14: Leonard Wells Volk *Life Mask and Hands of Abraham Lincoln* (1860/1886)

Grant Holcomb

"Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of these United States, is everlasting in the memory of his countrymen." So notes composer Aaron Copland in the narration to his acclaimed composition "Lincoln Portrait" (1942). Indeed, for many, Lincoln remains the quintessential American hero who, born and raised in the most humble of circumstances, became a prairie lawyer, president, Great Emancipator, and martyr. Beloved by generations of Americans, his life and legacy remain a deep and enduring presence upon the national memory. He was Walt Whitman's "powerful, western, fallen star!"[1] and, for over 150 years, American artists (painters, poets, sculptors, and composers) have been captivated by this "common man whom no other man resembles."[2]

The artistic reputation of Leonard Wells Volk rests primarily on his sculptural portraits of Abraham Lincoln. His 1860 life casts of Lincoln's face and hands earned him immediate and enduring fame, as most, if not all, later sculptors used his casts while trying to capture the Lincoln likeness.

Born in Wellstown (now Wells), New York, Volk's early interest in sculpture began in his father's marble-cutting workshop in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. As a young man, he established studios in Buffalo, St. Louis, and Galena, Illinois, before traveling to Italy in 1855 in order to study, first-hand, the masterpieces of ancient and Renaissance sculpture. Upon his return two years later, he set up a studio in Chicago where he established himself as a sculptor and a prominent figure in the city's art community. In fact, he was one of the founders of the Chicago Academy of Design (later the Art Institute of Chicago) and served as its president for eight years.

Volk first met Lincoln in Chicago in 1858 when the Springfield attorney and aspiring Republican candidate to the United States Senate was debating Stephen A. Douglas, "The Little Giant," throughout the state of Illinois. Always in search of new models (especially of rising politicians), Volk asked Lincoln if he would pose for him sometime in the future. An accommodating Lincoln agreed and, two years later, was reminded of the conversation when he found himself back in Chicago serving as counsel for the defense in a land-dispute case. Lincoln kept his promise and, after breakfast on the morning of March 31, 1860, walked to the artist's studio to pose. Volk remembered a man with a rugged face, a broad and pleasant smile, and a memorable sense of humor.[3]

In an 1881 article describing the making of the first portrait bust of Lincoln, Volk notes that "He sat naturally in the chair and saw every move I made in a mirror opposite...."[4] After cutting holes for the eyes and placing quills in the nostrils that enabled Lincoln to breathe, Volk applied the plaster mold and, after one hour, removed it from Lincoln's face. "It clung pretty hard," he recalled, but Lincoln "bent his head low and took hold of the mold, and gradually worked it off...; it hurt a little, as a few hairs of the tender temples pulled out with the plaster and made his eyes water."[5] The sitter found the experience disagreeable and, when the plaster began to harden on his face, even frightening. But after a positive image of the face was made by pouring liquid plaster into the mold, Lincoln could declare, "There is the animal himself."[6] And Lincoln's friends agreed. For example, John Hay (later Lincoln's private secretary in the White House), described the portrait as "a face full of life, of energy, of vivid aspiration."[7]

Whether due to serendipity, good timing, or keen ambition, Volk found himself in Springfield shortly after Lincoln received word that he had been nominated the Republican candidate for President. "I went straight to Mr. Lincoln's unpretentious little two-story house," Volk wrote. "His face looked

radiant. I exclaimed: 'I am the first man from Chicago, I believe, to have the honor of congratulating you on your nomination for President.' Then those two great hands took both of mine with a grasp never to be forgotten."[8]

Leonard Wells Volk,
1828–1895
Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, Washington Square Park, Rochester, NY, dedicated 1892
Photograph from the Albert R. Stone Negative Collection, Rochester Museum & Science Center, Rochester, New York

Volk had envisioned a full-size statue of Lincoln and, as such, wanted to have casts of his hands as well as his face. Lincoln obliged and, the day following Volk's arrival, sat for the artist once again. When Volk asked him to hold a round stick in his right hand (which was swollen, Volk noticed, "on account of excessive hand-shaking the evening before"), Lincoln went to the wood-shed, fetched the sawn-off handle of the family broom, and began to whittle it. "I remarked to him that he need not whittle off the edges. 'Oh, well,' said he, 'I thought I would like to have it nice.'"[9] (Mary Lincoln was apparently not pleased with Lincoln's solution.) Volk then proceeded to cast the left hand while hearing Lincoln tell the story of the scar on his thumb: "You have heard that they call me a railsplitter," he said, "Well, it is true that I did split rails, and one day while I was sharpening a wedge on a log, the axe glanced and nearly took my thumb off, and there is the scar, you see."[10]

The cast hands have a startling emotional power. In their simple rough realism—the scar, the fierce grip of the swollen right hand, the prominent veins, the bony knuckles—we are looking, after all, at the "actual" hands that swung the axe and would, in the next few years of their life, write the Gettysburg Address and sign the Emancipation Proclamation. In their intensely physical actuality they embody, here and now, much of our diffuse feelings for this complicated man.

Many artists have used the Volk casts in their monuments of Abraham Lincoln, from Augustus Saint-Gaudens's acclaimed *Standing Lincoln* in Chicago (1887), to George Grey Barnard's portrait bust (ca. 1918; see essay 46 in this volume), to Daniel Chester French's heroic *Lincoln Monument* in Washington, D.C. (1922). African American painter Hale Woodruff seems to have been influenced by the bronze casts in his depiction of Lincoln's clenched hands in his 1942-43 mural study, *Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln Discussing Emancipation*.[11] Volk himself used them to create his monumental tribute to Lincoln in Washington Square in Rochester, New York. Standing nine feet tall atop a forty-three foot high column, Lincoln faces north with a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation in his right hand. Below, four bronze figures represent the branches of the military; on the base, bronze plaques depict significant Civil War battles and events. Over one hundred thousand people attended the unveiling of the sculpture on Memorial Day, 1892. On hand with the artist and his wife were President Benjamin Harrison, Frederick Douglass, and New York State Governor Preston Flowers.

Hale Woodruff, 1900–1980
Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln Discussing Emancipation, 1942–43,
Tempera on masonite,
11¼ x 11 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 2002.20
©Estate of Hale Woodruff/ Elnora, Inc., Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York

Over the next quarter-century Volk's original plaster casts passed from Volk to his son Douglas, and then into the care of a fellow artist, Wyatt Eaton, before the renowned sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens saw them and recognized their historic and artistic significance.[12] Saint-Gaudens and his friend Richard Watson Gilder then set out to raise money to have bronze replicas made and sold in order that the originals could be acquired by the Smithsonian Institution, where they reside (in the Museum of American History) today. The Memorial Art Gallery's bronzes apparently date from this 1886 venture. From that time forward, innumerable artists, known and unknown, have utilized the bronze casts in order to capture the spirit as well as the likeness of Abraham Lincoln. "To gaze upon his face," one sculptor wrote, "is like beholding the grandeur of a rugged mountain."[13]

(Facing page)
Leonard Wells Volk,
1828–1895
Life Mask and Hands of Abraham Lincoln, 1860/1886
Bronze, 9¾ x 8⅛ x 5⅝ in.
Gift of Thomas and Marion Hawks, by exchange, 98.37.1-2a-b

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