

Abraham Lincoln, February 5, 1865

Abraham Lincoln was the first American president to use photography for political purposes. During his first presidential campaign in 1860, some thirty-five portraits of the candidate by the photographer Mathew Brady were circulated throughout the country. The immediacy of a photograph created a sense of intimacy between viewer and subject (or voter and candidate) that few painted portraits could achieve—particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, when the medium was still a novelty for many Americans. Acknowledging its power to move the populace, Lincoln gave portrait photography credit for his victory. “Make no mistake,” he said. “Brady made me President!”

This photograph of Lincoln by Alexander Gardner was made some years later, when the burden of the presidency had taken its toll. Gardner had been one in a team of photographers employed by Brady to follow the Union troops and make a visual record of the Civil War. He began to work independently in 1863, when he established his own studio in Washington, D.C., and became known for his portraits of uniformed soldiers setting off for war. President Lincoln visited Gardner’s studio one Sunday in February 1865, the final year of the Civil War, accompanied by the American portraitist Matthew Wilson. Wilson had been commissioned to paint the president’s portrait, but because Lincoln could spare so little time to pose,



9-B Alexander Gardner (1821–1882), *Abraham Lincoln, February 5, 1865*. Photographic print. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

the artist needed recent photographs to work from. The pictures served their purpose, but the resulting painting—a traditional, formal, bust-length portrait in an oval format—is not particularly distinguished and hardly remembered today. Gardner’s surprisingly candid photographs have proven more enduring, even though they were not originally intended to stand alone as works of art.

This half-length portrait of Lincoln is one of the finest from that February studio session. The president sits comfortably in a sturdy chair, his left elbow resting on its arm, his right on his own slightly elevated knee. There is nothing in this photograph to indicate Lincoln’s exalted position: we might just as well be looking at a humble country doctor. His clothing appears plain (though not unfashionable) and his loosely knotted bowtie has been left slightly askew. By this point in his public life, the president had sat for dozens of photographs, and he would have been mindful of the need to hold perfectly still during the several minutes it took to make an exposure. In this print, Lincoln’s eyes look steadily toward the camera but his hands fiddle impatiently with his eyeglasses and pencil as if to remind the photographer that he had more important things to do.

What draws and holds our attention is Lincoln’s expression, which the poet Walt Whitman described as “a deep latent sadness.” At the time this picture was taken, Lincoln had weathered the worst of the war and almost succeeded in his fight to preserve the Union, yet he was painfully aware how much that cause had cost the nation. Lincoln appears much older than his fifty-five years, and Gardner did nothing to flatter the president’s haggard, careworn features. The photographer may even have exaggerated them, for the turn of Lincoln’s head leaves one side of his face slightly in shadow, making his right eye and cheek appear hollow and cadaverous.

Gardner’s photograph took on another dimension shortly after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination on April 14, 1865. A Boston publishing firm exploited the nation’s grief by producing prints of the portrait Matthew Wilson had based on Gardner’s photographs. Gardner’s own publisher countered a few days later by offering this and other photographs from the February studio session. They were advertised as the products of “Mr. Lincoln’s last sitting.” That unsupported (and until recently, unquestioned) claim gave rise to the tradition that Gardner’s portraits had been taken just four days before Lincoln’s death, investing them with a special aura of martyrdom. We now know that these were not in fact the last portraits of Abraham Lincoln. Even though Gardner’s picture does not belong to the president’s final days, it records his weary and worried countenance during the last long weeks of the war, when the surrender at Appomattox was still some months away.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at all parts of this photographic portrait.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M | S

Compare this portrait to that of Lincoln on a penny. How are they different?

In this one he faces front, but he is shown in profile on the penny. Also, his beard is fuller on the penny.

E | M | S

Suggest that students sit as Lincoln sits in this photograph. Notice that his head is turned slightly so that we see the outline of his cheek. Imagine having to sit perfectly still for three full minutes.

E | M | S

Where is the light source for this photograph located?

It is above, left of center.

Notice in what part of the photograph the light creates dark shadows. Point out some of the darkest of these areas.

They are on his neck, under his right cheekbone, and under his right eyebrow.

E | M | S

Compare the size of his hands to his face. Which is in sharper focus, the hands or face?

The face is in sharper focus.

Why might his hands be slightly blurred? What might he be holding in his hands?

He holds a pen and eyeglasses; the blurring shows that Lincoln moved his hands during the long exposure.

Ask what the pen and glasses might symbolize.

Perhaps they show Lincoln's learning and the importance of the executive office of the president.

E | M | S

Describe how Lincoln is dressed.

He wears a dark suit, vest, watch chain, bowtie, and a white shirt.

His bowtie is crooked. What might a crooked bowtie suggest?

He is not perfect. Ordinary people might feel closer to him because he seemed more like a regular person.

Is there anything about his dress to suggest that he is president of the United States?

There is not.

INTERPRET

E | M | S

How old do you think Lincoln looks in this photograph? Why?

He was fifty-five years old, but he looks older. The stress of war may have aged him.

E | M | S

Ask students to describe Lincoln's expression. How does he feel? Is he sad, happy, bored, tired, or something else?

Although he has a slight smile, his face is haggard, and he is probably tired and sad after four years of bloody civil war.

S

Why was photography an important element in Lincoln's campaign for president?

Photography was still a new medium, just beginning to be used. Up until this time, portraits were painted or drawn. A photograph seemed much more intimate. Voters were able to recognize him and feel that they knew him.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: Civil War; Reconstruction; Lincoln's assassination

Historical Figures: Abraham Lincoln; John Wilkes Booth

Geography: Northern free states; Southern slave states; border states

Literary Connections and Primary

Documents: *Honest Abe*, Edith Kunhardt (elementary); "O Captain! My Captain!," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Walt Whitman (secondary); Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (elementary, middle); Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address (middle,

secondary); Emancipation Proclamation (elementary, middle); Lincoln's "House Divided" speech (middle, secondary)

Arts: photography; work of Mathew Brady