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Shooting Lincoln: Photography and the 16th President

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The Chrysler Museum of Art is home to one of the most substantial and significant collections of Civil War era photography in the United States. Composed entirely of objects from the museum's permanent collection, [*Shooting Lincoln: Photography and the 16th President*](#), drew upon these extensive holdings to construct a focused analysis and compelling narrative of the different ways in which photography intersected with the life, death, and career of Abraham Lincoln. Although the exhibition primarily featured photographs and prints, photographic equipment was integrated throughout the galleries to contextualize the means by which photographic images were created and circulated. Together, these more than 70 objects revealed new insights into Lincoln and the conduct of his presidency. The exhibition's overall narrative investigated how Lincoln and his photographers used images to shape the President's identity, but it also expanded this analysis to consider additional issues. These included: the physical, political, and social environments in which Lincoln carried out his presidency; the ways that photographs functioned politically and militarily; and the means by which images served collective desires of mourning and retribution following Lincoln's assassination.

Presented in the museum's Alice and Sol B. Frank photography galleries, the exhibition was divided into three rooms and organized thematically. The first room served as an introductory space, establishing several of the key themes that ran throughout the show. An iconic and familiar image of Lincoln first confronted visitors: Anthony Berger's 1864 portrait, made in Matthew Brady's Washington D.C. studio. This image appeared on the five-dollar bill for most of the twentieth century. On an adjacent wall, a single portrait of Lincoln appeared with Francis Hacker's *carte-de-visite* of Lincoln's purported childhood home and John Adams Whipple's portrait of Lincoln and his family at their Springfield home. This group demonstrated the ways in which photographs were intricately tied to the construction of Lincoln's political persona and historical legacy, both during his lifetime and well beyond.

The exhibition's first gallery also included a grouping of photographs and prints that showcased the range of visual media consumed by Civil War era audiences. Photographers clearly understood their medium's documentary value as evidenced in Alexander Gardner's *Newspaper Correspondents at the Execution of Captain Henry Wirz*, 1865, an image which

records the presence of literary observers who came to bear witness to the execution of the notorious Confederate commander of the Andersonville prisoner of war camp. The juxtaposition of two prints from *Harper's Weekly—The Army of the Potomac—A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty*, after Winslow Homer, and *The Harvest of Death—Gettysburg, July 4, 1863*, after Alexander Gardner and Timothy O. Sullivan—positioned photography as part of an array of visual strategies used to disseminate images related to the conflict.

Other photographs in this gallery explored the intellectual and physical environments that structured Lincoln's tenure as president. Several *carte-de-visite* portraits of Lincoln's allies and rivals were matted together in a group. While the sitters appeared formulaic in their conventional formal poses and attire, the gallery labels cleverly complicated the relationships between the politicians. In one example, the labels explained how Alexander Hamilton Stephens was once Lincoln's ally in Congress, and then his opponent as Vice President of the Confederacy, and then, late in the war, met personally with Lincoln in order to attempt to negotiate peace. Photographs of important sites in and around Washington, such as Alexander Gardner's *Patent Office, Washington, From South-West, 1865*—a building which served as a military hospital and barracks and also played host to Lincoln's second inaugural ball—established a physical sense of the capital during the Civil War, but also highlighted the range of subjects beyond portraiture that interested photographers and their public.

The exhibition's second gallery was devoted mainly to Lincoln's conduct as the nation's political and military leader. Alexander Gardner's well-known photograph *President Lincoln on Battle-Field of Antietam*, from *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War*, depicts the President among army officers following the long awaited, but far from decisive Union victory at Antietam. The exhibition built upon this context by including Matthew Brady's portraits of Lincoln's generals, George B. McClellan (1861) and Ulysses S. Grant (1864), which reflected the changes in top military command throughout the war. Another Brady portrait, *General R. E. Lee and Staff*, taken in Richmond shortly after the Confederate general's surrender at Appomattox, seemingly confirms the wisdom of Lincoln's final choice of Grant to lead the Union army to an ultimate victory. A single battlefield photograph, Timothy H. O'Sullivan's *Field Where General Reynolds Fell, Gettysburg, 1863* was paired in the exhibition with Charles John Tyson and Isaac Griffith Tyson's *Cemetery Hill, 1863* from the series *Views from the Battle Field of Gettysburg, July 1st, 2^d, and 3^d, 1863*. While calling to mind the impact of Lincoln's powerful elegiac Gettysburg Address, these images also accentuated the human cost of the war waged by the leaders and officers who appear in dignified studio portraits along the same gallery wall.

Photographers were equally eager to capture the significant political moments of Lincoln's presidency such as his second inauguration. This point was deftly made by the inclusion of William Morris Smith and Gardner's *Re-Inauguration of President Lincoln, 4th March, 1865*. Taken at a great distance, the image might at first seem to be a simple scenic view of the Capitol and its distinctive dome, which dominates the composition, if not for the multitude of crowds gathered on the Capitol steps, dressed in black and barely discernible. Indeed Gardner positioned his own camera much closer to the proceedings and hired Smith to travel further afield capturing ancillary views. A free-standing case in the middle of the gallery was devoted to an examination of one of Lincoln's utmost political accomplishments, the passage of the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished slavery. The case was anchored by a fascinating stereocard created by George May Powell that featured a

photomontage of portraits (most likely from Brady's extensive catalogue of notables) of the 38 Senators and 117 Congressmen who voted to secure passage of the Amendment. Lincoln's visage appears at the center base of the montage, signaling the pivotal role he played in this monumental legislative endeavor.

A nuanced and multilayered picture of the President emerged in the several other studio portraits included in this gallery. A Gardner portrait of Lincoln taken on November 8, 1863, a week prior to his delivery of the Gettysburg address, depicted a resolute and slightly stern President. The ca. 1890 print, one of the most formally striking portraits in the show, revealed that the self-fashioning on the part of the President was equally matched by the technical brilliance and artistry of his many photographers.

The final exhibition gallery assessed images produced in the wake of Lincoln's assassination. Lincoln's funeral train, which carried the President's body from Washington D.C. to his home in Springfield, Illinois over the course of 16 days, offered thousands of onlookers the chance to collectively mourn the loss of the nation's leader. The funeral procession also allowed many opportunities for photographers to capture the outpouring of grief and further memorialize the President through the images they produced. The exhibition included photographs of funerary gatherings along the route in Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Harrisburg. Most interesting of these was *The Engine "Nashville" of the Lincoln Funeral Train*, possibly by Henry H. Reeves, which depicts mourners and dignitaries gathered around the train's locomotive, the front of which bears a large photographic portrait of Lincoln. This image reinforced the important role that photographs had claimed in the service of grief, remembrance, and mourning during the course of the war.

In addition to these commemorative and mournful images, the gallery also included a large suite of works chronicling the capture and execution of the men and women that conspired to assassinate President Lincoln. The most haunting and powerful among these were eight different photographs created by Alexander Gardner at the execution of four of the convicted conspirators at the Old Arsenal Prison in Washington D.C. Together, they captured the gruesome enactment of the sentence and the unimpassioned preparation and orderliness of the proceedings. Gardner's numerous photographs of the hanging, taken at a distance and from above, were contrasted with his more intimate and casually posed portrait of *General John F. Hartranft and His Staff*. The disinterested but composed attitude of the officers charged with the conspirators' confinement and execution perhaps reflect the mindset of soldiers (and a nation at large) hardened to the prospect of death but resolute in the righteousness of its administration.

The sesquicentennial of the Civil War offered an ideal occasion for museums to mount exhibitions that reevaluated the conflict and its wider political and social impacts through the visual arts. In this vein, the highly successful presentation of *Shooting Lincoln* offered a substantial contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the sixteenth president and the relatively young medium of photography. While exhibitions such as *The Civil War in American Art* (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012-13) and *Photography and the American Civil War* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013) offered an expansive treatment of the intersections between art and the Civil War, the Chrysler's exhibition offered a more focused analysis of the ways in which a single pivotal figure exerted a profound influence upon a vast range of photographic

imagery. Rather than a catalogue of Lincoln portraiture, the exhibition smartly incorporated more varied images that established the broad footprint that Lincoln bore on the visual culture of the era. These connections were convincingly established through the thoughtful presentation of the images as well as the extensive, well-researched labels.

The exhibition contributed to our understanding of Civil War era photography in several ways, first by sorting out key cataloguing questions of authorship—an ongoing and painstaking process in the field of Civil War photography. Several works in the show gained new or clarified cataloguing information. The exhibition also focused attention on less familiar figures such as Charles John Tyson, Isaac Griffith Tyson, and Samuel Montague Fassett, expanding the range of photographers usually associated with Lincoln, and suggesting avenues for further study. This exhibition also offered a substantial contribution to Lincoln scholarship by tracing the president’s impact on the period’s visual culture beyond the genre of portraiture. Finally, *Shooting Lincoln: Photography and the 16th President* demonstrated the merits of a well-executed exhibition of objects from a permanent collection. Drawn from a deep and carefully assembled collection and based upon sustained, in-depth research, the presentation of the photographs and prints in this exhibition forged potent connections between familiar and unexpected objects, which will propel scholarship and enliven the museum’s holdings for both scholars and the public.