

The Life Masks of Lincoln

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance
- Relate dates of Lincoln’s presidency to the Civil War
- Understand the toll that the war took on Lincoln.

Portraits

Abraham Lincoln

Leonard Wells Volk

Plaster, 1917 cast after 1860 original

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

NPG.71.24

Abraham Lincoln

Clark Mills

Plaster, c. 1917 cast after 1865 original

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

NPG.71.26

Background Information for Teachers

“If any personal description of me is thought desirable it may be said, I am, in height, six feet, four inches, nearly; lean in flesh, weighing on an average one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair, and gray eyes—no other marks or brands recollected.” ——
—Abraham Lincoln, 1859

Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth president of the United States, serving from 1861 to 1865. His physical traits helped define him and have made him easily recognizable to generations of Americans.

Life masks: molds taken from faces of living individuals. It was common practice to take a “death” mask. However, both Lincoln masks we are looking at were created while he was alive. These two life masks are significant for several reasons, especially because they show Lincoln the year before he became president and the year of his death.

Leonard Wells Volk made the life mask of Lincoln in April 1860. The image you see is a cast done in 1917 from Volk’s original. Volk met Lincoln during his debates with Stephen A. Douglas. Once Volk made the cast, he could create busts and cameos of Lincoln; after Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, Volk was prolific in producing Lincoln’s likeness after his earlier cast. Clark Mills made the life mask of Lincoln in February 1865, two months before Lincoln’s death.

Events During Lincoln's Presidency:

November 1860: Elected president

February 1861: Arrives in Washington

April 12, 1861: Confederate guns ordered to fire on at federal troops attempting to supply Fort Sumter, in Charleston, South Carolina

April 15, 1861: Calls for 75,000 volunteers/militia to suppress the rebellion

April 19, 1861: Calls for a naval blockade of the Confederate coastline

July 1862: Conducts first reading of Emancipation Proclamation

November 1864: Reelected to second term

March 1865: Second inauguration

April 8, 1865: Lee surrenders to Grant at Appomattox, Virginia

April 11, 1865: Gives last public address; urges a generous spirit of conciliation during the reconstruction

April 14, 1865: Shot by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theatre

Lesson Procedures

Portrait Activity

- Divide students into pairs. Give each pair the two images of the life masks (1860 and 1865)
- Have each pair of students sit across from each other, with each holding one image so the other cannot see it. Have them describe the image to each other.
- Place both images on the board and have students discuss similarities and differences.

Questions to consider:

- How much time has elapsed between the two images?
- What happened in the United States between the time the two images were produced?

Timeline Activity

Create a timeline of events in the United States between 1860 and 1865. Have students list the major battles during this time and place those in the timeline along with Lincoln's writing of the Emancipation Proclamation, his reelection, and major decisions he enacted during those five years. Place a copy of the first life mask at 1860 and a copy of the 1865 life mask at the end. Consider having students look for images of Lincoln to place along the timeline as well.

National Standards of Learning

Standards in History for Grades 5-12

Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)

Standard 2: The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people