

Lincoln and Photography: A Closer Look

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.
- Compare the characteristics of two portraits that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context.
- Communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

Portraits

Abraham Lincoln
By Mathew Brady
Salted-paper print, February 27, 1860
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
NPG.96.179
[Link >>](#)

Abraham Lincoln
By Alexander Gardner
Albumen silver print, 1865
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
NPG.81.M1
[Link >>](#)

Background Information for Teachers

Mathew Brady Photograph

Mathew Brady photographed Abraham Lincoln on February 27, 1860, mere hours before Lincoln delivered his Cooper Union address. This salted-paper print was skillfully retouched by Brady to give Lincoln a softer, younger appearance. Brady also adjusted Lincoln's collar to make him appear to have a shorter neck. Since the image was a photograph and easily reproducible, this portrait of Lincoln was sold to several newspapers covering the election. Artists at *Harper's Weekly* used the print to create a full-page woodcut telling the story of Lincoln's success in the election. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* also used the image as an illustration. Lincoln received the Republican nomination and was voted president. He gave credit for the portrait and speech, saying "Brady and the Cooper Institute made me President."

Alexander Gardner Photograph

Alexander Gardner's albumen silver print of Abraham Lincoln is one of the last formal photographs taken of the president before his assassination in 1865. On Sunday, February 5, Lincoln had a series of photographs taken at Gardner's Gallery in Washington, D.C. When

Gardner took the last photograph of Lincoln, the glass plate cracked. A single print was produced from the negative before it broke completely. Because of the cracked glass from the negative, the single print shows a line across Lincoln's head. After Lincoln's death in April, the print gained significance and seemed to foretell the president's assassination a few weeks later. A man named Mr. Solomon, who had met the president on numerous occasions, was present for the taking of the photograph. He recounted that Lincoln asked Solomon to tell him a funny story, resulting in the subtle smile in the print. In the photograph, Lincoln appears weary, and his eyes look at a distant horizon.

Lesson Procedures

Portrait Activity

Students analyze portraits of Abraham Lincoln as an introduction to the President's life.

Questions to consider with your students:

- What is Lincoln thinking? (Do this with 1860 photograph first, then with 1865 photograph.)
- List three adjectives to describe Lincoln's appearance in each photograph.
- What is the medium used to create these two portraits? Why is this significant?

Compare and Contrast

Create a Venn diagram to determine the similarities and differences between the two portraits.

Writing Activity

Split your class in half.

Have one half of your students write a letter to Mathew Brady as if they were Abraham Lincoln.

- Start with "Here are my thoughts on how you captured me ..."
- Students should consider the physicality of Lincoln in this photograph.
- Students should consider what was happening during the first days Lincoln was in office.

Have the other half of your students write a journal entry as if they were Abraham Lincoln after his sitting with Alexander Gardner in 1865.

- Start with "I left Alexander Gardner's studio today ..."
- Students should consider the physicality of Lincoln in this photograph.
- Students should consider what was happening in the last days Lincoln was in office.