artwork created by Greg Walbaum, who designs the Association's announcement brochures.*



*Dr. Robert S. Eckley provides guests with an update on the Abraham Lincoln Association endowment fund.*

with the 1909 commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Banquet speakers included such notables as Booker T. Washington, president of the Tuskegee Institute, and such political figures as William Jennings Bryan. The Association ceased activities in 1953. It was not due to lack of interest but rather the Association liquidated all of their assets to see through to publication the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, an eight-volume compilation of all of Lincoln's writings and speeches.

This year, Michael Beschloss, author and presidential historian, honored the Association with his comments on presidential leadership. The wit and colorful anecdotes that were sprinkled throughout his thoughtful remarks did not disappoint the sellout crowd.

Association president Donald R. Tracy presided over the festivities. His



*Theodore Gertz accepts the Lincoln the Lawyer Award on behalf of his late father, civil rights lawyer Elmer Gertz, from Judge Richard Mills.*

## More Photographs from the 2001 Abraham Lincoln Association Banquet



*The 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band from Pekin, Illinois, performs during a brief break in the ceremony.*



*Michael Beschloss signs an autograph for a banquet guest*

### New Selection of Lincoln Titles

As a continuing service to our membership, the Abraham Lincoln Association is pleased to offer the following four titles to its members at discount prices. Three of the four are recently released titles. Don E. Fehrenbacher died before he finished his magnum opus on slavery in the American Republic. Ward M. McAfee, who studied under Fehrenbacher before embarking upon his

own distinguished career as a historian, completed and edited the piece. Michael Burlingame edits another collection of writings by John Hay, Lincoln's private secretary. Charles B. Strozier's psychobiographical study of Abraham Lincoln reappears in a completely revised and updated version.

Please make all checks out to "IHPA." Illinois residents must add sales tax to their total.

John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*

Retail: \$23.95      ALA Price: \$20.50      IL sales tax: \$1.49

Michael Burlingame, *At Lincoln's Side: John Hay's Civil War Correspondence and Selected Writings*

Retail: \$39.95      ALA Price: \$32.00      IL sales tax: \$2.32

Don E. Fehrenbacher and Ward M. McAfee, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*

Retail: \$35.00      ALA Price: \$28.00      IL sales tax: \$2.03

Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: A Psychological Portrait*

Retail: \$18.95      ALA Price: \$15.25      IL sales tax: 1.11

### First Hay-Nicolay Dissertation Award

The Abraham Lincoln Association announced that Stewart Winger was the first recipient of the Hay-Nicolay Award for best dissertation in Lincoln studies. Winger studied at the University of Chicago under the direction of Martin E. Marty. Winger's dissertation, "Lincoln's Religious Rhetoric: American Romanticism and the Antislavery Impulse," is under publication consideration by Northern Illinois University Press. Winger, in attendance as one of the featured symposium speakers, went home with a \$5,000 check. He is currently a visiting scholar at the

*continued on page 8*



## Lincoln Portraits: An Interpretive Framework

*continued from page 3*

For each, he has written a descriptive analysis, recording a physical description and writing summary notes of impressions while in the painting's presence. The author intends to continue this approach as long as leads to original paintings of the sixteenth president continue to emerge. He hopes to accomplish at least the following as a result of his research: 1) to begin a dialog about at least the expressive meanings of these paintings, beginning in this article, with a comparative analysis of three Lincoln paintings separated by time and artistic approach; 2) from these and other interpretations, to explore some ways to organize thematic concepts of these images for an illustrated book; 3) to begin the process toward a comprehensive cataloging of painted images of Lincoln; and 4) to receive assistance in locating other paintings in public and private collections for possible inclusion in the proposed publication.

Three paintings of Lincoln have been selected for this comparative analysis. They were selected based on their range of expressive style as well as their depiction of Lincoln by artists separated in time by over a century. The analysis of each painting, though not intended to be comprehensive, is intended to feature some of the more obvious physical attributes of the artist's use of color, format, shapes, and textures that contribute to the expressive meaning of the piece, while highlighting some of the similarities and differences among them.

Is there a more majestic, yet approachable, Lincoln than the one in George P. A. Healy's 1860 beardless portrait? Some of the majesty and solemnity of the painting stems from the nearly life-sized presentation of the subject, one in which Lincoln's head and shoulders are set in view within a generous dark and neutral background expanse—as a jewel against dark velvet. Also, the artist has rendered Lincoln's face respectfully, with each nuance of wrinkle and fold a result of a

skillful build-up of translucent color glazes. This indirect painting method, a traditional approach brought for-



**Lincoln for the Defense**  
by Norman Rockwell (1962)

© 1962 The Curtis Publishing Company

ward from the earliest uses of the oil painting medium, seems appropriate for the mission of this artist to objec-

tively record the topography of the face. Any bravado of the artist's brush would be out of place here.

But the subject is not overly grand or immaculate. It is made approachable as well. Lincoln's facial expression is warmed by a relaxed expression. Hazel eyes emerge from under heavy eyelids and a stray forelock rests on Lincoln's broad forehead. Hair surrounding the profile occurs in random wisps. Also, the warm blush across nose, cheek, and ear, though a departure from what contemporaries have described as a sallow complexion, is complemented by the dark, smooth, shaven area of the beard. If Healy used the contemporary Hesler photographs as a model, they have not enslaved him to portraying the rough texture of skin nor the firmly set jaw. Healy has warmed and softened this portrayal, but has stopped short of idealizing the likeness. It is the combination of the majestic and approachable that is the chief attraction of the piece.

Some fifty years later, George Handel Story, also reportedly working from life sketches of Lincoln but at a much later time in his own life, offers a dramatically different portrayal of the man. Story's portrait (ca. 1915) is of about the same size and scale and presents what could be called a majestic Lincoln as well, but his approach has more of a flair for the dramatic. Rather than a natural looking approachable Lincoln portrayed in the context of a neutral background, Story presents a Lincoln carved, polished, and painted. Contrasts are up from the previous portrait, and this Lincoln is placed outdoors against darkened skies. The foreboding clouds break in the distance to reveal a sun-drenched capitol building at the lower right, while the stripes of a large American flag can be faintly perceived in the near background at left. These components are no doubt added to stir the patriotic in the viewer. They are rendered in a thick, directly painted impasto, adding energy to the deep space of the composition. This flourish of brush-

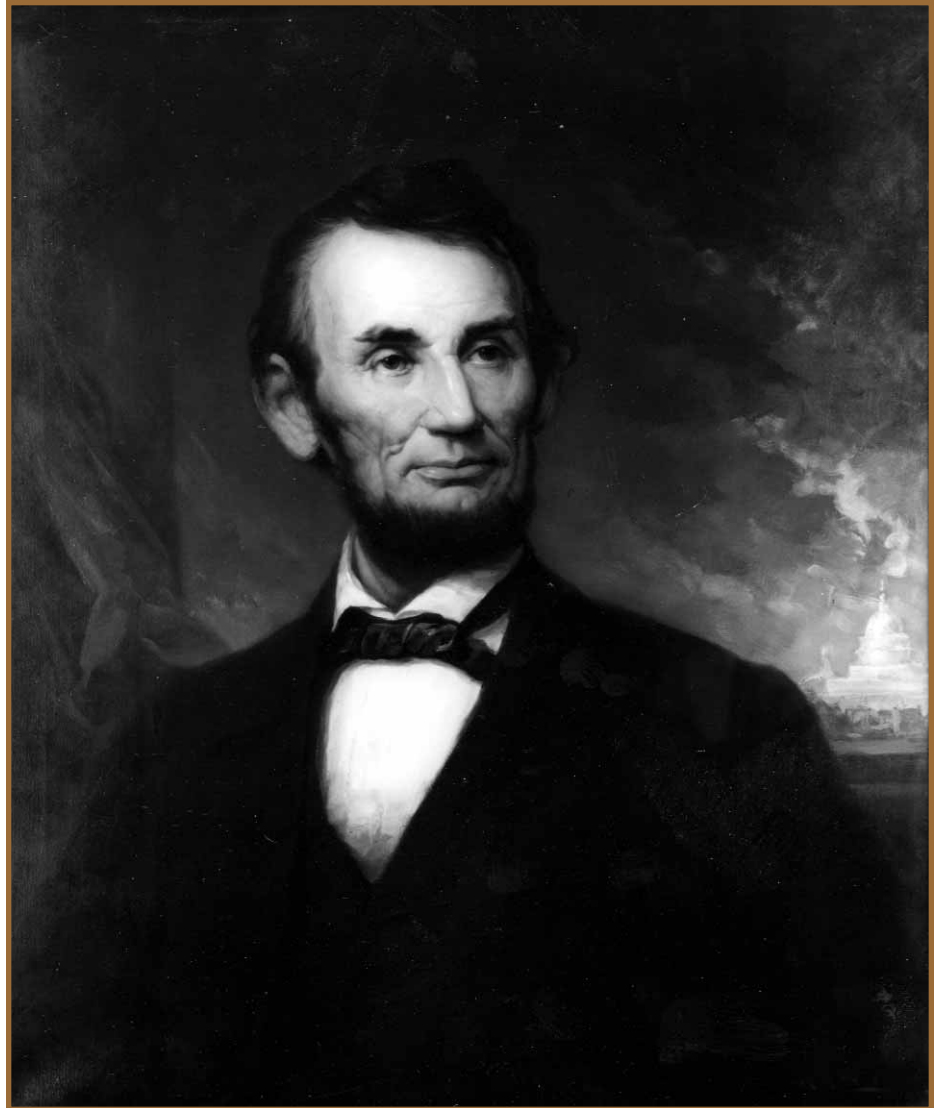
stroke is also one seen increasingly in twentieth-century American painting. It crosses all genres as the artist imposes more of his individuality in the painting.

The value and color extremes of the background are carried into the subject itself, with highlights and shadows of the face and shirtfront a result of sculpturally rendered effects in paint. Even the nose is scrubbed to a polished patina, with an almost pure white highlight accenting the top right edge. Portraying a memorialized Lincoln, Story has made an issue of the sixteenth president's furrowed face—the lines appearing to be not just etched, but carved into his countenance for time immemorial. The gaze is dramatized as well, with eyes focused on the viewer. Their skewed alignment, as that of the nose to the prodigious and firmly set mouth, adds an idiosyncratic drama to an already energized portrayal.

Story has given us an arresting portrait, bordering on the surreal, but nevertheless energized and impassioned from a lifetime of meditation and reflection of sketches he made during an encounter with the newly elected Civil War president.

In a word, drama is also an appropriate descriptor for the last piece in this discussion. The artist, Norman Rockwell, creates a Lincoln portrait that is dramatic on a number of levels. Painted in 1962, at a time when much

*continued on page 8*



*Abraham Lincoln by George Handel Story (ca. 1915)*

## APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Please enroll me as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Association in the category indicated:

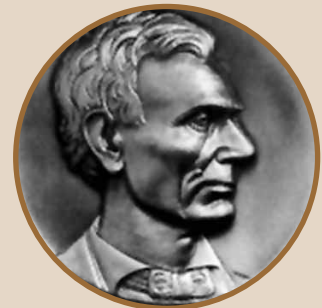
- Railsplitter . . . . . \$ 25
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## Lincoln Portraits: An Interpretive Framework

*continued from page 7*

of America was recalling the centennial of the Civil War and its commander-in-chief, *Lincoln for the Defense* reflects Rockwell's interest in one of the subject's earlier and more personally dramatic moments. He captures the then-lawyer Lincoln in the midst of the trial for New Salem friend and accused murderer Duff Armstrong, here shown seated and cowering, wrists shackled and shrouded in darkened colors in the near background. Rockwell departs from the traditional portrait format and dress, posing Lincoln standing in white trousers and rolled-up shirt-sleeves, holding an almanac in his left hand (supposedly the chief exhibit of his argument), his right hand clenched and forcefully pressed against a book on the table that separates him from the defendant. Tension is as much the subject here, as Lincoln is not only shown front and center, but turned in a dynamic view to the left, pressed to the plane of the canvas, with the viewer's eye level at his knees. From this unusual vantage point, the viewer must consequently look up to the towering form of Lincoln in command, and, curiously, to the underside of his jutting chin and nose to hollows beneath a foreshort-

ened forehead, from which emerges an intense gaze. Nothing rests easily in this painting.

Further tension is created as the painting's format is stretched vertically to accommodate Lincoln's elongated form. Though the overall painting measures less than four feet high, a possible detraction from the drama due to its smallish size, its height is nearly four times its width. Curiously, and atypical for many of Rockwell's illustrations, the earlier fussy paint daubs are preempted by paint irregularly applied in tiny ribbons and splotches of high intensity color, energizing Lincoln's white outfit and blue lively patterned galluses. Even these, though removed from their supportive function, rest uneasily at Lincoln's hip. Rockwell, in his sixth decade as illustrator, still in control of portrait likenesses and color and lighting effects, has let loose with some fireworks of the brush for this patriotic call to arms.

This Lincoln portrait, like the others in terms of possessing a unique presence, is unlike them in style and intent. It captures a moment in time—one pregnant with tension and anticipation. The two previous paintings, in whatever degree of naturalness, nobility, or idiosyncrasy, rendered

a more timeless Lincoln. In sum, these three paintings, chosen for their differences in style, approach, and intent, begin to illustrate some of the potential range of expressive meanings and consequent enjoyment that one can gain from a guided interpretation of their form.

\*Michael Fowler is a professor of art history at the University of South Carolina - Aiken.

### First Hay-Nicolay Dissertation Award

*continued from page 5*

American University at Cairo, Egypt. He and his wife are the proud parents of a baby girl, Claire.

The Hay-Nicolay dissertation award seeks to identify and reward outstanding young scholars just beginning their academic careers. The award is a cooperative effort between the Abraham Lincoln Association and the Mid-Atlantic Lincoln Studies Institute. Two five thousand-dollar prizes will be awarded in the first year with the prize alternating between the two organizations in following years.

## For the People

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