

Sacred Substantiations

Lincoln Casts and Statuary in the American Imagination

Ramey Mize

Abstract

On March 31, 1860, Abraham Lincoln waited in the studio of Leonard Wells Volk as a plaster mold hardened around his face and head. After one hour, Volk removed the mold; he later repeated the process for Lincoln's hands. The resulting life casts elicited profound emotional reactions in those who saw them. Augustus Saint-Gaudens recognized and capitalized on their invaluable status as candid indexes of Lincoln's likeness in his 1887 Chicago monument, *Abraham Lincoln: The Man*. In the words of sculptor Lorado Taft, "It does not seem like a bronze. . . . One stands before it and feels himself in the very presence of America's soul."

It was also Saint-Gaudens who amplified the casts' influence through the manufacture of a prized series of thirty-three bronze replicas. The actual and imagined characteristics of these casts—their sense of possessing a "soul," and their physical manifestation of Lincoln's touch—all warrant consideration of their place within the larger tradition of holy relics. This paper posits the Lincoln casts as "contact relics" and establishes the generative potential of such a numinous categorization for American audiences, especially in the wake of the Civil War. Volk's direct impressions of Lincoln's visage and hands provided the "blueprints," so to speak, for an astonishingly wide variety of sculptural manifestations—from the iconic *Lincoln Memorial* (1920) by Daniel Chester French to *Abraham Lincoln* (1917) by George Grey Barnard. This essay argues that the cultural impact of this sculptural genealogy is largely indebted to the casts' material substantiations of Lincoln's bodily presence and touch. Indeed, by situating these objects between medieval and modern modes of viewing, it will become clear that the casts, as progeny of the original life molds, afforded an affective, even remedial, authenticity for subsequent Lincoln monuments in the American imagination.

About the Author

Ramey Mize is a doctoral student in Art History at the University of Pennsylvania. From Atlanta, Georgia, she holds a BA in Art History from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and her MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. The majority of her research and publications to date examine the intersection of nineteenth-century visual culture, war, and landscape across Europe and the Americas. Her scholarship has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Previously, she has served as the Anne Lunder Leland Curatorial Fellow at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine, a Summer Fellow at the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Center for American Art, and a Guest Curator and Curatorial Assistant at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

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On March 31, 1860, Abraham Lincoln waited patiently in the sculpture studio of Leonard Wells Volk as a plaster mold hardened around his face and head.¹ Little by little, the plaster assumed the imprint of his defining features—high cheekbones, conspicuous nose, and prodigious ears—along with more intimate aspects, such as the wrinkles across his forehead, the deeply etched nasolabial folds, down even to the delicate texture of his pores and eyebrows. After one hour, Volk struggled to remove the mold; in a published recollection of the process

in 1881, the sculptor admitted that “it clung pretty hard, as the cheek-bones were higher than the jaws at the lobe of the ear. [Lincoln] bent his head low and took hold of the mold and gradually worked it off without breaking or injury; it hurt a little, as a few hairs of the tender temples pulled out with the plaster and made his eyes water.”² A short while later, Volk would also furnish those same hands, which had successfully detached the life mask, with casts of their own (Fig. 1).

The distinctive casts elicited profound emotional reactions in those who encountered them. Even Lincoln, upon viewing the finished life mask, supposedly exclaimed, “There is the animal himself!”³ Their value grew immeasurably following the president’s murder by John Wilkes Booth during a performance at Ford’s Theater on April 14, 1865. Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, was the first to perish by assassination; the notorious event, which transpired five days after the conclusion of the Civil War, shook the Union to its core. Out of the ensuing anger and grief, experienced predominantly by Americans in the North, Lincoln emerged as a kind of martyr or saint, thoroughly Christ-like.⁴ Many construed Lincoln’s death as the “ultimate sacrifice” and the key to the country’s sanctification. The Sunday after Lincoln’s untimely death, Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, in a memorable sermon at Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church, proselytized: “And now the martyr is moving in triumphal march, mightier than when alive. The nation rises up at every stage of his coming. . . . Disenthralled of flesh, risen to the unobstructed sphere. . . he begins his illimitable work. His life is now grafted upon the infinite and will be fruitful as no earthly life can be.”⁵ The Christian dimensions of Lincoln’s

¹ Grant Holcomb, “Leonard Wells Volk: Life Mask and Hands of Abraham Lincoln,” in *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester*, ed. Marjorie Searl (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 67. For more information on Volk’s biography, see F. Lauriston Bullard, *Lincoln in Marble and Bronze* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1952), 91.

² Leonard Wells Volk, “The Lincoln Life-Mask and How it was Made,” *Century Magazine* 23 (December 1881): 226.

³ Quoted in Holcomb, “Leonard Wells Volk,” 67.

⁴ Kimberly N. Kutz projects Lincoln as “the chief ghost in a nation of ghosts.” She explains that because the Civil War witnessed an “unprecedented loss of life” (with a staggering 620,000 total fatalities), “Lincoln’s sudden and devastating death seemed the average soldier’s death writ large, and Americans projected their desire for the souls of their sons, husbands, and fathers into the national process of mourning.” See Kutz, “Chief of a Nation of Ghosts: Images of Abraham Lincoln’s Spirit in the Immediate Post-Civil War Period,” *Journal of American Culture* 36 (2013): 112.

⁵ Quoted in Lloyd Lewis, *Myths after Lincoln* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 117.



Figure 1

Leonard Wells Volk (American, 1828–1895), Casts of Abraham Lincoln's Face and Hands, 1860. Plaster. Mask: 7 in x 8 1/2 in x 9 in; 17.78 cm x 21.59 cm x 22.86 cm. Right hand: 3 5/8 in x 5 1/4 in x 6 1/8 in; 9.1948 cm x 13.335 cm x 15.5956 cm. Left hand: 2 3/4 in x 4 1/4 in x 6 5/8 in; 6.985 cm x 10.795 cm x 16.8148 cm. Gift of Thirty-three Subscribers, 1888, Division of Political and Military History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

historical persona found a symbolic complement in George Washington, and the two were often biblically interpellated by authors and artists, with Washington as the “creator” and Lincoln as the “redeemer” of the young nation.⁶ An 1865 mezzotint print by John Sartain entitled *Abraham Lincoln, The Martyr Victorious* renders this cultural fantasy in vivid detail: Lincoln is pictured at the moment of his arrival at the celestial landscape of heaven, where George Washington and a host of angels welcome and usher him to eternal life (Fig. 2).

Although Lincoln's life mask and hand casts fell from public view for a time, they later resurfaced in the home of the artist Wyatt Eaton in 1887. Douglas Volk, Leonard's son, had entrusted them to Eaton some years before.⁷ Augustus Saint-Gaudens instantly recognized and capitalized on their invaluable status as candid vectors of Lincoln's likeness in his Chicago monument, *Abraham Lincoln: The Man (Standing Lincoln)* (1887) (Fig. 3).⁸ Saint-Gaudens also

⁶ In further testimony to this fact, a number of banners displayed at Lincoln's funeral bore the phrase: “Washington the Father, Lincoln the Savior.” Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27.

⁷ Burke Wilkinson, *Uncommon Clay: The Life and Works of Augustus Saint-Gaudens* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 161.

⁸ Bullard, *Lincoln in Marble and Bronze*, 4–5. Saint-Gaudens was the first artist to reference the casts for the purposes of a monumental sculpture. It was Richard Watson Gilder, poet, essayist and editor, who brought Volk's casts to the attention of Saint-Gaudens, after having first glimpsed them at Wyatt Eaton's residence. In a letter Gilder wrote to Saint-Gaudens's son, the author relates his discovery: “One



Figure 2

Engraved by John Sartain (American, 1808–1897), *Abraham Lincoln, the Martyr, Victorious*, Published by W. H. Hermans, New York, 1866. Mezzotint. Image: 46.2 x 35.4 cm; sheet: 70.2 x 55.1 cm. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

night I saw at Wyatt Eaton's, who was living on the south side of Washington Square, a life-mask of Lincoln of which I had never heard. I got your father and one or two others to form a committee, and we purchased the original cast of that and of the two hands, from Douglas Volk, his father having taken them and given them to him. And we presented these originals, with bronze copies, to the National Museum at Washington. For those who subscribed for the bronze copies of the set, at seventy-five dollars, your father had made in his studio inscriptions with the name of the subscriber. This wonderful life-mask was, of course, of use to him in the Lincoln." See Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *The Reminiscences of Augustus Saint-Gaudens*, ed. Homer Saint-Gaudens (London: Andrew Melrose, 1913), 355.



Figure 3

Augustus Saint-Gaudens (American, born Ireland, 1848–1907), *Abraham Lincoln: The Man (Standing Lincoln)*, 1884–87. Reduced 1910; cast 1911. Bronze. 40 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 30 1/4 in. (102.9 x 41.9 x 76.8 cm). Purchase, Tyson Family Gift, in memory of Edouard and Ellen Muller; The Beatrice G. Warren and Leila W. Redstone, and Maria DeWitt Jesup Funds; Dorothy and Imre Cholnoky, David Schwartz Foundation Inc., Joanne and Warren Josephy, Annette de la Renta, Thomas H. and Diane DeMell Jacobsen Ph.D. Foundation, and Felicia Fund Inc. Gifts, 2012. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2012.14a,b.



Figure 4

Casts of the Face and Hands of Abraham Lincoln, original Plaster made by Leonard Wells Volk (American, 1828–1895) in 1860, bronze made under the direction of Augustus Saint-Gaudens (American, born Ireland, 1848–1907) in 1886. Face: 8 3/8 x 7 5/8 x 5 1/2 inches (21.3 x 19.4 x 14 cm) Right hand: 6 1/4 x 4 7/8 x 3 3/8 inches (15.9 x 12.4 x 8.6 cm) Left hand: 6 5/8 x 4 3/8 x 2 1/2 inches (16.8 x 11.1 x 6.4 cm). Gift of the Fairmount Park Art Association, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1932-66-1a-c. www.philamuseum.org

amplified the casts' influence through the manufacture of a series of bronze replicas; a significant motivating force behind the acquisition of these copies was the common belief that Lincoln "was divined through Volk's mask and casts" (Fig. 4).⁹ For example, Laurence Hutton, a prolific collector of life and death masks, testifies to such reverence in this observation regarding [his personal Lincoln mask](#): "I have watched many an eye fill while looking at it for the first time; to many minds it has been a revelation; and I turn to it myself more quickly and more often than to any of the others, when I want comfort and help."¹⁰ He continues: "What Whittier wrote to James T. Fields of the [Marshall engraving of Lincoln](#) may be said of the life-cast. 'It contains the informing spirit of the man within.'"¹¹ Lorado Taft took this notion a step further. In a published interview, the sculptor opined: "It does not seem like a bronze: there is something human, or shall I say?— superhuman about it. One stands before it and feels himself in the very presence of America's soul."¹²

⁹ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 211.

¹⁰ Laurence Hutton, *Portraits in Plaster from the Collection of Laurence Hutton* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), 250.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Lorado Taft, "American Sculpture and Sculptors," *The Chautauquan* 22 (January 1896): 390.

To numerous observers, these objects possessed a dense aura of vitality, or affective power, which thickened over the course of their trajectory and proliferation. Lincoln's historical significance, coupled with his posthumous attainment of a Christ-like identity as a martyr for liberty, is essential to the casts' numinous verve.¹³ Indeed, the actual and imagined characteristics of the casts outlined thus far—their palliative, emotive effects, their endowment with Lincoln's "spirit" or "soul," and their physical manifestation of his touch—all evoke hallmarks of holy relics. Cynthia Hahn defines the relic as "a physical object understood to carry the virtue of a saint or Christ, literally 'virtue' but more accurately 'power' of a holy person."¹⁴ To be specific, these casts align most closely with Hahn's conception of a "tertiary" relic, "an object that has touched a relic and thus now carries the transferred . . . [or] 'contagious' virtue."¹⁵ This paper will posit the Lincoln casts as such, as "contact relics," and will interrogate them according to the germane, intersectional facets of early Christian and nineteenth-century American material culture.¹⁶ Three central questions will be explored: How do the unique properties of casts, especially those of a legendary figure's face and hands, map onto those of prototypical relics? In what ways do facture and materiality intensify their enlivenment? Finally, to what extent does their vitality shift or grow when the casts become exemplars for other sculptures? The formal and symbolic associations of the casts will be scrutinized as well as their journey from plaster to bronze, and finally, their embedment in public monuments. By situating these objects between medieval and modern modes of viewing, it will become clear that the bronze series made after Volk's casts, as the progeny of the original life molds, afforded a profound and affective authenticity for subsequent sculptures of Lincoln in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Facing Lincoln's Mask, Grasping Lincoln's Hands

"If you wish to have a face of a man or woman, of any rank, adopt this method."¹⁷ So begins the section entitled "How to Take a Life Mask" in the technical handbook *Il Libro dell'Arte* by Cennino d'Andrea Cennini (c. 1370–c. 1440). These instructions appear in the manual's final chapter, which is "devoted to methods of casting."¹⁸ The procedures required for the life mask as set forth by a late medieval artisan vary little from those performed by the nineteenth-century sculptor: the subject's face is anointed with oil, breathing tubes or "quills" are inserted into their nostrils, plaster is applied carefully over their features, allowed to set, and then removed. The artist is left with this "waste mold" which is filled with fresh plaster for the

¹³ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 29, 35.

¹⁴ Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400–circa 1204* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 9.

¹⁵ Ibid. Deborah Lutz also draws this distinction: "A cast was a 'negative' image . . . of the face and made direct contact with it. But then the mask itself, made from this cast, would be a 'positive' image, which would have touched the cast but not the flesh itself." See Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 190.

¹⁶ Peter Brown explains that "the fullness of the invisible person could be present" just as much in these "contact relics" as in fragments of the saint's physical remains. See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 88.

¹⁷ Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook: Il Libro dell'Arte*, trans. Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. (New York: Dover, 1960), 125.

¹⁸ Ibid., xxvii.

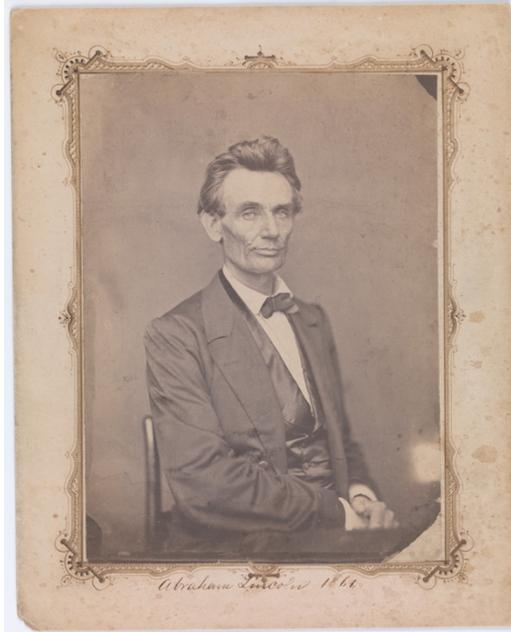


Figure 5

William Marsh (American, 1850s-1860s), *Abraham Lincoln*, May 20, 1860. Salted paper print from glass negative. Image: 5 11/16 in. (19.9 x 14.5 cm). Gilman Collection, Joyce F. Menschel Gift, 2005. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2005.100.89.

ultimate cast.¹⁹ The eyes are typically covered last, or else openings are left in the plaster, so as not to disturb the sitter's eyesight. Volk adopted this tactic for Lincoln's mask, which serves as explanation for the oddly shaped, rough-hewn cavities over the eye area.²⁰ This method remains the same for death masks; both versions were practiced in ancient Egypt, Rome, and Greece, fell from consistent use during the Middle Ages, but became standard again by the sixteenth century.²¹ John Henri Isaac Browere (1790–1834) popularized the technique in the United States, executing a prodigious array of life masks of political leaders, among them Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) and John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), for the purpose of portrait busts.²² Acting upon Browere's precedent, Volk, too, appropriated Lincoln's mask as an ancillary tool for the production of a formal bust.²³

Together, the casts arrest Lincoln's clean-shaven carriage and sturdy hands, poised at the brink of his presidency and all that came after—the duress of the Civil War, the deliveries of the Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation as well as his eventual assassination and cultural

apotheosis. It may be said, therefore, that the casts capture the soon-to-be president's dynamic potentiality in material form. The singularity of the mask enhances its impact, revealing Lincoln's facial attributes in startlingly graphic detail—the tender veins at his temples, the harsh scar to the lower left of his mouth, the curvature of cartilage in his ears. A photograph of Lincoln, taken by William Marsh in the same year the cast was taken, testifies

¹⁹ I have compiled this description from both Cennini's *Handbook* as well as the instructions included in Laurence Hutton's nineteenth-century catalogue *Portraits in Plaster*, xv–xvi.

²⁰ Holcomb, "Leonard Wells Volk," 67.

²¹ Philippe Aries, *Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 128. Deborah Lutz adds that the taking of masks on a thoroughly intimate level—of family members, spouses, lovers, or friends—did not emerge until the end of the eighteenth century. See Lutz, *Relics of Death*, 191. For more information on death masks, see Iris Gibson, "Death Masks Unlimited," *British Medical Journal* 291 (December 1985): 21–28.

²² For more information on Browere's biography, technical innovations, and oeuvre, see David Meschutt, *A Bold Experiment: John Henri Isaac Browere's Life Masks of Prominent Americans* (Cooperstown, NY: New York State Historical Association, 1988) and Charles Henry Hart, *Browere's Life Masks of Great Americans* (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1899).

²³ Thayer Tolles, "Abraham Lincoln: The Man (Standing Lincoln): A Bronze Statuette by Augustus Saint-Gaudens," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 48 (2013): 226.

to the force of these features, all of which comprise a thoroughly striking and idiosyncratic facial landscape (Fig. 5).

Other than to realize hyper-accurate, three-dimensional portraits, why might there have been a general urge to take casts of faces? What special resonance has historically been affiliated with the face or head, and in what ways have relics been implicated? Across cultures and time, the head has been venerated as the preeminent part of the body, the “vital seat” of an individual’s power and identity, the “primary vehicle” of one’s “expression, emotion, and character.”²⁴ Plato conceived of the head as the “dominant and divine” site in which the soul dwells and even thrives past death.²⁵ He elaborated on this philosophy in *Timaeus*: “And so in the vessel of the head, they first of all put a face in which they inserted organs to minister in all things to the providence of the soul, and they appointed this part, which has authority, to be by nature the part which is in the front.”²⁶ As Charles T. Little points out, a significant number of medieval theologians subscribed to Plato’s view of the head as a holy “vessel” for the soul, from Calcidius in the fourth century to the Scholastic philosopher William of Conches in the twelfth.²⁷ By the thirteenth century, the head’s importance had largely supplanted that of the heart— an alternative site for the soul, as proposed by Aristotle.²⁸

The head’s incorporation of the body’s predominant “sense organs” and expressive facial features was instrumental to the conviction of its primacy.²⁹ Richard Brilliant eloquently summarizes: “The human head is like a package whose contents have spilled out, revealing the face, the prime vehicle of expression, the principal marker of personal identity.”³⁰ The corresponding antique and medieval conceptualizations of the head as a “vessel” and the face as the mediator of its holy “contents” are especially meaningful in terms of relics and reliquaries. Reliquaries, by necessity, enshrine and mediate relics, and frequently instate a formal dialectic between interiority and exteriority, visibility and concealment.³¹ Alfred Gell, in his assessment of internal conceptions of agency in relation to holy objects (idols, reliquaries, etc.), identifies this dynamic as a “primordial inside-outside relation,” with the human body as the index.³² There is, of course, no “objective form” to the mind or soul, yet Gell acknowledges that “even if we cannot depict the mind, we can at least depict the possibility that there is a mind we cannot depict.” According to Gell, as long as the “crucial feature of concentricity and

²⁴ Charles T. Little, “Introduction: Facing the Middle Ages,” in *Set in Stone: The Face in Medieval Culture*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), xv. See also “Image and Identity: The Role of the Mask in Various Cultures,” UCLA Museum of Cultural History (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1972), 4.

²⁵ Little, “Introduction,” xv.

²⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1949), 27.

²⁷ Little, “Facing the Middle Ages,” xv.

²⁸ Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 274. See also Esther Cohen, “The Meaning of the Head in High Medieval Culture,” in *Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Catrien Santing, Barbara Baert, and Anita Traninger (Boston: Leiden, 2013), 70.

²⁹ Cohen, “Meaning of the Head.”

³⁰ Richard Brilliant, “Faces Demanding Attention,” *Gesta* 46 (2007): 91.

³¹ Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 9.

³² Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 133.

'containment'" is evident in an object, with visibly apparent "routes of access to this inwardness," then it is possible for "agency" to be attributed to an otherwise inert article.³³

Equipped with Gell's formulation of this "internalist theory of mind," it is reasonable to submit that Lincoln's life mask, as a metonym for his head, effectively denotes agency through these requisite traits of concentricity and containment. Laurence Hutton remarks on the life mask's verism: "It cannot flatter, it cannot caricature. It shows the subject as he was. . . . In his mask he is seen, as it were, with his mask off."³⁴ In this sense, the life mask, as an artless facsimile, unveils the "true" or unguarded face of the sitter. The face, with its various sensory organs (or "routes of access"), implies containment and narrates interiority, allowing for the conclusion that the life mask evinces Lincoln's soul and inner animation. To a certain extent, the hands, too, signal interiority through their palpable substantiation of the sharp, skeletal armature bulging under the skin. James Mellon, in his compendium of photographs of Lincoln, makes this illustrative observation concerning the late president's countenance: "It is a face at times strangely unaware of itself, revealing an inner as well as an outer dimension . . . sometimes the very embodiment of holiness—a face whose masks at once beckon and forbid."³⁵ The life mask, as an interceding entity, therefore, operates in much the same way as a reliquary, and through its incorporation of touch, potentiality, and vitality, it also evokes a relic; indeed, it hovers tantalizingly between the two.

Volk took the casts of Lincoln's hands on May 19, 1860, the day after the politician received the Republican nomination. The condition of his right hand bore discernible testimony to this coincidence—Volk observed that it was "swollen as compared with the left, on account of excessive hand-shaking the evening before."³⁶ In order to mitigate the hand's inflamed and distorted appearance, the sculptor requested that Lincoln grasp some kind of thin object. The item, which can be seen clenched between the fingers in the plaster cast, is the top portion of a broom handle, which Lincoln selected, cut, and whittled smooth for this very purpose.³⁷ The hand casts equal the mask in their uncanny conservation of such superficial markings. Lincoln's scar, the gossamer webs of skin between his fingers, the sharp knuckles and protuberant veins—are all registered in the plaster in forensic detail. Rather than capture the hands at rest, Volk cast them in an active state. Each hand forms a taut fist; the strain is exceptionally palpable in the puffy right hand, which forcefully seizes the broom handle. The fists make cutaneous contact with themselves, while simultaneously touching both the mold and the broom handle. Finally, as hands, they incarnate tactility writ large. In this way, the cast hands operate as material echoes, mirroring and channeling the action that imbued them with sanctity and relic-hood in the first place.

Sacred touch defined a relic, but a relic, radiating with agency, could also touch its devotees. Since the early Christian period, pilgrims demonstrated an avid desire to handle relics, but reliquaries increasingly moderated this tactile engagement.³⁸ While technically a barrier to the rawness of the relic within, the reliquary nevertheless allowed for its own variety of haptic interaction. Thiofrid of Echternach attests to the reliquary's essential permeability in this excerpt from the twelfth century: "As the soul itself in the body cannot be seen and yet

³³ Ibid., 132–33.

³⁴ Hutton, *Portraits in Plaster*, xiv.

³⁵ James Mellon, *The Face of Lincoln* (New York: The Viking Press, 1979), 12.

³⁶ Volk, "The Lincoln Life-Mask," 228.

³⁷ Harold Holzer, *The Civil War in 50 Objects* (New York: Viking, 2013), 41.

³⁸ Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 158.

works its wonders therein, so the precious treasury of dust [relics] works unseen. . . . Who with fast faith touches the outside of the container whether in gold, silver, gems, or fabric, bronze, marble, or wood, he will be touched by that which is concealed inside."³⁹ Mark Paterson defines the term "haptic," which derives from the Greek word *haptesthai*, as "of, pertaining to, or relating to the sense of touch or tactile sensations." He continues: "'Haptic' commendably expands the reach of touch from cutaneous surface to more inwardly-oriented senses."⁴⁰

The relic is thus empowered to "touch" the handler through the reliquary on an affective level; for touch, out of all the senses, is "most linked" with sentiment.⁴¹ Accordingly, as Grant Holcomb and many others have recognized, the casts of Lincoln's hands radiate their own "startling emotional power."⁴² The hand, like the face and head, signifies an individual's expressive activity, personality, and influence. Indeed, the intellectual and the manual often culturally intertwine, with the hand presenting itself as "the physical analogue of our free-roving mind."⁴³ Deborah Lutz makes much of the hand and head's saturation with "being," alleging that they are "prime candidates for shining with undeath, or thingness that maintains the vitalism of the postperished."⁴⁴

This perception of the arm, and by extension, the hand, resonates with the prevailing view in the central Middle Ages. For example, one twelfth-century document itemizes the relics translated from Saint Mammes to Langres, among them an arm, "through which work is perceived," and a head, "so that he might speak, since thinking, speaking, and acting are communicated through the collarbone and the arm."⁴⁵ In her study of shaped, body-part, or "speaking" reliquaries, Cynthia Hahn devotes attention to the arm reliquary, such as the extraordinary example in the Metropolitan Museum's collection, namely because it was apprehended in this way—as "the site of work or action" in the saint's body (Fig. 6).⁴⁶ Irrespective of contents, the special arm form was prioritized for reliquaries because of its aura of activity. Touch, therefore, as a means of contact and an index of causality, was paramount

³⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 24. From *Thiofridi Abbatis Epternacensis: Flores epytaphii sanctorum*, ed. Michele Camillo Ferrari (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 2.3.37.

⁴⁰ Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 4.

⁴¹ Susan Stewart, "From the Museum of Touch," in *Material Memories*, ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 31. Stewart elaborates: "To be 'touched' or 'moved' by words or things implies the process of identification and separation by which we apprehend the world aesthetically."

⁴² Holcomb, "Leonard Wells Volk," 69. Bronze casts of Lincoln's hands were "much sought after by Lincoln lovers." See Truman Bartlett, "The Life Mask of Lincoln," *The Magazine of History* 40 (1930): 14.

⁴³ Hugh Aldersey-Williams, *Anatomies: A Cultural History of the Human Body* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013), 190. The author continues: "The pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras believed that man was more intelligent than beasts because of his hands. Aristotle, nearly a century later, believed roughly the opposite, that our hands only become necessary with intelligence. Either way, they were in agreement that manual dexterity and intelligence were closely connected."

⁴⁴ Lutz, *Relics of Death*, 81.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Cynthia Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries," *Gesta* 36 (1997): 20; from the original source "Canonicus Lingonensis," in *Exuviae Sacrae Constantinopolitanae*, ed. Count Riant, 3 vols. (Geneva, 1877–98), I, 33–34; Cited and translated in C. W. Solt, "Romanesque French Reliquaries," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 9 (1987), 179. See also Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 135–36.

⁴⁶ Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints," 21. Hahn also stresses that arm reliquaries are among the most prevalent type still extant and are accompanied by a rich supply of supporting documentary texts.



Figure 6

Arm Reliquary, c. 1230. Silver, gilded silver, niello, and gems; wood core, 21 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 4 in (64.8 x 16.5 x 10.2 cm). Meuse Valley, South Netherlands. The Cloisters Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 47.101.33.

to the complex functional and metaphorical significance of the medieval arm reliquary.⁴⁷ Indeed, touch often effected healing, as alluded to earlier in the passage by Gregory of Nyssa. Guibert of Nogent corroborates touch's miraculous and salutary capacities in another, more specific twelfth-century miracle story: The monk's cousin, after falling ill, sought a cure and found it in the precious arm-reliquary of the martyr St. Arnoul; his health was restored after receiving the "touch of the holy arm," which "pressed [the body] hard."⁴⁸

Although Lincoln's hand casts were not implemented in such expressly salvific practices following his death, they were certainly redolent of the president's past actions, many of which were widely regarded as redemptive. Holcomb explains: "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."⁴⁹ As Hahn emphasizes, relic arms "had acted in life," and, for medieval viewers, this past action instilled within the limb a power "that remained available in death."⁵⁰ Furthermore, touch, like no other sense, can be perceived in real time; Susan Stewart argues that touch constitutes a "threshold activity"

⁴⁷ Ibid., 33. Susan Stewart investigates the conflation of touch and causality: "The temporal aspect of touching also implicitly bears a notion of causality. The pressure we feel when touching a material thing—a pressure toward and against the thing and toward and against ourselves as well—brings about an idea of causality, or something having happened or made another thing to happen. Only touch yields immediate perception of pressure." See Stewart, "From the Museum of Touch," 32–33. For more on touch and causality, see David Malet Armstrong, *Bodily Sensations* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1962), 29.

⁴⁸ *Self and Society in Medieval France: The Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent* (1064–1126), ed. J. F. Benton, trans. C. C. Swinton Bland (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 226. The full account is as follows:

The arm of the martyr of St. Arnoul was kept in the town from which I came. After it was brought to this place by someone, the townspeople became doubtful about it and it was thrown into a fire to test it, but it immediately leaped out. Some time elapsed and then a cousin of mine, one of the nobles of the castle, was stricken with a very serious disease. When the arm of the blessed martyr was laid on him, the complaint shifted its ground at the touch and settled in another part. And when its virulence was put to flight and the touch of the holy arm pressed it hard, and in the end after running up and down his face and limbs, the whole force of the disease flowed into the region of the throat and shoulders, the skin being a little raised like a mouse, and gathering into a ball it vanished without any pain.

⁴⁹ Holcomb, "Leonard Wells Volk," 69.

⁵⁰ Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints," 26. Hahn clarifies: "Even when, as was sometimes the case, arm relics were not sheltered in arm-shaped reliquaries, still the limbs are preserved with a special reverence."

because “there is a kind of carrying-over from experience to experience of the experience, a kind of doubling which finds its illustration in the image of a living thing bringing a dead thing to life through the transitivity of touch.”⁵¹ Touch implicates the “thresholds of self and other,” blurring the boundary between the two; it is liminal and, as a consequence, well-suited for relics and their own liminal operations between earthly and heavenly realms.⁵² In the casts, Lincoln’s hands make deliberate contact with themselves and the broom handle, and to behold these acts of holding, as it were, ignites an acute impression of their intentionality, their liveliness.

A Vital Likeness: Volk’s Casts as Vera Icon

On April 24, 1865, Lincoln’s funeral train arrived at City Hall in Manhattan, the fifth stop of a stately procession that would conclude in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois, on May 4—a full twenty days after the assassination.⁵³ Lincoln’s body was considered public property from the moment he was shot until the internment and was stabilized through embalming into a visually coherent entity for citizens to witness.⁵⁴ Augustus Saint-Gaudens, then just seventeen, joined the seemingly “interminable” line, intent on paying his last respects (Fig. 7).⁵⁵ The sculptor recalled how the experience proved so captivating that it warranted a repeat visit: “I saw Lincoln lying in state . . . and I went back to the end of the line to look at him again.”⁵⁶ Nineteen years later, the memory of this forceful visual encounter would resume a pressing relevance; in 1884, Saint-Gaudens received a \$40,000 commission from the Chicago Lincoln Memorial Fund for what would become his widely celebrated Standing Lincoln monument. During the summer and fall of 1885, the artist marshaled as many relevant source materials as possible: photographic portraits of Lincoln, a live model of Lincoln’s size and proportions, various speeches and publications by the late president, his own memories, and, significantly, the life casts by Volk.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Stewart, “From the Museum of Touch,” 33. For more on the cultural history of touch as an empathetic and quickening activity, see George L. Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

⁵² Patricia Cox Miller offers this useful characterization of relics as betwixt and between: “Neither wholly material nor wholly spiritual— ‘living dust’ as Paulinus of Nola called them— relics occupied a signifying field that mediated between matter and spirit and so subdued the potential dichotomy between them.” See Patricia Cox Miller, “The Little Blue Flower is Red’: Relics and the Poetizing of the Body,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000): 214–15. Miller also cites Peter Brown’s identification of this as a “paradox of the linking of Heaven and Earth,” 215. See Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 78, for further elaboration on this point.

⁵³ For an in-depth chronicle of Lincoln’s funeral train, see Richard Wightman Fox, *Lincoln’s Body: A Cultural History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015), 97–123.

⁵⁴ Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 158.

⁵⁵ Saint-Gaudens, *Reminiscences of Augustus Saint-Gaudens*, 51. Saint-Gaudens had also glimpsed the president-elect in New York in 1861: “What remains in my mind is seeing in a procession the figure of a tall and very dark man, seemingly entirely out of proportion in his height with the carriage in which he was driven, bowing to crowds on each side,” 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Tolles, “Abraham Lincoln,” 223–26.

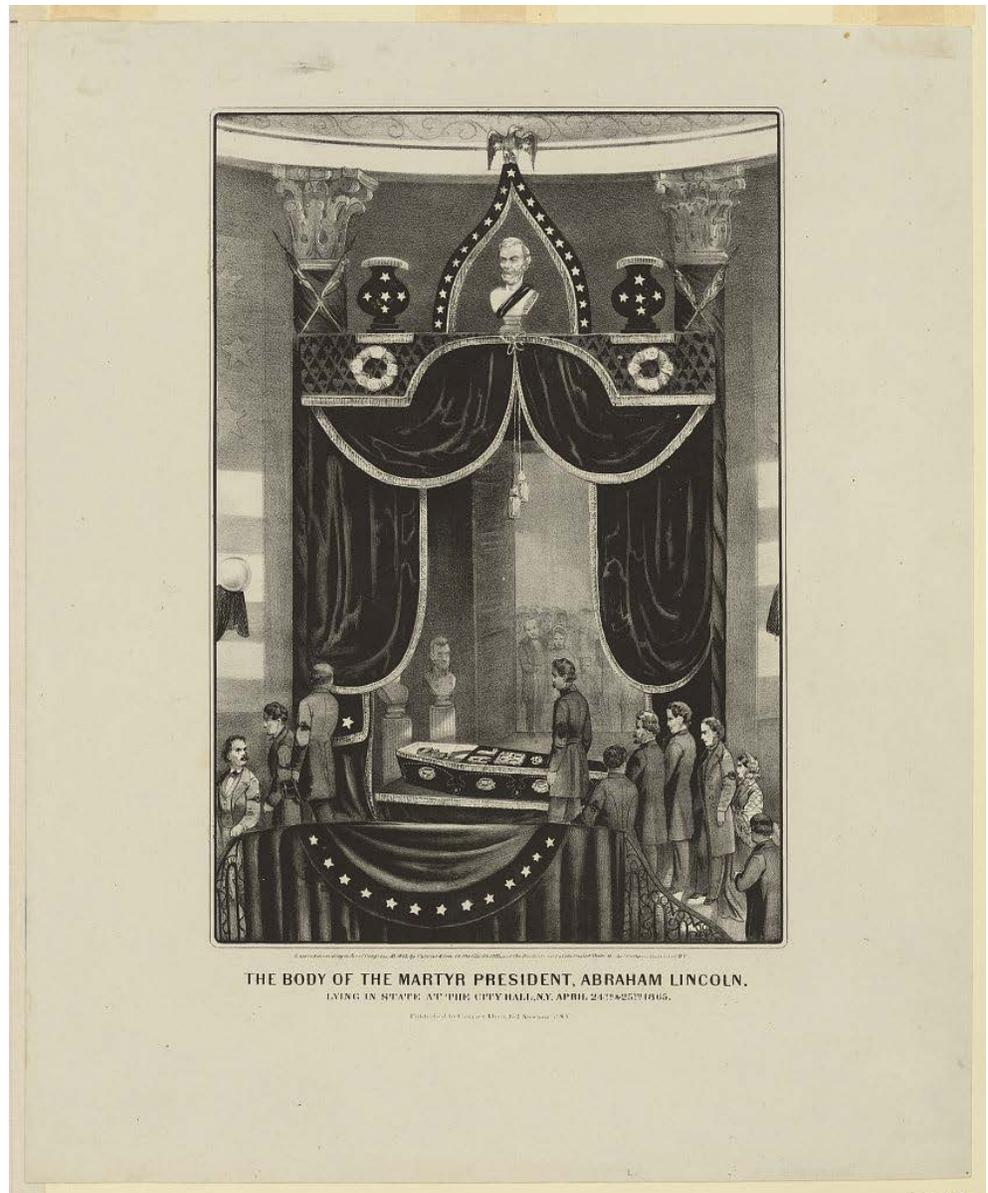


Figure 7

Currier & Ives, *The Body of the Martyr Abraham Lincoln Lying in State at the City Hall, New York, April 24th, 25th, 1865*. Lithograph. 17.75 x 13 in (19.68 x 33.02 cm). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

The first sculptor to draw upon these artifacts, Saint-Gaudens “made extensive use” of their intimate anatomy for his own work.⁵⁸ Diana Strazdes has even proposed that the “necessarily relaxed facial features” of Lincoln’s mask may have “encouraged the contemplative attitude for the developing figure of Lincoln.”⁵⁹ Indeed, the introspective bearing of Lincoln’s countenance, physical frame, and gestures represents one of the final sculpture’s most striking attributes. Rather than position Lincoln in an authoritative, declamatory state, Saint-Gaudens elected to present him standing before a ceremonial, Klismos-style Chair of State, head bowed, right hand in a soft fist behind his back, the other gripping his lapel; the sculpture captures Lincoln in the quiet, thought-gathering pause, perhaps “weighing his words,” before a public address.⁶⁰

Following its ceremonial unveiling and dedication on October 22, 1887, Saint-Gaudens’s *Standing Lincoln* was met with an outpouring of critical accolades, securing its place as a paradigm of Lincoln statuary. A resounding refrain emerged amid this approving chorus—one that held the sculpture’s authentic likeness as the defining feature and in highest esteem. The renowned art critic Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, for example, found the pose “simple, natural, individually characteristic—as far removed from the conventionally dramatic or ‘sculpturesque’ as from the baldly commonplace. Neither physical facts nor facts of costume are palliated or adorned. . . . What we see are realities. . . suffused with poetic thought. . . and ennobled though not altered by the subtle touch of art.”⁶¹ The *Chicago Daily Tribune* pronounced that the “counterfeit presentment was indeed Abraham Lincoln,” and concluded that “the entire aspect is so like the man, so devoid of artifice or paltriness that, in spite of the homely features, it becomes majestic.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Wilkinson, *Uncommon Clay*, 161. John H. Dryfhout invokes the use of these casts as evidence that realism was “a necessary ingredient to Saint-Gaudens,” in *The Work of Augustus Saint-Gaudens* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2008), 32. See also Kathryn Greenthal, *Augustus Saint-Gaudens: Master Sculptor* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 126.

⁵⁹ Diana Strazdes, “Recasting History: Word and Image in Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s Standing Lincoln Monument,” *Word and Image* 26 (2010): 134. Thayer Tolles claims that Saint-Gaudens “adopted from the mask the high forehead, large ears, deep-set eyes, and facial structure, to which he added the familiar tousled hair, bushy eyebrows, and trimmed beard,” “Abraham Lincoln” 226.

⁶⁰ Tolles, “Abraham Lincoln,” 227; Christopher A. Thomas, *The Lincoln Memorial and American Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 9. The speech before which the figure in *Standing Lincoln* hesitates is generally thought to be the Gettysburg Address. The sculpture is set within the context of an elaborate base, across which inscriptions may be read; indeed, the monument was born from a collaborative effort, with the base designed by the architect Stanford White (1853–1906) and the inscriptions written by Richard Watson Gilder (1844–1909). For a sensitive, comprehensive reading of the monument as a whole, see Strazdes, “Recasting History.”

⁶¹ M. G. van Rensselaer, “Saint-Gaudens’s Lincoln,” *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 35 (November 1887): 39.

⁶² “Eli Bates, Great Gift: Saint Gaudens: Colossal Statue of Lincoln,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1887, 2; and “The Martyr President: Unveiling His Statue at Lincoln Park Yesterday,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 23, 1887, 9. Lincoln’s unique carriage was generally deemed “homely,” awkward, and elusive; as James Mellon avers, “Lincoln’s features were the despair of every artist who undertook his portrait.” Lincoln himself was quite aware of this fact—so aware, that, upon an accusation of being “two-faced” during the Lincoln-Douglas debates, he allegedly retorted, “If I had another face, do you think I’d wear this one?” See Mellon, *The Face of Lincoln*, 159.



Figure 8

Hans Memling (German, 1430–1494), *Saint Veronica* [obverse], c. 1470/1475. Oil on panel. 12 5/16 x 9 5/8 inches (31.2 x 24.4 cm). Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery, 1952.5.46a.

Such encomiums speak to the driving force behind the sculpture's exceptionality for nineteenth-century audiences: its powerful resemblance, an authenticity afforded by Volk's life molds.⁶³ For period viewers, the monument's majesty, indeed its sanctity, is an explicit byproduct of its verism, and, in this way, Saint-Gaudens established a precedent. F. Lauriston Bullard, in his discussion of the artist's use of the casts, contends that "since the erection of his Standing Lincoln at Chicago in 1887, many, perhaps nearly all, of the sculptors have had the advantage of the use of that famous mask."⁶⁴ Volk's direct impressions, or "true" images, of Lincoln's visage and hands, provided the "blueprints," so to speak, for an astonishingly wide variety of sculptural manifestations, from the iconic Lincoln Memorial (1920) in Washington, DC, by Daniel Chester French, to Abraham Lincoln (1917), another standing bronze in Cincinnati by George Grey Barnard.⁶⁵

A final medieval topos will shed light on this point, especially in relation to the casts' ready provision of an "original" relic from which a multitude of referential objects and images stem and proliferate. Two artifacts "of special authority" were thought to represent

the "Holy Face" of Christ during the Incarnation: the cloth of Edessa, or the Mandylin, in the East, and the Veronica, or vera icon, in the West.⁶⁶ According to the earliest documentary texts, the "Holy Face was an impression of Christ's features on a veil or linen cloth, created directly by contact."⁶⁷ Because Christ's body had ascended to Heaven, not a single corporeal relic remained, thereby establishing the "contact relics" of the Holy Face as all the more precious and symbolically complex. These tertiary relics do not proffer an artistic likeness of Christ's face; they instead retain the outline of his countenance, "not made with human hands,"

⁶³ Tolles, "Abraham Lincoln," 226.

⁶⁴ Bullard, *Lincoln in Marble and Bronze*, 4–5.

⁶⁵ Volk himself engaged his casts for the production of a Lincoln monument in Washington Square in Rochester, New York. See Holcomb, "Leonard Wells Volk," 69.

⁶⁶ Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf, eds., *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium Held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1996), ix. This text opens with a description of the two preeminent relics and their provenance: "The Mandylin healed King Agbar of Edessa, who was converted by it; and it protected his city from destruction and occupation. The Emperor Constantine Porphyrogennetos, in turn, sought the Edessa Face for his palatine chapel in Constantinople, where it became the city's palladium. In Rome, where spiritual and political power converged in the pope's hand, the Veronica was housed in St. Peter's; the chance to see it motivated millions of pilgrims."

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

impregnated within the cloth—a remarkable trace that echoes the impression made in the original plaster mold and immortalized through the casts of Lincoln.⁶⁸ The “venerable originals” of the Mandyllion and the Veronica, however, circulated primarily in the guise of copies and often as two-dimensional renderings.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, these derivatives were regarded as legitimate and holy in their own right by virtue of an “iconographical formula,” which explicitly visualized the existence of their “ecclesiological” referent: in general, as seen in the National Gallery’s fifteenth-century painting on panel by Hans Memling, Christ’s neckless head is depicted against a luminous, white cloth, held outspread and aloft by St. Veronica (Fig. 8).⁷⁰

The Mandyllion and the Veronica boast an extraordinarily rich textual and iconographic history, but Gerhard Wolf engages one aspect that has striking parallels in this study. According to Wolf, the Western cult of the Veronica, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, mobilized “images of a new kind,” not simply cult images, but “images of another image.”⁷¹ He explains:

*The face on the cloth is as it were a symbolic form or the immanent condition for this process. The original is a product of touch; but the artists who pictured the face of Christ certainly did not paint with sacramental blood, but rather in a mimetic act. . . . The role of the original (transferred from Jerusalem to Rome) is that of a screen open to projections, which guarantees the transposition of the primordial touch . . . into a visual contact offered by the copy.*⁷²

The original, in this case, is both generous and fecund, spawning countless generations of equally impactful simulations. If the vera icon is a “screen open to projections,” then the Lincoln masks themselves serve as “molds” from which new renditions of proportionate virtue may be made. As Harold Holzer incisively points out, “Few modern viewers realize that the marble hands grasping the throne-like chair of the Lincoln Memorial and the hand clutching his lapel in the great monument at Lincoln Park in Chicago owe their inspiration—and their lifelike detail—to Volk’s pioneer castings. . . . [The casts] live primarily in the work of many others.”⁷³ Each variation is indelibly tethered to and empowered by the cast originals. Their genealogy is indebted to the casts’ material substantiations of Lincoln’s bodily presence and touch.

Conclusion: “From the Living Face”

Fragments of Lincoln’s body and personal possessions, or “Lincolniana,” have widely been regarded and collected as conventional relics since the president’s death over 150 years ago. For instance, Dr. Edward Curtis, while cleaning the surgical instruments used in Lincoln’s autopsy, discovered “[a tiny splinter of bone from President Lincoln’s head](#),” which had been

⁶⁸ Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a “True” Image* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 5–6, 144–50.

⁶⁹ According to Baert, the “prototype of the neckless face, such as the Greek acheiropoiotos of Abgar, the Mandyllion, arrived in the West at least in the thirteenth century,” *Disembodied Heads*, 187.

⁷⁰ Kessler and Wolf, *Holy Face*, 156 and 177. The cult of Veronica was fomented by Innocent III (1160–1216) in Rome; see Baert, *Disembodied Heads*, 187.

⁷¹ Gerhard Wolf, “From Mandyllion to Veronica,” in *Holy Face*, 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 176–77.

⁷³ Holzer, *Civil War*, 42.

driven into the brain by the bullet.⁷⁴ Curtis immediately packaged the fragment and mailed it to his wife, Augusta L. Curtis, for safe-keeping; Richard Wightman Fox aptly observed that “she became the proud possessor of the most eagerly pursued type of body relic in the Christian West since the fourth century: a sliver of the martyr’s bone.”⁷⁵ This relic is now housed in the National Museum of Health and Medicine, along with other precious remnants, the most visceral of which is undoubtedly the [fatal bullet](#).

As this study has shown, Lincoln’s life mask and hand casts by Leonard Volk merit the same, if not greater, hallowed accreditation. The correlative interplay between nineteenth-century and medieval material cultures engenders a more nuanced comprehension of the potency of these objects, and such an interpretation concretizes their place within an American “relicual” tradition. The casts even patently demand this recognition by way of an inscription, or, in medieval lexicon, an “authentic.” The bronze “after-casts” all bear the same demonstrative message, inscribed within the metal substrate on the back of the mask and the truncated surface of the hands’ wrists. As in the copy held in the collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the label reads: “This cast was made for Fairmount Park Association, a subscriber to the fund for the purchase and presentation to the United States Government of the original mask made in Chicago April 1860 by Leonard W. Volk from the living face of Abraham Lincoln. This cast was taken from the first replica of the original in New York City, February 1886.” This pronouncement leaves no doubt as to the casts’ authenticity, their sacred provenance, and their perpetuation, dissemination, and enlivenment of Lincoln’s likeness, and to some degree, his very presence, long after death. In the words of the poet Richard Watson Gilder: “This bronze doth keep the very form and mould of our great martyr’s face.”⁷⁶



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⁷⁴ This quotation derives from a sworn affidavit signed by Augusta L. Curtis, dated May 11, 1926, and quoted at length in Helen R. Purtle, “Lincoln Memorabilia in the Medical Museum of the Armed Forces of Pathology,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 32 (January–February 1958): 72–73.

⁷⁵ Wightman Fox, *Lincoln’s Body*, 64. Teresa Barnett details one such Lincolniana collection that was put up for auction in 2007 and included: “fragments of the hearthstones of cabins Lincoln lived in as a boy, his rail-splitting maul . . . strands of his hair, a pair of his spectacles, the tablecloth on which he ate his last meal, bloodstained bits of his pillow slip, bandages, and shirt collar, and handles from his coffin.” See Teresa Barnett, *Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 194–95.

⁷⁶ This excerpt comes from Richard Watson Gilder’s poem, “On the Life-Mask of Abraham Lincoln,” which begins: “This bronze doth keep the very form and mold of our great martyr’s face,” and was first published in *Century Illustrated Magazine* 33 (November 1886): 37. Edmund Clarence Stedman devoted verse to the casts of Lincoln’s hands as well in “The Hand of Lincoln”: “Look on this cast, and know the hand that bore a nation in its hold; from this mute witness understand what Lincoln was—how large of mold,” in *The Poems of Edmund Clarence Stedman* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908), 435. To read each of these poems in full, see Appendices A and B. Both poems as well as many others on Lincoln are reproduced in Osborn H. Oldroyd, *The Poet’s Lincoln: Tributes in Verse to the Martyred President* (Washington, DC: Published by the editor, 1915).