

*Head of Lincoln* at the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts  
By Elizabeth Johns

Personal in its scale rather than monumental, a private meditation rather than a public memorial, the marble *Head of Lincoln*, 1929 [Figure 1] by Gutzon Borglum (1867-1941) in the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts is a little-known gem.

Rising from rough stone, the *Head* presents to the viewer the President's deep-set, hooded eyes, cheekbones with skin tightly pulled over them, lines and softening flesh through his face and protruding lower lip. The physiognomy and emotions of Lincoln are the sculptor's single concern. Without a bust, on which suit or toga would make allusions to past heroes, the work is twenty inches high, including the stone below the head. It is displayed on a pedestal that permits the viewer to look directly into the likeness of the president, a likeness emanating the sorrow, worry and weariness of an old man at fifty-nine.

This *Head of Lincoln* entered the WCMFA collection in 1931, with the opening that year of the museum established by the Pittsburgh-born and expatriate painter William H. Singer, Jr. and his Hagerstown-born wife Anna Brugh Singer. In 1929, during the time that Anna Singer and her husband were planning the Museum as a gift to the Hagerstown community, Mrs. Singer commissioned Borglum to create the sculpture, asking that it be a "replica" of the large *Head of Lincoln*, 1908, in the U.S. Capitol. The couple presented not only the building, but part of their collection, and throughout the late 1920s Mrs. Singer bought works that would give the Museum a complete installation for its grand opening.<sup>i</sup>

Because Borglum is associated primarily with the four Presidents at Mount Rushmore, South Dakota, this sculpture is something of a surprise.<sup>ii</sup> Born in Idaho and peripatetic until he went to Paris to study as both painter and sculptor, including making himself well known to Auguste Rodin and his apprentices, Borglum established himself in New York in 1901. There he earned the reputation of being arrogant and refractory. Among his pronouncements was that beauty emanated only from "soul-consciousness," with the implication that except for his own there wasn't much among artists. He insulted fellow-members in the American Society of Sculptors as provincial and denounced the revered Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907) after his death as only "pseudo-classical" and unable to make his own designs.<sup>iii</sup> Not a very careful businessman, Borglum was fired for mismanagement in 1925 by the Daughters of the Confederacy from his monumental project on Stone Mountain, Atlanta. Soon he was at work on the four presidents on Mount Rushmore, but the project outlasted him and had to be finished by his son. Devoted to the monumental as the only significant scale for sculpture, he was always working on small pieces to pay the bills and strained patrons' patience.

Even so, Borglum was successful in cultivating and sustaining friendships, among them with the Singers and their artist friends. Some of these friendships may have begun in the summer of 1907, when the Singers lived in New York and William exhibited at several venues, including the National Academy of Design.<sup>iv</sup> Another opportunity occurred later in 1907, when the Singers were at Old Lyme, Connecticut among some of Borglum's friends. Common associates also included the Norwegian-American painter and sculptor Martin Borgord (1866-1935) and, in Paris, the American sculptor Paul Wayland Bartlett (1865-1925). Borglum and many of these artists were later visitors at the Singers' homes in Laren, the Netherlands, and Olden, Norway.<sup>v</sup>

Anna Singer's commissioning of the WCMFA's *Head of Lincoln* followed through on Borglum's first nationally-recognized achievement: the *Head of Lincoln* now in the U.S. Capitol [Fig. 2] So profound an admirer of Lincoln that he named his son after him (Lincoln Borglum, 1912-1986), Borglum studied the life masks of Leonard Volk for his sculpture and perhaps also used portrait photographs of the president. Because he believed that

sculpture should reveal the “soul” of its subject, he may also have consulted Walt Whitman’s first-hand descriptions of the President in *Specimen Days*, published in 1882.

Whitman, having seen Lincoln many times in Washington, wrote in 1861:

“I see very plain ABRAHAM LINCOLN’S dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. . . . far beneath his smile I notice well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man’s face. There is something else there. One of the great portrait painters of two or three centuries ago is needed.”<sup>vi</sup>

And in 1864, at Lincoln’s second Inauguration, Whitman lamented:

Lincoln “look’d very much worn and tired; the lines, indeed, of vast responsibilities, intricate questions, and demands of life and death, cut deeper than ever upon his dark brown face; yet all the old goodness, tenderness, sadness, and canny shrewdness [showed] underneath the furrows.”<sup>vii</sup>

Borglum undertook the U.S. Capitol *Head of Lincoln* in 1907 as the first of three heads he wanted to carve: Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, and Christ. His fame for the result was the result of his own bravado: after completing the work in 1908, he wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt to ask him to display the sculpture for Lincoln’s birthday in the President’s Room of the White House. Roosevelt agreed, and then, impressed with the power of the sculpture, called upon investment broker and banker Eugene Meyer, Jr. to purchase the work for the U.S. Capitol. Congress’s purchase of the work, with legislation to place it on permanent display in the Capitol Rotunda, was a major publicity break-through. The sculpture, which Borglum claimed he had carved directly from the marble rather than using a cast, was deemed by critics as more faithful than any previous likeness to Lincoln’s physiognomy and psychology. Lincoln’s son, Robert, visited the Capitol to see it and wrote the artist that the work was “the most extraordinarily good portrait of my father I have ever seen.”<sup>viii</sup> Following through on his creed that the larger the better, in 1911 Borglum designed a pedestal for the *Head* that emphasized its grandeur [Fig. 3]. He had hoped that the sculpture would be unique, but later consented to molds that were used for portraits in bronze, among them the copy at Lincoln’s tomb in Springfield, Illinois in 1909.

Twenty some years later, it was a “replica” of this *Head of Lincoln* of 1908 that Mrs. Singer commissioned. She herself was devoted to Lincoln’s memory.<sup>ix</sup> Perhaps she and her husband had seen Borglum’s *Head of Lincoln* in the U.S. Capitol during their visit in 1927 and 1928 to the United States, which included a stop in near-by Hagerstown, but she surely knew about it from its publicity.<sup>x</sup> In New York during that visit, which had been timed to coincide with William’s large exhibition of his Norwegian landscapes at the Durand-Ruel Gallery, the Singers hosted a dinner to announce their plans for the Hagerstown museum. Envisioning the replica as gracing the sculpture court of the proposed museum, Anna Singer asked their mutual friend Martin Borgord to talk with Borglum about it on his next visit to the sculptor, who was in San Antonio, Texas working on a commission. The well-traveled Borgord delivered the request in person.

In accepting the commission in 1929, Borglum wrote Anna:

“My dear Mrs. Singer:

Our dear friend Martin Borgord communicated to me two or three months ago your interest in my Lincoln at the Capitol in Washington and your inquiry as to whether or not I had a replica of it. He has told you about that.

“The facts are that I began a replica, half the size of the Lincoln, in marble about three or four years ago at Stamford, Connecticut [where Borglum had built a large studio]—a very beautiful piece of marble that

I had on hand at the time. It was made for a dear friend of mine in Michigan who died, unfortunately, before it was finished. Upon receipt of your letter by Martin that you were interested in this marble and would like it, I had it shipped from my studio in Stamford to San Antonio here, and it is now practically finished and I'm having it photographed, which will follow under separate cover.

"The marble of course has been cut by myself, and I think, in certain ways, is probably a little freer and a little better as a piece of workmanship than the one at the Capitol, and I am delighted that you are to have it. I'm particularly delighted that it goes to you through my dear old friend Martin, who literally began his career at the time I began mine in California, and we have met probably the third or fourth time in thirty odd years. I know you are going to like the head so I will say nothing more about that excepting that it is accepted by the family and the Federal government as the official portrait of Lincoln."<sup>xi</sup>

The *Head* was sent directly to Hagerstown from San Antonio.

Unfortunately, the Singers were not able to come to Hagerstown when the Museum was dedicated in 1931. Because of Mr. Singer's illness and the intervening war, and her husband's death in 1943, Mrs. Singer did not visit until 1946. In the meantime, Borglum had been doing some thinking about the "replica." Looking back in 1936 on his creation of the work, Borglum responded to Richard Carl Medford, an early director of the Museum, who had inquired about the origins of the *Head*:

"In reply to your letter of the 13<sup>th</sup> March, forwarded to me from South Dakota, you are quite right about the marble bust purchased by Mrs. Singer. This is the original study in marble, rather [than] made from the original study that is in larger dimensions in the Capitol in Washington. . . it is probably finer in its technique than the one in the Capitol. . Sincerely yours, (signed) Gutzon Borglum."<sup>xii</sup>

Had Borglum at last spoken his mind that his *Head of Lincoln* in 1908 was a "study"? His retrospective use of the term "study" for even the 1908 head perhaps reveals his sense of fidelity to an inner vision even on a monumental scale. Or was he claiming (despite his statement in his letter in 1929) that the WCMFA *Head* was in fact the original study for the work in the Capitol? In writing about the Hagerstown museum's *Head* as being "freer" and "a little better as a piece of workmanship" and "finer in its technique" than the one at the Capitol, Borglum was perhaps voicing his claim over the years that beauty rests only in "soul-consciousness"—that of the artist and that of his subject.

Indeed, this aspect of Lincoln is quite clear in the "study" at WCMFA. Regretting the beauty of many of Borglum's works that later went ignored, Mary, his widow, wrote in 1952: "It is a striking thing about Borglum that nobody knew very much about him, even his friends. More people know of him now than ever did when he was living, and to most of them he is a man whose sole work was the carving of Mount Rushmore."<sup>xiii</sup> (19 in Casey, etc.)

The viewer in Hagerstown can know much more about Borglum than that. As one stands looking directly into the face of Lincoln in this "study," attentive to the inner life of the President, no doubt the sculptor would be pleased to know that his "soul-consciousness" is quite evident in his work at the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts.

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<sup>i</sup> On the establishment of the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, see *Washington County Museum of Fine Arts: "Our Fondest Dreams and Hopes:"the Seventy-Fifth Year, 1931-2006* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Washington

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County Museum of Fine Arts, 2006), and Helen Schretlen, *Loving Art: the William & Anna Singer Collection* (Singer Laren: Waanders Publishers, Zwolle, the Netherlands, 2006).

<sup>ii</sup> On Borglum, see Gerald W. Johnson, *The Undefeated* (New York: Minton, Balch & company, 1927); Robert Joseph Casey and Mary Borglum, *Give the Man Room: The Story of Gutzon Borglum* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952); and Rosa Portell, *Out of Rushmore's Shadow: the Artistic Development of Gutzon Borglum* (Stamford, Connecticut: Stamford Museum & Nature Center, 1999).

<sup>iii</sup> Casey and Borglum, p. 71.

<sup>iv</sup> Singer exhibited at several venues in New York, and had one of his Norwegian landscapes accepted at the National Academy in winter, 1907 (Schretlen, p. 62).

<sup>v</sup> Borglum and his son Lincoln visited the Singers at Dalheim, their home in Olden, Norway, in the summer of 1931 (Schretlen, p. 169); and with the Norwegian-born American painter Jonas Lie (1880-1940), he spent time with them there in 1938 (Schretlen, p. 98).

<sup>vi</sup> *Specimen Days*, August 12, 1861.

<sup>vii</sup> *Specimen Days*, March 4, 1864, Inauguration.

<sup>viii</sup> Robert T. Lincoln, letter to Borglum on February 6, 1908, cited on the website of the Architect of the Capitol: <http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/lincoln> by borglum.cfm.

<sup>ix</sup> Schretlen, p. 98.

<sup>x</sup> *The Seventy-Fifth Year*, WCMFA, p. 26.

<sup>xi</sup> Letter to Mrs. Singer, Eleventh April 1929, sent from the Menger Hotel, San Antonio, Texas. In Borglum object file, WCMFA.

<sup>xii</sup> Borglum to Medford, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1936, writing from 124 East Woodlawn, San Antonio, Texas, responding to Medford's letter of March 30, 1936. Both letters are in the Borglum object file, WCMFA.

<sup>xiii</sup> Casey and Borglum, p. 19.

Elizabeth Johns is Professor Emerita of Art History, University of Pennsylvania, and resides in Hagerstown, Maryland. Professor Johns received her B.A. degree and election to Phi Beta Kappa from Birmingham-Southern College, M.A. from University of California at Berkeley, and Ph.D. from Emory University. Before and during her Ph.D. studies, she held positions in English and Humanities at Albany State College, Clayton Community College, and Savannah State College, all in Georgia. In 1975 she accepted an appointment in Art History at the University of Maryland, College Park; in 1987 she became Andrew Mellon Professor of Fine Arts and History at the University of Pittsburgh; and then in 1989 she joined the Penn faculty as Silfen Term Professor of the History of Art. Her books include *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton, 1983), for which she won the Mitchell Prize for the most promising first book in the history of art; *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (Yale, 1991), which she wrote on fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson Center; the exhibition catalogue *New Worlds from Old: 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes* (Thames and Hudson, 1998); *Winslow Homer: The Nature of Observation* (California, 2002), for which she won the Charles Eldredge Prize from the Smithsonian American Art Museum; and the exhibition catalogue *Paths to Impressionism: French and American Landscape Paintings in the Worcester Art Museum* (Worcester, 2003). Professor Johns was promoted to professor emerita in 2001, after which she served for three years as the Lilly Vocation Fellow at the Center for Religion, Ethics and Culture at the College of the Holy Cross.