



A Career Modeled on Lincoln

Vinnie Ream — Sculptor

Glenn V Sherwood

In talking about her statue of Lincoln in a speech at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, Mrs. Vinnie Ream Hoxie said, "It had been indeed a labor of love, not without its trials, but well rewarded by its final triumph." What was the "final triumph" that she mentioned? The story of the statue gives a clue.

Abraham Lincoln's death had a profound impact on American society. It forced change. One example can be seen in the story of Vinnie Ream, a teenage girl and apprentice sculptor who was making a bust of the President. Miss Ream was a postal clerk in the Dead Letter Office and had been one of the first women employed by the agency during the Civil War in 1862. In 1863, she obtained permission to work part-time and began studying with the famed sculptor Clark Mills at the U.S. Capitol. At first, her work was crude, but her skill developed rapidly. She soon made high-quality portrait busts and relief medallions of many notable statesmen. She became known as the "Wonder Girl" artist.

There is some evidence that Vinnie Ream modeled Lincoln from at least a few life sittings prior to his death. These occurred at the White House from late 1864 to early 1865. Records suggest that she had a portrait (the C.S. German study of January 1861) that Lincoln may have

signed. It was said that, at first, Lincoln refused to be modeled, but after supportive congressmen told him that Ms. Ream came from a poor "western" background, Lincoln relented and reportedly responded, "Poor is she? Well, that's nothing agin' her."

Ms. Ream later recalled, "And so it was, the Great Heart that vanity could not unlock opened with the sympathy that recalled to him his own youth." As Ms. Ream modeled Lincoln, she acquired his persona. She later wrote, "I was modeling him in clay, but... his personality was sinking deeper into my soul."

As her skill with portraiture grew, she developed an entire series of Lincoln busts and relief medallions. Her work was aided by a life mask of Lincoln taken by Clark Mills on the President's birthday in 1865.

After Lincoln's death, Vinnie Ream heard that interest was growing for a statue of Lincoln for the U.S. Capitol. She wrote a letter to the House Committee on Grounds and Public Buildings asking for the job and submitted a plaster bust of Lincoln as an example of her work. The Republican leader Thaddeus Stevens championed the idea and introduced House Resolution #HR-197 to give her the commission outright. The application was bolstered by a petition that had been circulated in April of 1866 in recognition of Ms. Ream's ability. It was signed by President Andrew Johnson, General Grant and numerous other government leaders.

The Resolution passed the House of Representatives on July 26, 1866 by a vote of 57-7 and reached the Senate

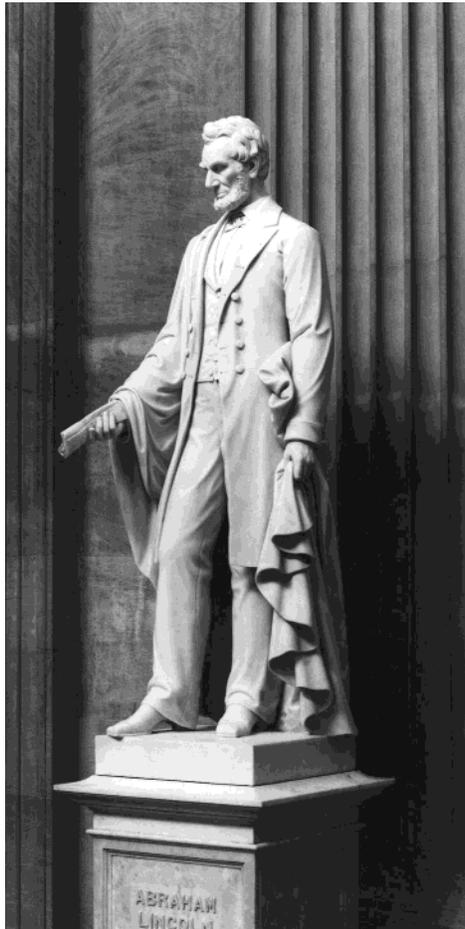


on July 27th in the session's closing hours. The commission was debated in a lengthy discourse that ran 7 pages of small type in the Congressional Globe. Since Ms. Ream was born in Wisconsin, the western politicians sided with her against Senators who represented the east-coast art establishment. Senator Charles Sumner said "This candidate is not competent to produce the work which you propose to order, she cannot do it." Sumner cited Ream's lack of formal training and argued that a more skilled sculptor with "ripe genius" should be sought. Senator James Nesmith of Oregon retorted, "The Senator might have raised the same objection to Mr. Lincoln, that he was not qualified for the presidency because his reading had not been as extensive as the Senator and because he had lived among rude and uncultivated society."

Art procured for the Capitol was plagued by a checkered past. Greenough's massive half-nude statue of "George Washington" was a long costly ordeal that became the target of public ridicule. The "Discovery" and "Rescue" groups at the Capitol drew similar scorn. Senator Edgar Cowan of Pennsylvania quipped, "If the statuary in the Capitol is in bad taste, let us improve it. And I do not know any other way but to hire this young lady who manifests such extraordinary ability." Cowan hit a nerve on the issue. The commission was awarded to Vinnie Ream by a vote of 23 ayes, 9 nays with 18 absent. Miss Ream was only 18 years old when she signed the contract on August 30, 1866 — just about one month prior to her 19th birthday on the 25th of September. She became the first woman and the youngest artist to ever receive such a commission.

Vinnie Ream became a celebrity overnight as the press paraded the decision by Congress. Politicians drew flak for awarding a prestigious coveted commission to a virtually unknown teenage girl. The commission, however, was little more than a mere experiment. It gave Miss Ream no advance money to fund the work as was usually done with similar awards to professional sculptors. She was simply granted use of a room in the Capitol to model the work. The contract required her to produce a life-size plaster model of the statue acceptable to the Secretary of the Interior prior to a half-payment of \$5,000. She would be given the other half of the \$10,000 commission upon delivery and acceptance of the finished marble statue. It seemed an impossible job for a young woman, and many people thought so, but the cagey Miss Ream was no ordinary girl.

Her studio was near the offices of Supreme Court Justice David Davis who had been a key Lincoln associate. Davis became a mentor and an advisor as work on the statue



model progressed. Miss Ream tried to obtain the clothes Lincoln wore on the night of the assassination to achieve authenticity. She wrote to Mrs. Lincoln and received an evasive

reply. Remarkably, Mrs. Lincoln had given the suit to White House doorman Alfonse Donn shortly after the murder and the clothes were in the possession of an artist named Wilson in New York. The resourceful Ms. Ream appealed to Mrs. Gideon Welles and other influential people for help and soon obtained use of the suit. She measured the blood-stained garments "with reverence and trembling hands." As the statue took form, Ms. Ream had the figure inspected by surgeons for accuracy. Many old friends of Lincoln came to see the model and offered comments, advice and encouragement. The Capitol studio became a fashionable Washington attraction.

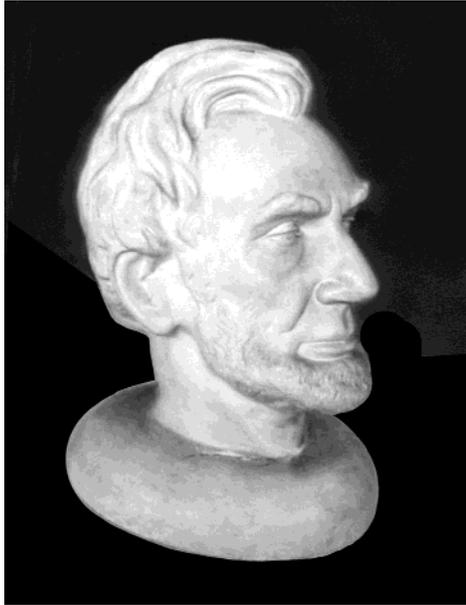
Completion of the statue model was jeopardized by the impeachment of Andrew Johnson in 1868. The Lincoln/Johnson policy toward the conquered South was considered too lenient by carpetbagger elements seeking regional control. Ms. Ream was evicted from the Capitol by reconstruction radicals who thought she was pro-Johnson and because she refused to influence Kansas Senator Edmund G. Ross to vote for Johnson's conviction. Senator Ross was a friend of the family from Kansas who boarded in the Ream home. Ironically, the studio was reinstated by Thaddeus Stevens who thought his colleagues had botched the impeachment. He resented their Draconian-style treatment of Vinnie Ream.

A cast of the Lincoln statue model was made in 1869 and Vinnie Ream and her parents sailed for Europe. Ms. Ream studied briefly in Paris and in Munich with notable artists. She established a studio in Rome where the Lincoln statue model was placed on public display. Many American sculptors living in Rome came to view the model and offered suggestions. Through their guidance she met marble cutters in Carrara and she went there to help select the stone at the marble quar-



Two early photographs of sculptress Vinnie Ream and her most famous work (above.)

ries. Miss Ream and her parents returned to Washington with the completed statue in December of 1870. It was unveiled at the US Capitol in January of 1871 in an elaborate ceremony attended by the highest officials of the US government and by emissaries of many foreign nations.



Another of Ms. Ream's Studies

The statue was attacked in the press. A classical critic wrote “what a gaunt shameful spectre of shapeless ugliness hath she hewn out of the unoffending marble.” Many attacks paraded the predictable tabloid theme that the attractive young woman had wheedled the commission with “feminine wiles.” When the final commission payment was considered by Congress, they voted to double the last payment in recognition of the statue’s success, giving Miss Ream a total of \$15,000 for the work. Horace Greeley’s *New York Daily Tribune* gave the Congressmen a stern rebuke, blasting them as “men of defident moral sense.”

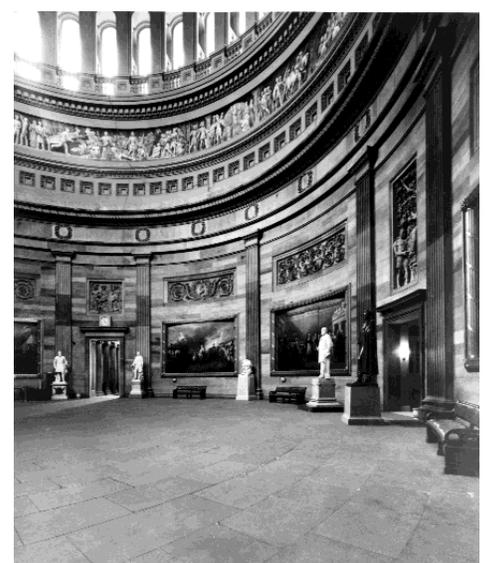
“fraud” and a “humbug” and that men did her work. To challenge the notion Ms. Ream established a studio briefly in New York. She made clay sculpture models at industrial shows in front of the public “to show a skeptical world that she can model in clay.”

The Lincoln statue’s downcast stance was criticized by some writers, including Mark Twain. But it was defended by progressive reviewers like Miner Kellogg and Mary Clemmer Ames. Kellogg pointed out the meaning of the work, that Lincoln was represented in

Some journalists defended Vinnie Ream. The feminist paper *The Revolution* retorted, “Every feature of her face, every tress of what one writer calls her ‘flashing hair’ has been analyzed in an attempt to show the unworthy influence it was assumed she exercised to obtain the commission.” The press had made other allegations that Ream was a

the act of giving the Emancipation Proclamation to a newly-liberated people. The long cloak shown falling off the left shoulder and caught precariously by the left hand represented the “protective mantle of government” that had almost slipped away, yet was held in readiness to uphold the law. Kellogg added that the figure’s “dual expression of sadness and benevolence” was “touchingly portrayed.” Ames wrote, “No one can object to the sadness of the expression. The atmosphere created by it is the same as that which came from the man. It is more himself and less a mere likeness. It is the most real likeness of Lincoln that I ever saw.” Another newspaper writer wrote that the statue “tells the story of Lincoln very well.”

Vinnie Ream continued her career with a statue of Farragut commissioned in 1875, but it was a long uphill battle to get the work unveiled by 1881. She had difficulty breaking into the large monument business and few of her ideal works sold. With neoclassical art on the decline, she decided to marry army officer Richard L. Hoxie in 1878. They had one son. Vinnie Ream returned to sculpting briefly — designing statues of Kirkwood and Sequoyah. She submitted a bid for the Lincoln Memorial, but she died of a kidney illness in 1914. She is buried near her husband in Arlington National Cemetery.



Three views in the Capitol Dome, the center as it appeared 100 years ago in a stereoview, the other two show placement of Ms. Ream's statue as it appears today



A rare carte from Ms. Ream's visit to Europe.



The artist at work.

Vinnie Ream's statue of Abraham Lincoln has been praised and condemned since its unveiling in 1871. In a strange irony, the scroll was broken off of the work at about the same time that the Jim Crow laws were implemented in the South. The statue stood that way until civil rights reforms of the 1960s. Congressman Fred Schwengel of Iowa sought a special appropriation for repairs. The scroll was restored and the statue was unveiled a second time when the Emancipation Proclamation Centennial was observed on April 16, 1962.

In her 1893 speech, Vinnie Ream Hoxie recalled her thoughts of Lin-

coln: "My country had loved him and cherished his memory. In tears the people had parted with him. With shouts of joy and acclamations of affection they had received his image in the marble. Upon the very spot where a few years before they had gathered in sorrow to gaze upon his lifeless body lying there in state while a nation mourned, they had gathered again to unveil his statue. 'The marble is the resurrection,' say the old sculptors, and now the dead had arisen to live forever in the hearts of the people whom he loved so well."

The statue was unveiled and the mystic transformation was complete. The

work ultimately came to represent two mutual triumphs: that of a martyr president whose ideas prevailed, and that a young, female artist could prove her skill in a man's world. Vinnie Ream and Lincoln projected similar ardent traits and beliefs to society. It was a culture clash between a staid eastern ideology and the new spirit of the West. This galvanized the issue of equality and brought it out. The Civil War was over. It was "a new birth of freedom" as Lincoln said in his visionary speech at Gettysburg. The conflict heralded the end of an era and opened doors to better opportunity for all.

[Glenn V. Sherwood] is the author of **[A Labor of Love: The Life and Art of Vinnie Ream]**, 440 pages, **[Sunshine Press Publications Inc.]**, 1997; ISBN: 0-9615743-6-4. He is presently working on a one-hour video documentary on Vinnie Ream for television. He is related to the Ream family through both of his parents.

