

# The Bloomsbury Review

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### *A Labor of Love*

#### *The Life and Art of Vinnie Ream*

GLENN V SHERWOOD

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The gifted Vinnie Ream called her creation of Abraham Lincoln's statue in the U.S. capitol "A Labor of Love." Glenn V. Sherwood reveals that these same words "reflected my own personal odyssey in compiling this volume." The resulting biography of this young sculptor is not only an exhaustive study of the artist's life and the historic figures associated with her, but an in-depth review of the political significance of the era. Labeled "child genius" and "prairie Cinderella," Vinnie Ream was ahead of her time in many ways.

It's hard to imagine a girl of 18, more than a century ago, receiving a commission from the U.S. government to create a statue of the president. To be the youngest artist and first woman to achieve this honor is extraordinary. Ream's talents were as varied as the subjects she immortalized in clay and marble.

From her first poems and prose, published in newspapers at age 11, to her crowning achievement of the Lincoln statue in 1871, she created statuettes, busts, and portraits of such prominent people as Admiral Farragut, William Seward, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Susan B. Anthony, Horace Greeley, Frederick Douglass, and George A. Custer.

Despite her poor background and meager education, she loved music, which she both composed and performed, as well as poetry. Her poem "Lincoln," written after her statue was unveiled, contains these stirring lines:

*O, Lincoln, prophet, hero, friend!  
You clasped the hands so long estranged,  
You healed the wounds--you broke  
the chains,  
You honored all our silent slain.*

When she first met the great man and told him of her background, she recalled:

*And so it was, the great heart which vanity  
could not unlock opened with the sympathy  
that recalled to him his own youth.*

One newspaper described her Lincoln statue:

*He stands at his full height, the head bending forward, the face looking downward, as if surveying the Emancipation Proclamation held in his right hand. A long circular cloak--a modern cloak--covers the right shoulder and arm, falling off the left, and caught by the forearm and held by the left hand.*

An interviewer asked why she hadn't presented the president:

*in a heroic attitude with shoulders thrown back, with head more erect and his arm more elevated, as he gave to the world the proclamation of freedom?*

Her answer was,

*Because I never saw him in that attitude. On the contrary, I often found him tilted back in his chair with his feet encased in a pair of slip-shod slippers resting on a table, about on a level with his head.*

Despite her obvious qualifications and the late president's approval, there was much controversy about granting her the commission. In a chapter titled "The Great Debate," senators' descriptions varied from

*a young girl of poor parentage, struggling with misfortune, ... she manifests great taste and great powers of art, and in the short experience which she has had she has developed wonderful powers in that line*

to opposing opinions, which declared,

*this candidate is not competent to produce the work which you propose to order. You might as well place her on the staff of General Grant, or put General Grant aside and place her on horseback in his stead. She can not do it.*

Even after the contract was eventually awarded and payment of \$10,000 was agreed upon, no money was given to begin the work--a heavy financial burden for the young artist. As Sherwood explains in an early chapter:

*The U.S. Capitol would seem like an enviable niche for a portrait artist. But politics can be a strange business and Vinnie Ream was soon to find herself in one of the strangest episodes in American politics.*

It was the time of impeachment proceedings brought by Republicans against the Democratic president, Andrew Johnson, in February 1868, and several senators opposing his conviction held secret meetings in her small Washington studio.

Senators weren't Vinnie's only supporters. One of her earliest admirers was a mixed-blood Cherokee, who wrote her love poetry.

A famous Confederate general made her a Mason, to the consternation of his fellow lodge members, and several poets of the era wrote romantic verse, some of which she set to music. She supposedly received a proposal of marriage by mail from the Mormon leader Brigham Young.

After completing a bust of Franz Liszt, it is believed he dedicated a musical piece to her; and later wrote the music for her wedding to Richard Hoxie in 1878.

If the book at times seems overburdened with minutiae--entire chapters are devoted to word-by-word debates in Congress--Sherwood explains:

*This has been done deliberately to let the historical characters speak for themselves and to allow readers to interpret the original material from their own experience.*

His enthusiasm and passion for his famous ancestor--he is related to the Ream family through both parents--has produced a sympathetic scrapbook of the woman and the era, crowded with pictures of Vinnie at all ages. Illustrations of her work and models, sketches, letters, and invitations fill the pages, along with photographs of historical figures.

It is impossible to ignore the comparison between Vinnie Ream and Maya Lin, a young Yale student who created the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Both were young women, competing against well-known and respected artists, who were forced to defend their work in Washington before antagonistic judges. It's enlightening to learn that in a 1909 speech,

*Vinnie Ream stated that "Women have at last burst their bonds" and said that women could have both a family life and professional careers, an idea ahead of its time.*

Surprisingly, the book does not end with Vinnie's death in 1914. A long list of tributes to her is listed in an epilogue, followed by an appendix chronicling her contributions to 19th-century culture:

*The art of Vinnie Ream and the notoriety that it received marked a major rediscovery of naturalism in portraiture. Her Lincoln statue influenced later sculptures of Lincoln and helped start a trend that would be taken into the twentieth century by sculptors like Daniel Chester French.*

Sherwood has even included an "Unsolved Mysteries" section, which probes questions raised about her work, the Ream family, and her role in the Andrew Johnson impeachment trial. The author's admiration for this extraordinary woman is evident. His final sentence expresses his feelings eloquently:

*Vinnie's presence and the spirit of Lincoln, may have been enough to radically change American history.*

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REVIEWER: Barbara Weston, a freelance writer living in Miami, FL, writes poetry, short fiction, features, and reviews.

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