

## SCULPTURE AND PUBLIC HISTORY:

### *My Summer With Lincoln*

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This story began many years ago when I was a young child. At that time my family lived in Silver Spring, Maryland and we used to make numerous excursions to the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (a two-mile stretch of green space and associated national memorials between the U.S. Capitol Building and the Lincoln Memorial and considered by most to be the most sacred soil of the country). I have some vivid memories of those jaunts and I think that the Mall was, in a way, one of my childhood playgrounds. But there is one visit that stands out among all the others. One summer night in the early 1960s my family went to hear the United States Marine Band play along the banks of the Potomac River. In my mind's eye, I can still see the water shimmering on the Potomac and remember the white outdoor shell under which the band played. As part of that evening we visited **Daniel Chester French's** sculpture of *Abraham Lincoln*, seated inside the grand space designed by architect **Henry Bacon**. My father remembers that, as he carried me down the long steps of the *Lincoln Memorial*, I looked back over my shoulder and waved, saying, "Bye-Bye Lincoln." I think it is fitting that, all these years later, somehow my path again crosses that of monumental Mr. Lincoln.



Jim Percoco

We now move to 1964. I am a bit older and in Catholic grade school in New York. It is pre-Vatican II (the sweeping reforms instituted in the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1960s), and my school and our church are replete with statuary. There is one statue that is ubiquitous in all the books I read and in many posters hung by the Sisters of Charity on the walls of the classrooms – **Michelangelo's Pietá**. When the New York World's Fair opened in 1964 and the Vatican announced plans to open a pavilion that would display the *Pietá*, I was overjoyed. On my first visit to the World's Fair I insisted that the first site we visit must be the Vatican Pavilion. I can still recall, quite vividly, being on the moving walkway that carried visitors into a midnight blue room, with twinkling white lights, and being swept

away by the beauty of Michelangelo's marble masterpiece. I rode that walkway many times, just to see, again and again, that masterpiece. In 1972 when a disturbed visitor to the Vatican took a hammer to the *Pietá*, I grieved.

It is safe to say that these two anecdotes meant that sculpture, particularly monumental sculpture, would play a role in my life. In the intervening years when I visited battlefields, monuments always grabbed my attention. Even one night in the late 1960s, in Boston, passing **Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial**, then streaked with a green corrosion and stained patina, the bronze **Robert Gould Shaw** and his soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th Infantry silently spoke to me. At that moment I had a sense that sculpture and my life were meant to be entwined.

Since 1988 I have presented many public sculptures as companions in the classroom. I believe they help teachers tell the story of the past. I have no formal training as an art historian, and most of what I have learned has come through a 15-year collaborative working relationship with **Michael Richman**, the editor of the *Daniel Chester French Papers* and a leading free-lance historian and writer on American Public Monuments. In 1989 I received an *Independent Study Summer Fellowship Award* from the **National Endowment for the Humanities** and the **Council for Basic Education**. Richman was my mentor. Over the years he has taught me how to more than appreciate sculpture, and to understand its aesthetics and how these pieces work.

In the summer of 2002, I received the best grant possible, my wife's permission to spend some time on the road and to pull together everything I'd learned since 1989 and apply it in a way that I had never done before. This academic adventure would certainly put a different spin on the age-old September teacher question, "So? What did you do with your summer vacation?"

I will admit that there was more than just an academic aspect to my agenda. I was in deep need of rejuvenation. Living in post-9/11 America, I was beginning to feel, in the classroom, as if my world was being

swamped by popular culture. My students seemed only to be interested in the latest episode of *Survivor* or some other "reality" TV program. Everywhere I turned I saw the faces of an array of celebrities endlessly recounting their shallow lifestyles. The sloppy attire of many male students and the increasingly revealing clothes of many female students made me feel uncomfortable. Language in the school hallway seemed to have sunk to a new low. In preparing my lessons, I felt as if I were being pulled more and more to a crowd that aspired to the lowest common denominator. On top of all this it seemed like the vise-grip of teacher accountability was closing tighter and tighter.

My well was running dry. I longed to find a sense of integrity and I thought *Honest Abe* could help. I somehow wanted to reaffirm my commitment to high ideals by staring squarely into the face of someone who tried to make a nation fulfill its ideals. Rather than sit and read books, I preferred to read the landscape to see what the many Lincoln statues could say to me. And I wanted to find out what others think about Lincoln in America today. This would be my informal survey about Lincoln and American memory. Etched in stone above French's nineteen-foot tall figure of Lincoln are the words of art critic **Royal Cortissoz**, "*In This Temple As In The Hearts Of The People For Whom He Saved The Union The Memory of Abraham Lincoln Is Enshrined Forever.*" In this country, remembering Mr. Lincoln has become almost a cottage industry.

According to a recent survey of the *Inventory of American Sculpture* there are more than 600 memorials to American presidents across the United States; 216 of these outdoor statues and monuments are of Abraham Lincoln. Not surprisingly, there are only three statues of Lincoln in states of the former Confederacy. Ironically, Richmond, Virginia, recently received *Abraham Lincoln* whether they liked it or not. A bronze statue of Lincoln and his son Tad, commemorating their April 1865 visit to the defeated Confederate capitol, was unveiled at the new *National Park Service Visitors Center for Richmond National Battlefield Park*. (The unveiling took place on April 1, 2003, amidst a demonstration against the statue led by some descendants of Confederate veterans who claimed a statue of Lincoln in Richmond was a slap in the face to brave southern boys who died defending their homeland.) Even Alaska and Hawaii have statues of Lincoln. As you can well imagine, there are 41 statues of Lincoln in Illinois, with more planned to be unveiled there between now and 2009, the *Bicentennial of Lincoln's birth*.

Of this large number of Lincoln statues only nine incorporate African American figures as part of the sculptural design or ensemble. This is ironic given that Lincoln is often called the *Great Emancipator*.

So which statues to pick? I decided to frame my visits and learn about Lincoln by plotting his physical and mental growth. I chose statues that are considered outstanding works of art, because I believe that great art inspires—I know it inspires me.



Jim Percoco at Lorado Zadoc Taft's "Lincoln the Lawyer," in Urbana, IL.

I wanted to understand these statues from an artistic and aesthetic perspective, as well as to recognize their value as historical objects that in their own way help us to interpret the past and provide a context to the meaning and place of Lincoln's memory in American culture. I wanted to ask about these statues: *Are these true representations of the real Lincoln, or are they the creative work of various artists and their interpretations of the man, shaping a particular kind of collective national memory?* Here was the heart of my intellectual quest.

Keeping me companion on my journey was **Carl Sandburg's** epic biography of **Lincoln on Books-On-Tape**. During my trip I met and interviewed a variety of people: from tourists who were gathered like pigeons around these sculptures, to Lincoln scholars, including the Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, who bought his first of many Lincoln busts and statues with his lunch money when he was thirteen; from sculptors, to archivists; from souvenir shop owners to a 21st Century Herodotus, a 95-year-old proprietor of a private historical and genealogical society in a small backwater community of southern Illinois. All of these people shared with me their impressions of the 16th President as I continued to form my own view of this most fascinating American.

At the beginning of my adventure I felt a bit like Frank Capra's protagonist Jefferson Smith, the quintessential everyman, in the classic film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. If you recall, Smith, when he first arrives in Washington visits the monuments and ends up at the *Lincoln Memorial*. He is swept away by the grandeur of it all, later telling folks that *Lincoln is bigger than life just waiting for you to come up those stairs*. As we approach the climax in the film a dejected and disillusioned Smith is about to leave Washington rather than fight the "realities of Washington politics." But before he leaves he returns to the *Lincoln Memorial*, and there finds some solace and inspiration. He decides to stay and resolves to take on the corrupt Senators who are running the show in the U.S. Capitol. Perhaps Lincoln would inspire me in the same way.

Why Lincoln? Why not choose George Washington? His character certainly is one that lends itself to inspiration. Why not Thomas Jefferson? Why not look at his writings and take from them some comfort? I chose Lincoln for a variety of reasons.

One reason is that there are photographs of the man. Records indicate that Lincoln posed for close to 140 photographs. Of that number 130 survive for us to study. Even with that visual documentation one of his private secretaries, John Nicolay once said, "*Lincoln's features were the despair of every artist who undertook his portrait ... They put into their pictures the large, rugged features, and strong prominent lines; they made measurements to obtain exact proportions; they 'petrified' some single look, but the picture remained hard and cold. ... Graphic art was powerless before a face that moved through a thousand delicate gradations of line and contour, light and shade, sparkle of the eye and curve of the lip, in the long gamut of expression from grave to gay and back again... to that serious, far-away look with prophetic intuitions beheld the awful panorama of war, and heard the cry of oppression and suffering. There are many pictures of Lincoln; there is no portrait of him.*" I think some sculptors have achieved what portrait canvas artists could not capture.

Most people either love or hate Lincoln. I once gave a workshop at a conference for Virginia Independent Schools on my *Lincoln Legacy Project*. Afterward I was approached by a teacher who was offended by my presentation. He told me that there was no way he could teach about Lincoln as I did because many of his students or their families were members of the *United Daughters of the Confederacy* or the *Sons of Confederate Veterans*. Some African Americans I have spoken to don't necessarily see Lincoln as the *Great Emancipator*, arguing that Lincoln was a racist and used blacks for his own political ends. These thoughts are articulated in the book, **Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream** by Lerone Bennett, a book that created a great stir amongst Lincoln admirers. On another occasion a parent of one of my students took issue with me over Lincoln, claiming that Lincoln was a dictator, usurped the Constitution, and forced federal policies on people who had chosen to

leave the Union. Books among the Lincoln literature have titles such as, **The Lincoln Nobody Knows**, **Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind The Myth**, and **The Lincoln Enigma**, and the range of opinions they represent fascinated me. As Lincoln-biographer **David Herbert Donald** in his book, **Lincoln Reconsidered**, says, "*perhaps the secret of Lincoln's continuing vogue is his essential ambiguity. He can be cited on all sides of all questions.*"

Part of me was attracted to Lincoln's spirituality. He was a man, some argue, who was a skeptic. Although raised in a somewhat Calvinistic Presbyterian faith, as an adult Lincoln adhered to no formal religion – yet wrote and delivered the most spiritual speeches of all our Presidents.

I am hardly alone in being fascinated by Lincoln; he is a popular president. Consider the robotic Lincolns, brought to life by the Walt Disney Company in both California and Orlando, at the "*Mr. Lincoln Show*" and "*The Hall of Presidents*." Why didn't Disney have Franklin Pierce or even Woodrow Wilson speak to us? I wanted to try to un-

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derstand what it is about Lincoln that draws people to him. Is he really the "*soul of America*" as one dedication speaker mused at a Lincoln statue unveiling? Is he the *Great Emancipator*? Is he the *rail-splitter*? The *prairie lawyer* who was also a teller of anecdotes? What about Lincoln's depression? Where does that piece of the puzzle fit? I hoped that by spending the summer with Lincoln's statue images, I could gain some insights into these questions.

### Why Statues?

Historians and biographers get hundreds of pages to tell their stories. The sculptor gets one shot. He or she captures for all time, in one creation, the embodiment of the figure whose story the sculptor is trying to tell. At their best, memorials are instructive and some are much better than others.

Like a good student I did my homework. Before trekking out I immersed myself in several Lincoln biographies. For months, I read almost exclusively Lincoln literature, poring over the various interpretations and perspectives offered by different biographers and historians. **Dan Weinberg**, proprietor of the *Abraham Lincoln Bookshop* in Chicago told me that there have been more than 10,000 books and monographs written about Lincoln since his death. He is not only the most sculpted American on the landscape, but also the most written-about American.

So with a headful of Lincoln literature I set off to get an eye-ful of Lincoln sculpture. I hoped that the visual images would expand the mental visions I had been absorbing. Of all the Lincolns I looked at that summer, I think that there are four sculptural images of Lincoln as President that offer us a particular attitude and vision related to the 16th President:

- **Thomas Ball's 1876 *Emancipation Group*** in Washington, D.C.;
- **Augustus Saint-Gaudens 1887 *Standing Lincoln* or *Lincoln the Man*** in Chicago;
- **John Gutzon Borglum's 1911 *Seated Lincoln*** in Newark, New Jersey
- **Daniel Chester French's 1922 *Lincoln the President***, seated inside architect **Henry Bacon's *Lincoln Memorial*** on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Arguably these four rank within the top ten Lincoln sculptures in the nation.

### *The Emancipation Group*

In Washington, D.C., separated by three miles and what today is about a ten minute drive, sit two sculptures of Lincoln, French's and **Thomas Ball's *Emancipation Group***. It is an odd juxtaposition, in that both works celebrate the same man yet are remarkably different in tone and feel. In 1876, only eleven years after Lincoln's assassination, Ball received a commission to sculpt what would become America's first great monument to the fallen President. The Western Sanitary Commission awarded the contract to Ball, but the \$16,242 needed for the bronze casting came solely from the pockets of African-American freedmen and members of the United States Colored Troops. It is of no small significance that the first important Lincoln statue to be erected in the country was paid for by blacks. **Charlotte Scott**, a freed-woman from Virginia, offered the first \$5.00 of her free earnings to, "make a monument for *Masa Lincoln*." Ironically she gave this small installment to her former master, **Dr. William P. Rucker**, a Union loyalist from Virginia who had been involved with the Sanitary Commission. Congress appropriated \$3,000.00 for the pedestal and Thomas Ball went to work in his Italian studio.



*The Emancipation Group*

The statue was posed in what was a conventional and acceptable attitude for the times. Lincoln is depicted as the *Great Emancipator* almost as if he is blessing the slave, who in his right hand holds a broken shackle, as he rises to take his place as a man. Interestingly, accounts of Lincoln's April 1865 visit to Richmond, the capital of the defeated Confederacy, recall that as Lincoln moved through the charred streets many former slaves got down on their knees as Lincoln passed, in posture of homage and supplication. Lincoln would have none of that and asked those who displayed such behavior to rise up off their knees.

In Ball's statue, Lincoln's right hand rests on a podium, upon which surface is a medallion bearing the likeness of George Washington. In that hand he holds a scrolled copy of the *Emancipation Proclamation*. Tradition holds that the last African American returned to the South under the *Fugitive Slave Act*, **Archer Alexander**, modeled the figure of the freed slave. Ball chose other symbolic devices, such as a broken whip on the rear of the memorial, to demonstrate the death of slavery. All aspects of the aesthetic arrangements of the work convey an awkward sense of formality in contrast to the modes of today. No sculptor today would create what to us is an anachronism. Even the keynote speaker at the dedication, **Frederick Douglass**, chided the Lincoln who "viewed from the genuine abolition ground... seemed tardy, cold, dull and indifferent." However, continuing Douglass offered, "But measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined... now the judgment is that infinite wisdom has seldom sent any man into the world better fitted for his mission... And so today we have done good work for our race. In doing honor to our friend and liberator, we have been doing the highest honor to ourselves." Douglass recognized the place of Lincoln in the history of his people and the debt that convention of the late nineteenth century dictated that the black community owed Lincoln. It is clear from his dedicatory remarks that Douglass saw that the African-American legacy, and its subsequent successes, would for many years come to be tied to that of the martyred President.

More than any other monument to Lincoln in the United States, Ball's *Emancipation Group* evokes an image of "*Father Abraham*." Only today is that image being placed aside as scholars take another approach to Lincoln. That notwithstanding, Ball's work was so successful that the City of Boston contracted for a duplicate cast, and many small reduction pieces brought the sculptor a handsome sum.