

Vinnie Ream – sixteen-year-old Sculptress’ Recollections of Abraham Lincoln

Perhaps, one of the most intimate sketches of Abraham Lincoln, the real man, has been passed down to us by a young sculptress of the day – Vinnie Ream. In 1864, Senator James S. Rollins of Missouri approached President Lincoln with an unusual request: he asked permission for a sixteen-year-old girl to have the benefit of personal sittings to make sketches for a statue of the president.¹

He declined the petition with the candid question: “Why would anyone want to picture a man so homely?” The senator pointed out that the girl was young, talented, ambitious and would be disappointed. Lincoln remained unswerved. “But,” said the senator, “she’s very poor.” This motivated Lincoln to respond: “She is poor, is she? Well, that is nothing against her. I will sit for the model.”²

Following are the recollections from the daily sittings with him in the months prior to his tragic death: In her personal recollection of Lincoln Vinnie Ream relates her own story of a young girl’s eyewitness impressions of the Great Emancipator:

The opportunity that I had to study Abraham Lincoln, was, indeed, unusual, because of its intimacy and because of the unusual conditions under which I saw him. There were a good many people who were rather closely acquainted with Lincoln and who, I think, appraised his character rather correctly. Most of them are, however, long since dead.

When I knew him and spent half an hour daily with him while modeling my statue, he was nearing that greatest of tragedies in American history, the assassination in the theater. So I knew the ultimate man. I met him also as an impressionable young girl of sixteen and the intuitions of such a child as I was are very apt to be correct. The mind at that age is as plastic as clay and receives an impression as readily, and that impression is likely to harden and be permanently retained. At sixteen I was mature enough to very well grasp the character of the man...

Lincoln had been painted and modeled before, and when friends of mine first asked him to sit for me he dismissed them wearily until he was told that I was but an ambitious girl, poor and obscure. He granted me sittings for no other reason than that I was in need. Had I been the greatest sculptor in the world, I am quite sure I would have been refused.

I came for half an hour every day. I was the merest slip of a child, weighing less than ninety pounds, and the contrast between the raw-boned man and me was indeed great. I sat demurely in my corner and begged Mr. Lincoln not to allow me to disturb him. It seemed that he used this half hour as a time for relaxation, for he always left instructions that no one was to be admitted during that time.

He seemed to find a strange sort of companionship in being with me, although we talked but little. His favorite son, Willie, had but just died, and this had been the greatest personal sorrow in a life that was mostly sorrowful. I made him think of Willie. He often said so and as often wept.

I think that history is particularly correct in writing Lincoln down as the man of sorrow. The one great, lasting, all-dominating impression that I have always carried of Lincoln has been that of unfathomable sorrow, and it was this that I tried to put into my statue. When he sat for me I believe he let himself go and fell into the mood that was ever within him, but against which he struggled. He never told a funny story to me. He rarely smiled.

I remember him especially in two attitudes. The first of these was his great form slouched into the chair at his desk, his huge feet extended, his head bowed on his chest, deeply thoughtful. I think he was, during those moments, following in mind some such thing as the operation of the army of Grant about Richmond,

appraising the horrible sacrifices that every day brought upon the people of his nation feeling that all the deaths that wisdom and forethought might prevent would and should be laid at his door. He was hearing the cries of suffering that were coming from the prisons and the sobs of the mothers for sons, lost like his own.

The second attitude he most often assumed was by the window that looked out upon the White House lawn. I always thought that when he stood by the window he was looking out for Willie, for he had watched the boy play many an afternoon from that very window. It was as he stood by the window that the great tears would course down his hollow cheeks, and he would be forced to dry them with his handkerchief. On two or three occasions he was so broken with his grief that he sank into a chair by the window and wept aloud. A big, strong man broken by grief is always a tragic thing to see, but never was there grief equal to Lincoln's.

In all the months that I had my daily half hour with Lincoln the order that we were not to be interrupted was broken but twice, and in each of these interruptions the breach was strangely illustrative of the character of the man. The first person who intruded upon the rest hour was a woman of middle age. She was the mother of a boy who had worn the gray and who had been captured and was in the old capitol prison.

The mother wanted a pass to see her boy, and such a pass required the signature of the President. Lincoln listened graciously to the woman's plea, wrote a pass with his own hand and apologized that the boy was being kept from his home. The second woman was young and pretty, and she blushed when she started, falteringly, to state her mission. The President anticipated her request, said that he knew by her blushes that she wanted to see a sweetheart, and granted her request in advance.

These visits to the White House continued for five months. Through all this time the personality of Lincoln was gradually sinking deeper and deeper into my soul. I was modeling the man in clay, but he was being engraved more deeply upon my heart.

Then, finally, came the great tragedy. I was in our home on Capitol Hill that terrible night. My parents had been out for the evening. They returned about midnight, and as they were entering the house, someone hurrying past called out to them that the President had been murdered. The murder of a President of a great nation is a most terribly tragic thing at best. So, of course, I was moved beyond measure at the death of Lincoln. I was prostrated...The success of the statue that I subsequently made was attributed to its trueness to the actual Lincoln. My ability to produce it was unquestionably due to those half hours in the quiet of the President's office, and to the searing in of the image by the great tragedy.³

Bibliography:

¹Herndon, Ann. *The Teenage Girl who Sculptured Abraham Lincoln*. The Sunday Star Magazine, February 10, 1957, Washington, D.C., p. 15.

²Hoxie, Vinnie Ream. *Personal Recollections of Lincoln*. Office of the Architect of the Capitol, Washington, D.C.

³Ibid.