

III. Visual Arts

Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth on Good Friday, April 14, 1865. The Christian symbolism that colored the rhetoric surrounding the event led artists to recast the defender of the Union and Great Emancipator as a religious martyr. This transformation was complex: while mourners took comfort interpreting Lincoln's death according to NT tenets of Christian sacrifice, northern artists, writers, and politicians, wary of forgiving the southern States, used Christian imagery to negotiate Lincoln's political legacy.

The struggle to define the meaning of Lincoln's transformation is evident across commemorative artworks produced in its aftermath. Wentworth Wilson's popular lithograph, *In Commemoration of Our Immortal President Abraham Lincoln* (1865) centers on a portrait of Lincoln flanked by images of Jesus beside the cross, and of the allegorical Columbia, who proffers the Emancipation Proclamation before the two slaves seeking sanctuary beside her. While Columbia casts her eyes away from Lincoln, beyond the image's left-hand frame and backward into the past, Christ's unbroken gaze aligns Lincoln's sacrifice with his own. Whether this alignment joins with D. Wiest's *In Memory of Abraham Lincoln: The Reward of the Just* (n.d.) to signal an end to the president's earthly work, or indicates the potential for its resurrection, remains unclear.

Elsewhere, one of the many mourning cards produced in 1865 invokes Hebrews to console the

bereaved masses. “Yet Speaketh,” reads Lincoln’s tombstone, recalling Abel’s “faith” and his “more excellent sacrifice.” With Abel’s righteousness in God’s eyes, comes the guarantee of life after death: “he being dead yet speaketh” (Heb 11:4, KJV). Coupled with words from his Second Inaugural promising clemency to the South – “With malice toward none, with charity for all” – Lincoln’s legacy of sacrifice and forgiveness appears both comfortingly immanent, and, engraved on his tomb, a lost hope to be mourned.

Selected Works ■ Anon., *In Memory of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States* (lithograph, ca. 1865, Library of Congress/USA). ■ Wentworth Wilson, *In Commemoration of Our Immortal President Abraham Lincoln* (lithograph, 1865, Library of Congress/USA). ■ D. Wiost, *In Memory of Abraham Lincoln: The Reward of the Just* (lithograph, n.d., Library of Congress/USA).

Bibliography: ■ Current, R. N., *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York 1958). ■ Fox, R. W., *Lincoln’s Body: A Cultural History* (New York 2015).

Kristen Treen