



46: George Grey Barnard *Abraham Lincoln* (ca. 1918)

Grant Holcomb

George Grey Barnard was one of the many American artists directly influenced by the work of Leonard Volk. He referred to Volk's cast of Lincoln as "the most wonderful face left to us"¹ and, indeed, felt "there was enough in [the casts] to make a human religion."² Lincoln, in fact, became both artistic and religious icon for Barnard. "This face," he proclaimed, "is infinitely nearer an expression of our Christ character than all the conventional pictures of the 'Son of God.'"³ Barnard's many portraits of Lincoln, two of which are entitled "Lincoln as Christ," reflect the profound impression that Lincoln's life made on the artist.

Barnard was born the son of a minister in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, and spent his early years living in the Midwest, primarily in Kankakee, Illinois. At the age of seventeen, he moved to Chicago and enrolled in evening classes at the Chicago Academy of Design. Here he first met and studied with Leonard Volk, founder of the Academy, and Leonard's son Douglas. Thanks to a commission he received while studying in Chicago, he was able to travel to Paris in 1883 and study at the École des Beaux-Arts. Indeed, he would spend twenty of the next twenty-eight years working and studying in Paris (1883–1894 and 1902–1911) where he produced many of his most monumental works. These include *Struggle of the Two Natures of Man* (1894, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), *The Great God Pan* (1899, Columbia University) and the heroic grouping of figures *Love and Labor: The Unbroken Law* (1910, Pennsylvania State Capitol, Harrisburg)—until that time, the largest commission ever received in the U.S.⁴ All reflect the artist's mastery of materials (especially marble) and his proficient training in classical sculpture.⁵

Upon his return to New York City, he began to focus his lifelong interest, one might say his obsession, on the life and the legacy of Abraham Lincoln. In 1912, former United States President William Howard Taft commissioned Barnard to create a monumental bronze sculpture of Lincoln for the citizens of Cincinnati, Ohio. Barnard sought to capture a "Lincoln of the People," or, in his words, "the mighty man who grew from our soil and the hardships of the earth."⁶ When unveiled in 1917, it met with scathing derision and ridicule. If the public referred to it as "The Tramp with the Colic" or "The Stomach Ache Statue," most damning of all was the criticism by Lincoln's eldest son Robert who, in a letter to Taft, called the sculpture "a monstrous figure which is grotesque as a likeness of President Lincoln and defamatory as an effigy."⁷

Barnard was undeterred by such criticism and continued to create many portrait busts of the martyred president. The majority range in size from approximately eighteen inches to a colossal fifteen-foot high bust. Together, they depict a variety of "Lincolns" from the clean shaven to bearded, youth to adulthood, and melancholy to romantic. The Memorial Art Gallery bust is part of this series and evokes, much like its counterpart at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a contemplative young man with smooth face and full sensuous lips, the hair massed and tousled, and the base pitted and textured. The series of marble and plaster busts reflects the artist's abiding interest in discovering the many aspects of Lincoln's personality whether serious or comic, romantic or spiritual. Barnard truly "sought the secret of his face,"⁸ which he described as "the triumph of God through man and of man through God....Lincoln, the song of democracy written by God."⁹

George Grey Barnard,

1863–1938

Abraham Lincoln, ca. 1918

Marble, 21 x 11⁷/₈ x 14¹/₈ in.

Marion Stratton Gould Fund,

86.5

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