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Lincoln University, Jefferson City Missouri

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Benton Unveils A Masterpiece In Page Library Sun. Afternoon

Adding a fitting climax to the music at the page festival at Linear University was the presentation and unveiling of a portion of the Abraham Lincoln mural by Thomas Hart Benton in Page Library Sunday afternoon. The mural, 6 by 8½ feet, took three years to complete. Painted in tempera, mixture pigment and egg emulsion, the Benton mural was termed a classical masterpiece by James D. Parks, head of the University art department.

The painting shows a full life sized figure of Lincoln grasping the upstretched hand of a Negro. In the background of the painting some Negroes sitting around a campfire. A corner of a ruined building is at one side of the picture. The foreground of the painting shows a teacher-instructor.

Describing the painting Benton told the audience in the large auditorium in the foreground of my picture I have tried to suggest how knowledge, new minds in the quest of knowledge -- how the values of knowledge once acquired, are continually replanted.

He explained, "The Lincoln you see is the symbol also the social and legal implementation of that impulse.

"Behind Lincoln I have shown the full life of a Lincoln University. About a soldiers campfire men who have been given freedom, bet a start in the knowledge that will help to sustain it.

"As Lincoln himself represents the legal right to exercise it so Lincoln University has represented what is necessary to direct that urge and hold its gains. Freedom may be won violence but it cannot be maintained without knowledge.

Beginnings

Relating the background of the idea of the painting Benton told the audience, "some three years ago Dr. J. Erroll Miller, NAACP lawyer, came to my house in Kansas City, and suggested that I paint a portrait of Lincoln for the University. I agreed to try it. Little by little, however, and studied his photographic record. I began to move in the idea of a portrait toward that of a symbolic representation. I say that I could not make a Lincoln portrait which would be satisfactory to me from any of the photographs which had been taken of him. My ideas of Lincoln could not be tried to monumental aspects."

The idea of the Lincoln portrait here on the campus grew out of discussion between President of the University and the President of the 1951 senior class.

Benton, continuing in his address told the audience, "Lincoln for me as he must also be for the rest of you gathered here, more than a man, who, by his strength of character and judgement, impressed himself upon a convulsive period of our history. He is the symbol of something even greater than his place in the clash of events. He has come to stand for an universal and eternal impulse of the human soul, valid in all periods of all history. That is the impulse to be free, free not only from..."
some particular bondage, but from all bondage, from all tyranny, from all injustice, and from all the inherited misfortunes that an historical fate may have imposed, or that some doctrinal fanaticism may try to impose.

The speaker concluded his address with the presentation of the legal title of the picture to A. Byron Masterson, president of the Board of Curators represented the State of Missouri.

In conclusion he said, “When I was about half through my work on this project, the Supreme Court of the United States made a decision. This decision will, in time, no doubt change the character of Lincoln University.

“It will not however, change the fact that the University has played its historic part in the great upward struggle toward universal freedom which President Abraham Lincoln has come to symbolize for us. No matter what changes may occur in the future, I am giving this picture in memory of the Lincoln University that has been and to the Lincoln University that now is.”