

From **Picturing History**, edited by William Ayres (1993)
"Picturing Lincoln" by Barry Schwartz.



Picturing Lincoln

BARRY SCHWARTZ

Every nation, as Robert Bellah has observed, is “a community of memory” that retains its past by retelling the same “constitutive narrative” and recalling with variable precision the people who embody its ideals.¹ In the American community of memory, two Abraham Lincolns have played an important role. The first is the rail-splitter, the rude man from the prairie and the river bottoms, the storytelling folk hero of common touch and homely virtue. The second Lincoln is the savior of the union, liberator of the slave, martyred hero of godly virtue. The first Lincoln ascended from the masses but never left them; the second Lincoln transcended the masses and guided them from a distance.

American history painters represented both Lincolns. Painters in the “grand style” concentrated on grand events; their goal was to dignify Lincoln, as Benjamin West would have put it, “by transmitting to posterity his noble actions, his mental powers, to be viewed in those invaluable lessons of religion, love of country and morality.”² Such paintings present idealized versions of Lincoln’s political accomplishments and moral character.³ By contrast, the realist or “genre” history painters depicted Lincoln doing ordinary things in familiar scenes. Whether they portrayed Lincoln in a private, mundane role or in a public role dealing with mundane matters, genre history painters humanized him. Grand-style and genrefied paintings thus formulate contrasting relations between reputation and social distance. The former elevate Lincoln’s reputation by revealing how his superior talents and moral virtues separate him from ordinary people; the latter enhance his reputation by emphasizing common traits with which ordinary people can identify.

Most nineteenth-century paintings of Lincoln followed

the grand style. Between Lincoln’s death in 1865 and the dedication of his national memorial in 1922, however, the United States evolved from a rural republic into an industrial democracy. Influenced by this transformation, twentieth-century artists increasingly saw Lincoln as the epitome of the common man, and they produced genrefied representations of him in greater numbers than ever before. Yet they could not put aside completely the nineteenth-century artist’s appreciation of Lincoln’s epic qualities. These two approaches to painting Lincoln, then, make the public’s visual understanding of him clearer. The first relates the genrefication of Lincoln’s image to the concerns and needs of a new and more egalitarian generation. The second approach attends to the enduring perception of Lincoln’s epic greatness and to its maintenance in the face of social change.

The Making of an Epic Hero: Nineteenth-Century Images of Lincoln

When painters and printmakers first turned to him, Abraham Lincoln was “one of the two or three most unpopular living presidents in American history.”⁴ His election provoked the secession of southern states and led to a war that many would have liked to avoid. Lincoln fought that war too timidly for some, too stubbornly for others; and, after sending hundreds of thousands of men to their deaths, he wanted to treat the enemy as if there had been no war at all. In November 1864, after pivotal victories on the battlefield changed the minds of thousands who thought the war unwinnable, Lincoln won reelection with 54 percent of the northern vote. Yet even with military successes behind him, many believed

Dennis Malone Carter. *Lincoln Greeting the Heroes of War*, detail of plate 96.

87. David Gilmour Blythe. *Abram Lincoln Writing the Emancipation Proclamation*. 1863. 21¼ x 27½" (55.2 x 69.8 cm.). The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; gift of Mr. and Mrs. John F. Walton.



that Lincoln's reelection reflected the public's dislike of challenger George McClellan rather than its endorsement of the president himself.⁵

Five months later, the assassin's bullet dramatically elevated Lincoln's prestige, but the widely held belief—based largely on impressive and prolonged funeral rites—that his death caused people to appreciate his greatness and realize how much they loved him cannot be sustained by evidence. Horace Greeley, for example, surmised in his editorial several days after Lincoln's death "that Mr. Lincoln's reputation will stand higher with posterity than with the mass of his contemporaries." Likewise, the Reverend George Briggs declared in his funeral eulogy that Lincoln would be "hailed in the coming time . . . with a truer, deeper homage than he wins today." George Templeton Strong also believed Lincoln was lacking in too many ways to earn the respect of his own generation, but "his name will be of high account fifty years hence."⁶

Contemporary critics considered Lincoln a boorish country lawyer whose background disqualified him for any public office. They ridiculed his accent, dress, physical ungainliness, and demeanor; they could not understand how he became president. When political

allies turned against him, they used the same language. "He does not act, or talk, or feel like the ruler of a great empire in a great crisis," Richard Henry Dana observed. "He likes rather to talk and tell stories with all sorts of persons . . . than to give his mind to the noble and manly duties of his great post." The rail-splitter image that made Lincoln attractive as a presidential candidate was evidently all too convincing; it undermined his dignity as president.

Clearly, then, contemporary opinion of Lincoln was not uniformly positive. History painters who admired Lincoln or accepted commissions from his supporters could not alter this opinion, but they countered it forcefully. Depicting him in the grand style, pro-Lincoln artists believed their efforts would be of no social significance if they did not inform and shape rather than articulate public opinion. History painters thus contrived a counterimage to the rail-splitting common man, one that ennobled Lincoln and depicted him as a president of grand and stately mien. After Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and his assassination dramatically altered the course of American history, they converged on an epic portrayal of Lincoln that Americans would eventually come to know best and embrace.

Emancipation

Lincoln's popularity was at its lowest point when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862. "No event in the history of this country since the Declaration of Independence itself . . ." the *Illinois State Journal* proclaimed shortly afterward, "excited so profound attention."⁸ Scores of prints immediately marked the occasion. They portrayed Lincoln at his desk writing the proclamation, signing it, or acknowledging the gratitude of black people. Other prints—more than two dozen, many bordered by approving allegorical figures—reproduced the proclamation's text. The extraordinary outpouring of "emancipation prints" met the demand of Lincoln's large antislavery constituency, but it never reflected widespread support for emancipation itself. Announced before the November 1862 elections, Lincoln's abolition policy evoked fears of a northward migration of blacks and caused heavy losses for his Republican party.

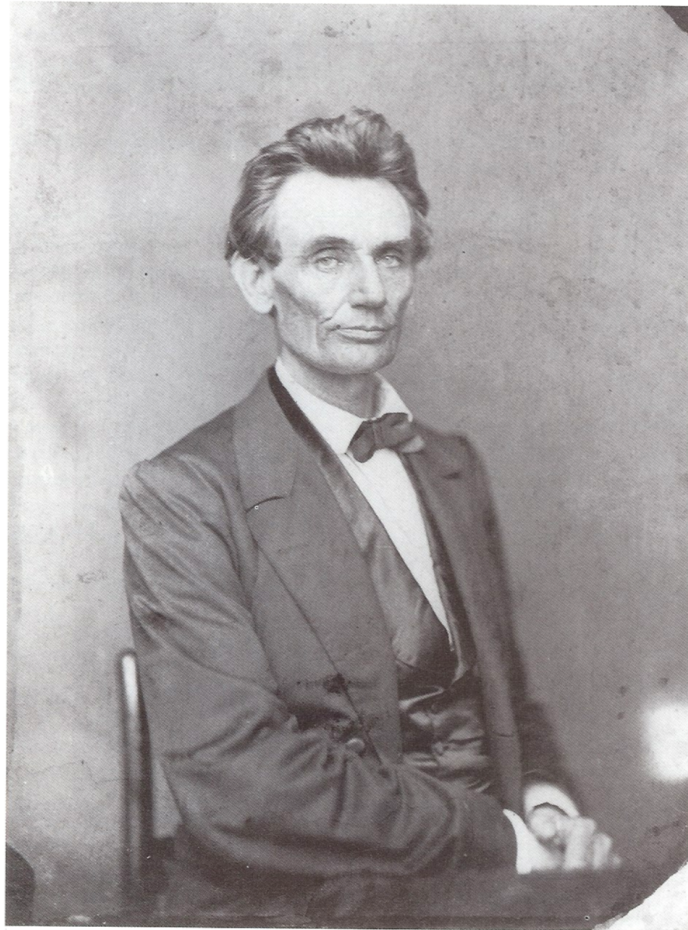
Even Lincoln's admirers acknowledged the public's ambivalence toward the proclamation, an admission that sometimes weakened their statements on his behalf. Painter David Gilmour Blythe, a staunch opponent of slavery, thought his *Abram Lincoln Writing the Emancipation Proclamation* (plate 87) would help promote the president's cause. He was wrong. Unlike his

earlier painting, *Lincoln Crushing the Dragon of Rebellion* (plate 88), which dramatically marks Lincoln's struggle against the Confederacy and its New York City supporters, Blythe's *Emancipation Proclamation* is ambiguous. Unconventional in design and execution, it succeeds best in magnifying the qualities of conventional history painting. Blythe's emancipator, with pen in hand, composes his proclamation. But the great man is half-dressed, wearing a rumpled shirt with cuffs rolled up, baggy pants, one slipper off, another on. The painting's moral lesson is vague. Lincoln sits among petitions against emancipation as well as for emancipation. Many objects in the picture, including the maul, window-curtain flag, and masonic emblems, possess no clear meaning. Even the Bible and U.S. Constitution, resting on Lincoln's lap and presumably representing his main sources of inspiration, give inconsistent guidance; they were invoked by both sides to justify or to condemn slavery. The painting is so densely symbolic, so intellectually complex, that only the most sophisticated viewer could decipher it. When lithographed and put on the market, few bought the prints.

Yet, the people that favored emancipation were determined to sanctify Lincoln's measure. They sought painters to articulate the proclamation's merit, not its controversial reception. Lincoln supporters in Philadel-



88. David Gilmour Blythe, *Lincoln Crushing the Dragon of Rebellion*. 18 x 22" (45.7 x 55.9 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; bequest of M. C. Karolik for the Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865.



89. William Marsh.
Abraham Lincoln. 1860.
Photograph. Gilman Paper
Company Collection, New
York.

phia therefore commissioned Edward Dalton Marchant to celebrate the proclamation's signing with a commemorative portrait. Lincoln liked the idea so much that he allowed Marchant to reside in the White House while he worked on the painting and arranged for Marchant's son, also an artist, to take leave from military duty to assist his father.

Assuming the portrait would be permanently exhibited at Independence Hall, Marchant conceived his work within the state portrait tradition (plate 90). Twice the size of Blythe's portrayal, Marchant's shows Lincoln in front of the oversized columns, drapes, chair of authority, and covered table that represent the majesty of the state. With quill pen in one hand, he secures with his other the proclamation he has just signed. Immediately behind him is a pedestal supporting the figure of Liberty and a broken chain symbolizing emancipation. Mar-

chant enshrines Lincoln by enveloping him in the trappings that had framed every presidential portrait since those of George Washington.

Marchant's painting must have satisfied its patrons, for it expresses with great dignity their feelings about both Lincoln and the prospect of slavery's demise. The public appeal of Marchant's style, however, was relatively limited. Neither Marchant's emancipation painting nor comparable paintings in the state portrait tradition by William Travers (1865), Solomon Nunes Carvalho (1865), and William Cogswell (1869) attained the popularity of Francis Bicknell Carpenter's group portrait, completed in 1864 (plate 91).⁹

An ardent opponent of slavery, Carpenter proposed to Lincoln a life-size painting of the president reading the proclamation to his entire cabinet. A less ambitious work, Carpenter maintained, would be unworthy of "this new



90. Edward Dalton Marchant. *Abraham Lincoln*. 1863. 55 x 45" (139.7 x 114.3 cm.). The Union League of Philadelphia.

epoch in the history of liberty."¹⁰ Impressed by the young artist's political vision and by his letter of introduction from Illinois congressman and friend Owen Lovejoy, Lincoln approved the plan and made Carpenter artist-in-residence, as he had Marchant six months earlier.

The completed painting, Carpenter stated, contains "no imaginary curtain or column, gorgeous furniture or allegorical statue"—a critical reference, probably, to Marchant's rival painting. The subject itself—"the salvation of the Republic—the Freedom of a Race"—would engage any audience "without the aid of conventional trappings."¹¹ In fact, though, Carpenter merely replaced one set of trappings—the state portrait's—for another—what Mark Thistlethwaite has termed history painting's "civil heroic tradition," exemplified by John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* (plate 42) and Benjamin West's *The American Commissioners; or, Signing the*

Treaty of Paris (plate 92).¹² An expression of collective will, the act of signing unifies the paintings' content. Trumbull's colonial delegates and West's peace commissioners are small companies of men whose center of influence is indiscernible. Thomas Pritchard Rossiter modified this pattern in *Signing the Constitution of the United States* (plate 93) by elevating George Washington above the many other delegates on the scene and surrounding him with an aura of light. The scale of Carpenter's painting is smaller, the contrast between his main and peripheral subjects less vivid than Rossiter's, but his composition is similar. Carpenter set Lincoln apart from his seven cabinet officers and arranged the entire scene around him.

For Lincoln's admirers, the *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln* was more than a history painting; it was "The Great National Pic-



91. Francis Bicknell Carpenter. *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln*. 1864. 110 x 180" (279.4 x 457.2 cm.). U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C.

ture"—an emblem of their vision of America. Authenticity made this emblem powerful. Many cabinet scenes, including Alonzo Chappel's *Lincoln Reading the Emancipation Proclamation to His Cabinet* (1862), were imaginary and hastily produced. Carpenter's scene was based on meticulous research.¹³

Carpenter's close attention to the cabinet's seating arrangement revealed its members' ideological division. The radical members of the cabinet are to Lincoln's right; the more conservative members to his left. The artist enhanced this "curious mingling of fact and allegory" by selecting from the actual meeting room certain "accessories." The *New York Tribune*, opposed to slavery, lies at the lower left near War Secretary Edwin M. Stanton's feet. A portrait of Simon Cameron, Stanton's predecessor and the first cabinet member to avow a radical emancipation policy, appears at the extreme left, above Stanton's head. Andrew Jackson's portrait, in contrast, is located in the center behind white-bearded Navy Secretary Gideon Welles. Jackson's determination to uphold national union brings him into the picture, but his friendliness toward slavery places him on the side of the conservatives. Occupying the symbolic chair of authority (unembellished, but the only one with armrests—a traditional symbol of authority in the hierarchy of seating furniture), Lincoln positions himself between the radicals and conservatives and mediates their claims. The docu-

ment he has just signed is a compromise that resolves competing interests: it will preserve slavery if the rebellion ceases, destroy slavery if the rebellion continues.¹⁴

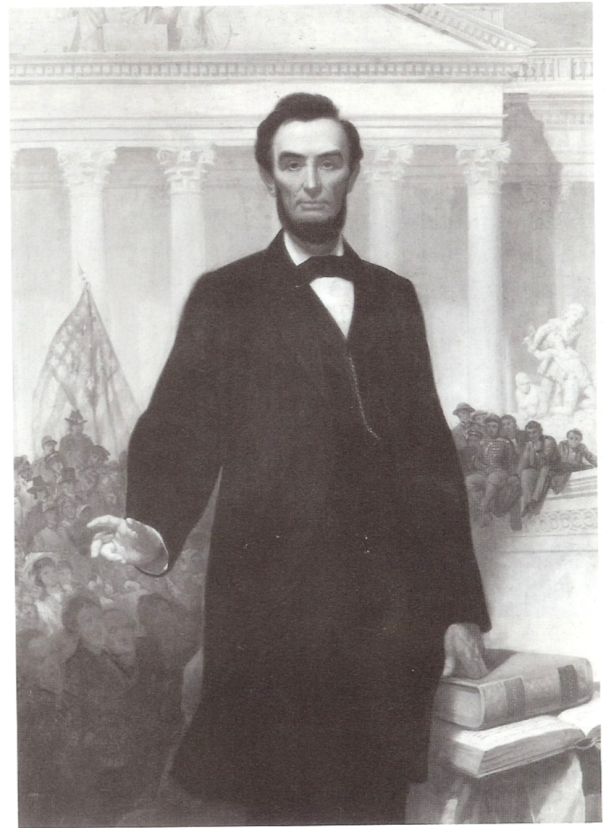
Consecration

Just as emancipation enshrined Lincoln as a symbol of freedom, Gettysburg linked him to patriotic sacrifice and heroic death. Six months after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Union forces won the battle of Gettysburg; soon afterward, by invitation offered only on second thought by a local committee, Lincoln consecrated the dead at the dedication ceremony for the new Gettysburg Cemetery. The occasion failed to capture artistic attention: not a single painting or print of the event or even decorative copy of Lincoln's speech appeared during the war. By 1876, however, growing public interest in the Gettysburg Address became evident in many centennial observances, which moved Albion Harris Bicknell to design a life-size representation of Lincoln at Gettysburg (plate 94).

The stiffness of Bicknell's painting betrays the fact that his likenesses were based on photographs taken separately and having no previous relationship to one another. Although rendered authentically enough, his subjects resemble a waxwork collection. The whole, in



92. Benjamin West. *The American Commissioners, or, Signing the Treaty of Paris, 1783*. 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (71.0 x 92.2 cm.). The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware.



95. Emanuel Leutze. *Abraham Lincoln*. 1865. 69 x 50" (175.26 x 127 cm.). Union League Club, New York.

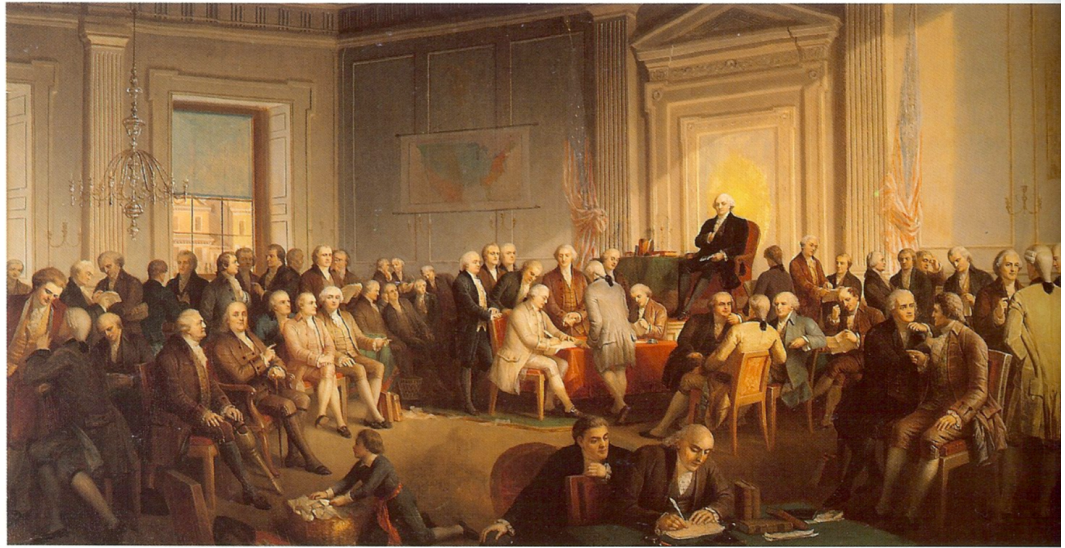
this sense, is less than the sum of its parts. In another sense, the rigid cast of the painting adds to its intended solemnity. Lincoln dominates the scene at center-foreground, standing beside a drape-covered table. His right hand grasps his address; his left, gracefully bent, touches the bottom of his lapel. The platform is decorated with a colorful carpet and floral bouquet. Lush trees in the left and right background frame the cemetery's horizon. Arrayed behind Lincoln are twenty of the war's most visible men—military officers, state governors, senators, vice presidents, and journalists.

Although most of them were not actually present with Lincoln at Gettysburg, and many known to have been on the platform are excluded from the picture, Bicknell's scene is not altogether fictional. Completed as southern influence reasserted itself and Reconstruction ended in 1879, the painting re-creates symbolically the coalition that fought the war. The pictured assemblage (whose members were identified by a key accompanying the printed reproductions) is weighted in favor of antislavery opinion—epitomized not only by the pres-

ence of antislavery radicals Henry Wilson, Salmon Chase, and Benjamin Butler, but also by black journalist and political leader Frederick Douglass (with whom few politicians, including Lincoln, would have dared to share a public platform in 1863).

Bicknell's composition, like Carpenter's, portrays the enactment of a ritual and embodies its expression of national solidarity. As anthropologist David Kertzer has observed, rituals such as proclamation signings and memorial orations "provide a mechanism for people to express their allegiance to an organization or to a movement without requiring common belief. . . . Solidarity is produced by people acting together, not by people thinking together."¹⁵ Just so, Carpenter and Bicknell depict men whose presence together dramatizes common identification with the nation and mutes conflicting beliefs about how it should be preserved. Lincoln, the object around and through which this unity becomes manifest, thus achieves a symbolic status that transcends his individual actions and powers.¹⁶

Bicknell's painting shares the formality and disregard



93. Thomas Pritchard Rossiter. *Signing the Constitution of the United States*. 1867. 24½ x 48¾" (60.6 x 121.9 cm.). Fraunces Tavern Museum, New York.



94. Albion Harris Bicknell. *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. 1879. 108 x 216" (274.3 x 548.6 cm.). Malden Public Library, Malden, Massachusetts.



96. Dennis Malone Carter. *Lincoln Greeting the Heroes of War*. ca 1865. 34 x 47" (85.0 x 117.5 cm.). The Hendershott Collection

for Lincoln's "human side" that characterize Marchant's and Carpenter's depictions—as well as, for that matter, almost all popular history painting executed in the late 1860s. But, if any president seemed human and informal, it was Lincoln. He was the people's president, his plebeian background the distinguishing mark of his public identity. That artists preferred images of him in the grand style of history painting, then, is traceable not to Lincoln's personal qualities but to the prolonged Civil War over which he presided. War is one of the traditional subjects of the grand style. As wartime painters felt their own energies and political passions aroused, however, they attributed to Lincoln powers and virtues that exceeded what he in fact possessed.¹⁷ The idealistic cast of their grand-style portrayals of Lincoln was thus accentuated.

Victory

The paintings of Marchant, Carpenter, and Bicknell describe events that occurred early in 1863 when the North's military fortunes and Lincoln's popularity were at low ebb. Nevertheless, they enhance Lincoln by representing the dignity of his office, the importance of his deeds, and the vast diversity of the nation he sought to unify. Emanuel Leutze's 1865 portrait of Lincoln (plate 95) reaffirmed and magnified these qualities. Commemorating the second inauguration in March 1865, Leutze de-

scribed a dominating, stately Lincoln standing in front of the Capitol with his hand on the Bible and U.S. Constitution. In the remote background, a large and diversified crowd listens to the great leader's address.

George P. A. Healy and Dennis Malone Carter depicted events that occurred in April 1865, the last month of the conflict. But because they were painted well after the war was over, their works add new qualities to Lincoln's historic identity. Healy superimposed the image of Lincoln as conqueror upon the image of Lincoln as emancipator and consoler. Completed in 1868, his painting (plate 97) is a composite of separate portraits, the oldest of which represented Lincoln during his first year in office. The presidential virtue Healy wished to stress was not sternness but magnanimity, as his choice of title—*The Peacemakers*, as opposed to "The Victors" or "Conquerors of the Rebellion"—indicates. Healy depicted Lincoln in the midst of a shipboard conference at City Point, Virginia. General Ulysses S. Grant sits on Lincoln's right, General William T. Sherman before him, and Admiral David Porter on his left. A profound serenity radiates from Lincoln's face and permeates the scene. With legs crossed and head resting in hand, he calmly looks at Sherman as the general leans forward to make his point. Lincoln is shown as he prepares to command his officers to give the enemy the mildest possible surrender terms.¹⁸

When Sherman set these terms before Joseph Johnston and his North Carolina army, Republican leaders

publicly rebuked him because of their burning resentment toward the South and their objection to Lincoln's magnanimous proposal.¹⁹ But sympathetic viewers knew little about this detail and probably would have cared even less. They saw what they wanted to remember—the victorious commander's kindness to his enemy—a trait that by 1868, notwithstanding the retributive aspects of Reconstruction, had already begun to lose the negative associations it had in 1865.

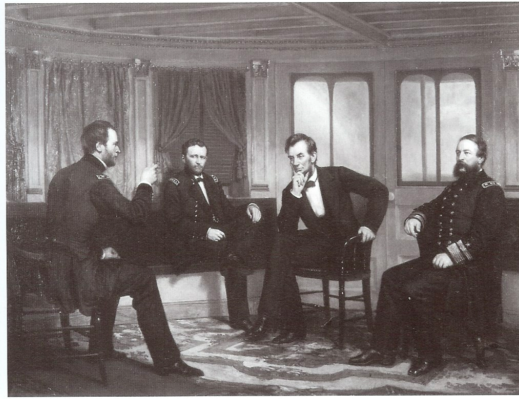
Yet even in 1865 there were indications that Lincoln's "gentle conqueror" image would enhance his reputation. Local reactions to his entering Richmond is a case in point. "Never in the history of the world," according to Lincoln's secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay, "did the head of a mighty nation and the conqueror of a great rebellion enter the captured chief city of the insurgents with such humbleness and simplicity."²⁰ Carter's *Lincoln's Drive through Richmond* (plate 98) sets this scene on canvas. Carter began this painting after completing another representation of Union triumph: *Lincoln Greeting the Heroes of War* (plate 96), in which Victory introduces Lincoln, the commander-in-chief, to Grant and Sherman. In *Drive through Richmond*, however, Lincoln is the war's hero, and he alone dominates the viewer's attention. Lincoln is accompanied by Admiral Porter and a military escort, but he looks more like Christ entering Jerusalem than Caesar entering Rome. Light emanates from his figure, bathing even the admirers who approach him. The picture vibrates with the excitement and movement of the crowd. Hats are tossed in the air. The older bid the young, as do parents their chil-

dren, to look upon the great man. A baby is held up to Lincoln by her father, as if to be blessed. The painting shows no aged people, and its foreground is composed almost entirely of children. A new era is evidently in the making. Still, the old endures: two unsmiling women at the right, loyal to the defeated Confederacy, with eyes ahead and backs to Lincoln, afford the sinister contrast. They distinguish themselves from the joyful assemblage by leaving it.

Carter was in New York when Richmond fell and probably learned about Lincoln's visit from eyewitness correspondents. His painting seems to reproduce the *Boston Journal's* account:

No written page or illuminated canvas can give the reality of the event—the enthusiastic bearing of the people—the blacks and poor whites who have suffered untold horrors during the war, their demonstrations of pleasure, the shouting, dancing, the thanksgivings to God, the mention of the name of Jesus—as if President Lincoln were next to the Son of God in their affections—the jubilant cries, the countenances beaming with unspeakable joy, the tossing up of caps, the swinging of arms of a motley crowd—some in rags, some barefoot . . . yet of stately bearing.²¹

Two thirds of these spectators, the correspondent estimated, were blacks; one third, whites.²² Carter reversed these percentages in his painting, possibly after learning from the *New York Times* that were it not for the army's ordering white people "to remain within their homes quietly for a few days, without doubt there would have been a large addition to the numbers present."²³ Carter



97. George P. A. Healy. *The Peacemakers*. 1868. 47½ x 62½" (119.7 x 159.1 cm.). The White House Historical Association, Washington, D. C.; photograph by the National Geographic Society



98. Dennis Malone Carter. *Lincoln's Drive through Richmond*. 1866. 45 x 68" (114.3 x 172.7 cm.). Chicago Historical Society.



99. John Bachelder and Alonzo Chappel. *The Last Hours of Abraham Lincoln*. 1865–1868. 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (64.0 x 108.7 cm.). McLellan Lincoln Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.



may have described Richmond's reception of Lincoln as it would have been if all citizens were allowed to express their true feelings. However, he may have meant his painting to be a moral lesson rather than a counterfactual statement, an account of Richmond's reception of Lincoln as he thought it should have been—or would have been if that city's residents were inspired by the correct moral sentiments (comparable, in all probability, to his own).

The liberation of white as well as black southerners enlarged Lincoln's historical role. Paradoxically, however, the spectacle of white Richmond celebrating Lincoln's arrival must have confirmed the widespread northern belief that his peace terms were too lenient, a cruel insult to the hundreds of thousands of men who died at his command. The white Confederate sympathizer who shot Lincoln to death confounded the irony.

Martyrdom

Lincoln's assassination led to great rites of national mourning and enhanced his stature.²⁴ National mourning is not the spontaneous expression of personal emotions; it is a duty imposed by the community. History painters had therefore always portrayed the death of a leader as a public rather than private event. Their intention, as sociologist Emile Durkheim would have put it, was to remind viewers "of the blow which has fallen upon society and diminished it."²⁵ In West's *Death of General Wolfe* (plate 17), officers and men dutifully mourn their dying leader in the very heat of battle, while Copley's *Death of the Earl of Chatbam* (plate 22) shows

members of a startled House of Lords surrounding their fallen colleague in stately sorrow. Presidential deathbed scenes, on the other hand, include family members as well as official representatives and show more clearly the distinction between personal and obligatory grief. Given the trauma of assassination, the Lincoln paintings exemplify this genre in dramatic terms.

Alonzo Chappel's *Last Hours of Abraham Lincoln* (plate 99) is the most prominent painting of the Lincoln death vigil. The scene is a room in the Peterson house, located across the street from Ford's Theater. New York publisher John Bachelder had commissioned Chappel to paint a view of the deathbed scene that placed more emphasis on symbolic than historiographic accuracy. The room in which Lincoln died measured ten by fifteen feet and could comfortably accommodate only a few people, but Bachelder wished to bring together in one painting everyone who had visited Lincoln after he had been shot. This artistic license changes the painting's essential quality: it transforms a simple bedroom into a room of state and creates a ritual atmosphere that gives great dignity to Lincoln's last hours. Even the eight physicians are dispersed among the assemblage, paying respects to Lincoln rather than treating him.

Chappel's rendering of the scene's ritual character conformed to protocol specifying who is to be at the side of an injured or dying president. Navy Secretary Welles knew how the rules applied to him: they compelled him "to attend the President immediately."²⁶ Stanton, according to Welles's diary, felt the same way, as apparently did the six other cabinet secretaries and assistants and the fifteen military officers who also appear in the painting.

The Last Hours, advertised as the “Golgotha of American History,” is probably among the most ambitious deathbed paintings ever produced. As soon as Lincoln’s remains were taken from Washington, Bachelder contacted everyone who visited Lincoln on his deathbed at the Peterson house (including Robert Todd Lincoln) and photographed them in the position they would occupy in the painting. Bachelder then arranged the forty-seven figures (seven less than the actual number of people who came to see the dying president) and had Chappel set them to canvas.²⁷ By 1869 the job was done, and prints (accompanied by a key to identify the painting’s subjects) were advertised.

Lincoln is placed exactly at the center of the painting. The candle behind his head cannot account for the shadowless illumination of his face and pillow. Lincoln is the source of his own illumination, and in the expanding glow the tension between devastating private grief and obligatory public mourning resolves itself. Robert, the president’s son, with handkerchief in his right hand and head lowered, stands in the foreground while his mother Mary lays her head upon her dying husband’s breast. Family friend Senator Charles Sumner stands behind Lincoln, just to the right of his head, at the painting’s center. Four women are present, each placed in the front row of visitors. Clara Harris, the New York senator’s daughter who accompanied the Lincolns to the theater, stands alone just behind Robert. (Her escort and fiancé, Major Henry R. Rathbone, is in the company of his colleagues on the other side of the room.) The wife of Senator James Dixon sits at the bed beside her friend Mary, while Mrs. Dixon’s sister and niece attend with handkerchiefs in their hands at the right. Thus, three of the four women are linked directly or indirectly to the president’s wife; the fourth, Miss Harris, separated from her escort, must share with the other women a private rather than public role. A kind of symbolic division of labor emerges: men mourn the president; women, the husband and father.

Public interest, however, supersedes private calamity. Already, Secretary Stanton is attending to state affairs: he stands at right with pad and pencil giving orders to General Auger, the District of Columbia commander. Vice President Andrew Johnson appears on the left, the chair on which he is seated an obvious reference to the powers he is about to assume. Reverend Dr. Gurley, congressional chaplain (pictured behind Robert) and Judge Carter, Chief Justice of the District of Columbia, in the extreme right foreground, stand by.²⁸ Everyone is self-possessed, but the sheer density of the scene gives the impression of selfless solidarity. *The Last Hours of Abraham Lincoln* is a symbolic drama in which scores of people known to differ with each other on every conceivable issue close ranks around their dying leader. In the portrayal of death, as in the portrayals of the Eman-

ipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg Address, the history painting’s ritual dimensions and formal style define its objective—not factual recording but epic dedication and apotheosis.

History paintings did not cause Lincoln’s apotheosis, but they helped greatly to convey it. General Sherman and Admiral Farragut, not Edward Marchant and Francis Carpenter, assured his 1864 reelection. General Grant, not Dennis Carter, enabled him to enter Richmond victoriously. History painters could not necessarily persuade Lincoln’s critics that his presidency was a success, but they could articulate his supporters’ desire for success. They could produce visual interpretations of Lincoln that made success seem natural, even attributable, to him, and in so doing their works helped make him a national emblem.

Rediscovering the Man of the People

Although many of Lincoln’s contemporaries were happy to see him removed from the political scene, assassination greatly increased his stature. The reputation of no pre-Civil War American public figure, in fact, had been elevated so far in so short a time. In the last third of the nineteenth century, Lincoln’s reputation became even more secure. In the early years of the twentieth century, however, it surged and surpassed Washington’s.²⁹ The 1909 centennial of Lincoln’s birth precipitated this development, but its deeper causes lay in changes wrought by the industrial revolution.

By the 1890s, as historian Henry Steele Commager observed, industrial development, population growth, and the rise of cities led the American people to a watershed—a widespread realization of the obsolescence of many political and economic traditions. During the ensuing Progressive Era (1900–1920), economic and political reforms extended the rights of common people.³⁰ Correspondingly, Lincoln’s commonness, infrequently celebrated in nineteenth-century visual art but central to the period’s idea of the man, took on an almost militant meaning. In 1860 Lincoln’s campaign managers invoked symbols of his humble background, including the log cabin and ax, in their effort to persuade people to identify with and vote for him. Fifty years later, Progressive reformers seized upon these same symbols in their struggle to redistribute political and economic power. Lincoln centennial speakers pointed out that “The Great Commoner” would oppose child labor and the exploitation of adult labor. They claimed he would recognize that “socialism is the new slavery” but would say the same about “corporations that break the laws with insolence and impunity.” Lincoln was a natural “labor leader” who recognized both the legitimacy of property and the essential rights of the working man.

In the end, it was less important to know what Progressive measures Lincoln would have supported than to know what traits of character, what virtues, that support would reveal. Hence the endless public reminiscences of Lincoln's simplicity and unpretentiousness, his merciful attitude toward condemned soldiers, his magnanimity toward defeated political and military opponents, his accessibility and responsiveness to people without influence and power, his profound sympathy for the casualties of war and their aggrieved families. Each reminiscence depicts the blurring of hierarchical distinction; each depicts the common man in interaction and close moral affinity with the state. Lincoln's character and life on the one hand, Progressive Era political and economic reforms on the other, were thus seen to be infused with the same egalitarian principle, such that the invocation of one invariably brought to mind the other. New Lincoln paintings effectively visualized the connection.

The Reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln

Before the twentieth century, artistic conceptions lagged behind the widely held, popular conceptions of Lincoln's commonness. It was not that nineteenth-century painters who wished to represent Lincoln's ordinary side lacked imaginative models. In 1860 David Gilmour Blythe produced *Abraham Lincoln, Rail Splitter*, showing the president-elect standing with an ax and maul over a split log, his jug and lawbook lying nearby, his baggy pants held up by a single strap. In 1865, after Lincoln's death, printmakers brought out a series of Lincoln family scenes, revealing a part of his private life never depicted before. Later, in 1868, Eastman Johnson completed his *Boyhood of Lincoln* (plate 100), showing the nation's savior as a youngster seated with book in hand before a glowing fire. Johnson's depiction, in the words of art historian Patricia Hills, "brought history painting in America to the intimate and humanizing scale of genre."³¹ The trauma of war and its aftermath, however, eclipsed this imagery and made the grand style more appropriate.

When early twentieth-century illustrators again emphasized Lincoln's humanity, the public was receptive. Howard Pyle's 1907 *Harper's Monthly* depiction of Lincoln seated at his presidential desk, deep in thought and peeling an apple, represents the best of many genre-fied magazine and book portrayals.³² But nothing captured Lincoln's common side more effectively than Jean Leon Jerome Ferris's history paintings. In a reform-conscious environment, Ferris brought to democracy's egalitarian dimension an iconic vividness it had never before possessed. He brought the ideal of equality down to eye level. A keen sense of the order of face-to-face encounters and a gift for finding the power relations of society

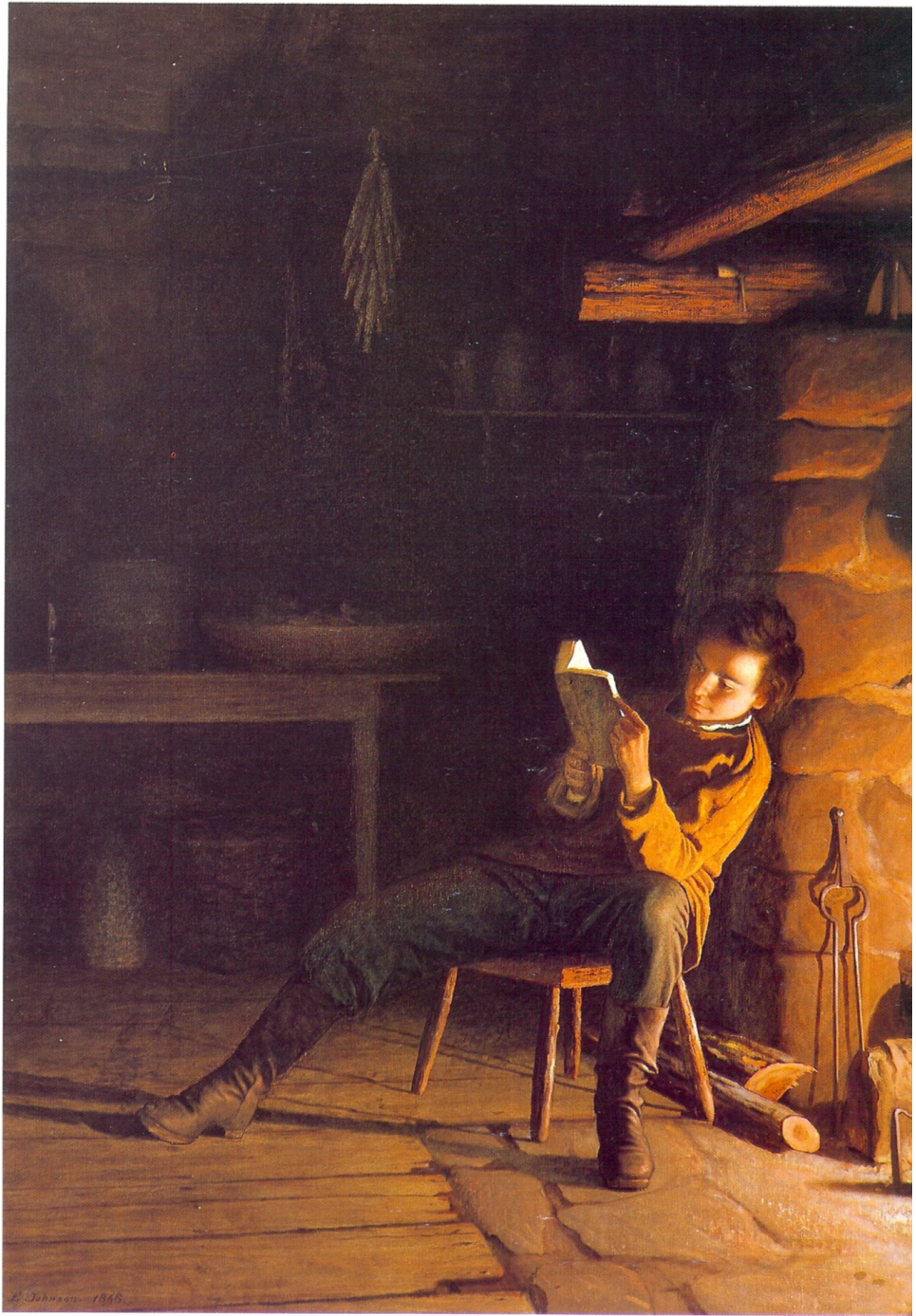
in the subtle gestures of everyday life are evident in each of Ferris's works. Combining sociological perceptiveness and artistic talent, his work suited the era's taste for both strong leadership and equality. Ferris's aim was not to elevate Lincoln's commonness but to humanize his greatness.

Lincoln and the Contrabands, 1863 (plate 101), although lacking in factual foundation, is typical of Ferris's work. Runaway slaves designated "contraband of war" and entitled to state protection encounter the president. The purpose of the meeting is unclear, but the petitioners are evidently in transit (a valise lies in the lower foreground): some are disheartened (including the woman with head in hand sitting behind the guard); others are eager to talk (especially the elderly man whom the guard restrains). Lincoln has been promenading in the company of two finely dressed ladies, but he allows himself to be interrupted. A young mother with children sustains his attention while his companions wait. The older child fearfully grasps his mother's apron, but the president wants to get close. He removes his hat out of respect, stands beside the poor woman, and affectionately places his left hand on her younger child's shoulder. Physical closeness, Ferris is saying, affirms equality in God's sight. *The Contrabands* thus differs from nineteenth-century sculptors' and printmakers' images of liberated bondsmen bowing and scraping to Lincoln in gratitude. Ferris's counterparts are polite, not slavish.

Lincoln's Last Official Act, 1865 (plate 102) extends the president's kindness from former slaves to condemned soldiers. As the popular media printed countless anecdotes about the tenderhearted president saving young men from firing squads, the believing public must have welcomed Ferris's painting. Lincoln was in fact inclined toward leniency, but he approved most of the hundreds of death sentences imposed on Union deserters during the war. Having no time to investigate details, he was likely to revoke a death warrant only as a political favor or when a case was brought to his attention by a political friend.

Ferris, however, shows Lincoln petitioned by a condemned man's wife. No account of Lincoln's last day in office mentions this meeting, but the painting condenses similar scenes known to have taken place previously. With head in handkerchiefed hand, Ferris's petitioner inclines in gratitude toward the president, who holds an order that will prevent her husband's execution. He does his good deed at an inconvenient time. The desk is covered with papers, the floor strewn with office debris. Behind the guard at his office door await others with pressing business. Still, the president finds time to convert a young wife's grief to joy.

The politically resonant aspect of the painting is its subjects' physical proximity. A powerless petitioner sits



100. Eastman Johnson. *Boyhood of Lincoln*. 1868. 46 x 37" (116.8 x 94 cm.).
The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor; bequest of Henry C. Lewis.



101. Jean Leon Gerome Ferris. *Lincoln and the Contrabands*, 1863, ca. 1921. 24 x 35" (61.0 x 88.9 cm.). Archives of 76, Cleveland, Ohio.

on the president's own chair (presumably by his invitation) and rests her arms on his desk. Her mobile left hand pivots on the elbow, seeking the president, wanting to touch him. Lincoln leans compliantly toward the grateful woman and places his hand upon her head, more aware of her anguish than of her husband's offense. This is not only a ruler but also a friend. *Lincoln's Last Official Act* is the epitome of early twentieth-century history painting—affirming hierarchy by reducing it to genre.

Continuities in the Making of an Epic Hero

A stronger dose of egalitarianism was required to democratize Lincoln's pictorial image than was needed to democratize his biographical and poetic images. The human side of Lincoln was not widely articulated in visual art until the Progressive Era, when the nation's democratic ideals and expectations reached a critical threshold of development. Yet, the same national crisis that promoted grand-style history painting in the early 1860s was present, on a lesser but still intense scale, in the early twentieth century. Out of the excitement of the Spanish-American War and the suffering of World War I, the United States emerged as a global force needing a grandly styled Lincoln to symbolize its expanding power as well as a genrefied Lincoln to symbolize its expanding democracy.

Ferris had recognized this dual need in *Lincoln at In-*

dependence Hall, 1861, which he completed along with *The Rail Splitter* in 1908. The Independence Hall painting shows Lincoln delivering a Washington's Birthday speech in Philadelphia, where he had stopped on his way from Springfield to assume the presidency. In the address, Lincoln publicly defied a plot to kill him the next night as he passed through Baltimore. Rather than surrender the principle of equality for all citizens, he declared, "I would rather be assassinated on this spot." Ferris showed Lincoln having finished the speech. Lincoln steps to the flag and grasps its cord in his right hand; just before he raises it, he points dramatically with his left hand toward the sky. The flag itself is a curtain that sets Lincoln in front of the platform's other occupants, and the minutely drawn audience exaggerates his prominence.

An equally ennobling Lincoln painting, designed in an attenuated grand style, is Robert Marshall Root's *Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Charleston* (plate 103). The content of the debate, from a late twentieth-century standpoint, was anything but ennobling. It began on the issue of race, with each candidate trying to assure the audience of his contempt for black people.³⁵ Slavery, Lincoln explained, was wrong, but that did not mean social equality was right. He had never been in favor "of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people."³⁶ In Root's painting, Lincoln strikes a Bicknell-type epic pose as he speaks. He stands at the picture's center, his right hand resting on a table (as in a state portrait), his left gesticu-

lating to emphasize his belief in white supremacy. On Lincoln's right side sits his opponent, Douglas; behind Lincoln sit local and state dignitaries whose likenesses Root copied from photographs. Root's grand style is violated, however, by his conspicuous incorporation of spectators, including distracted mothers and children—an unmistakable mark of genrefication.³⁵ But the occasion, not Lincoln himself, is genrefied. Lincoln remains a man above the people rather than a man of the people.

A Cumulative Vision

The traits most celebrated in great leaders reflect the main premises of their culture. The dual premises of American culture have always placed limits on the kind of man that could be made of Lincoln. Great and powerful nations cannot be represented by common, weak leaders. Democratic nations cannot be represented by remote, elitist leaders. The Lincoln image has for these reasons pulled in two opposite directions: toward stateliness, authority, and dignity on the one hand, and toward plainness, familiarity, and homeliness on the other. These two sides of the Lincoln image express two fundamental cultural themes—the egalitarian theme, rooted in the Jefferson-Jackson traditions, and the hierarchical theme, rooted in the Federalist and antebellum Whig traditions.³⁶ Lincoln personified both themes, the egalitarian and the hierarchical, from the very moment he was elected to the presidency, but these themes have informed his pictorial images unevenly. Lincoln images of the Civil War era were made largely of hierarchical stuff; images of the Progressive Era were more egalitarian and elaborately humanized. The pictorial past is thus constantly restructured in order to legitimize present interests and articulate present values.

In one sense, painters' depictions of Lincoln differed little from their depictions of other public men before his time. No one mistook George Washington for Lincoln, but state portrait and history painters followed similar conventions in their depictions of both leaders. In another sense, however, Lincoln was a unique subject. Washington was already an epic, godlike hero when American artists took him as their subject. As the years passed, the artists' problem was to show Washington to be like ordinary men. In contrast, Lincoln began as an ordinary man, and the task for artists of his own and later time was to make him godlike. And it was always a difficult task. To make Lincoln an epic hero during his own lifetime, painters worked against, not with, public opinion; to make him a folk hero in more recent times, painters risked obscuring his epic achievements.

Continuities in the artists' image of Lincoln center on his greatness, while the public image of Lincoln has always emphasized common traits. During the early twen-

tieth century, the depictions of Lincoln's epic qualities became unnatural and forced—almost as if artists doubted their authenticity. No other historical figure presented artists with such a problem. Ferris made many paintings of George Washington enacting domestic roles in order to reduce the remoteness associated with his great stature. Lincoln, on the other hand, already seemed earthy and plain. Concerned that humanizing Lincoln would diminish him, Ferris preferred to show him acting within a presidential role. When Ferris treated him in the grand style (*Lincoln at Independence Hall*), he grossly exaggerated Lincoln's physical stature relative to his audience's. Root's portrait showing Lincoln's dignified oratorical pose also appears inflated, at least beside Bicknell's similar composition.

Lincoln's uniqueness as a problematic subject of art mirrors his singularity as a man and a president. No other historical figure brings into such balance the common and sublime, the low and high, the egalitarian and hierarchical ideals of American culture. History painters did not create this dualism, but they have played a major role in preserving it. To have maintained it for so long, despite rapid and pervasive changes in social structure and artistic taste, may be their most notable contribution to the Lincoln legacy.



102. Jean Leon Gerome Ferris. *Lincoln's Last Official Act, 1865*. ca. 1912. 35 x 28" (88.9 x 71.1 cm.). Archives of 76, Cleveland, Ohio.



103. Robert Marshall Root. *The Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Charleston*. 1918. 20 x 60" (50.8 x 152.4 cm.). Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield.

