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The Croasdale Painting of Lincoln

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Every age has its special interests, in history and literature as in other matters. Probably there is no form of history and literature combined which to-day is more popular than biography. The great figures of the past are being scrutinized anew from every angle, and with the aid of every bit of available source material. Part of this interest in individuals is scientific in its origin; but part, too, is based on hero-worship, on the admiration and affection which normal men bestow upon the lives and the personalities of the great. Among those figures in the history of the United States who have been honored in this way in recent years, none is more outstanding or more widely-revered, than that of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln. An age which is vividly conscious of the priceless value of democracy, and of the liberty upon which democracy is based, has not been careless of Lincoln's memory, but has labored painstakingly to recover and preserve all the facts and all the objects which throw light upon his career. In view of these circumstances, it is not difficult to understand that the material is exhausted more easily than the zeal of the searchers; and that, as the field of inquiry is picked clean, any last straw of evidence is pounced upon with a new eagerness. Under these conditions, facts and objects which might easily have escaped attention at a time when interest was less keen, or source-material less exhausted, take on a new and greater attractiveness. It is this state of affairs in the field of Lincolniana which makes it possible that the Lincoln-loving public might welcome an account of a painting hitherto practically unknown—the Elizabeth Croasdale painting of Abraham Lincoln.

Until recently,¹ the Croasdale painting hung in the an-

¹ September, 1936.

cestral home of the Croasdale family in New Britain, Pennsylvania. Outside that home, neither the painting nor the artist seems to have been well known in recent years. Members of the Croasdale family of today maintain that the picture which bears their name was painted in the year 1861, from life, by Elizabeth Croasdale. The work is an oil painting on canvas, twenty-five inches wide and thirty inches in length. At the time of writing, it is in an excellent state of preservation. Apparently, the background in the picture has been restored, but the face and the body do not appear to have been altered. The present owner is Dr. Arthur Edwin Bye, artist, of Byecroft, Holicong, Pennsylvania. Dr. Bye purchased the painting in the Fall of 1936 from Mrs. Robert Croasdale Wood, the widow of a nephew of Elizabeth Croasdale, and an occupant of the Croasdale home in New Britain. Mrs. Wood affirms the family tradition that the painting was never exhibited, published, or sold. There is no signature or other mark on either the face or the back of the work by which its origin might be evidenced.

Of the artist herself, little enough is known. There is a brief note on "E. Croasdale" in the *Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors and Engravers*, by Mantle Fielding; but so little was the author of the note acquainted with his subject, that he assumed "E. Croasdale" to be a man. The Fielding note on E. Croasdale reads: "Portrait painter. He [*sic*] painted a portrait of Abraham Lincoln and on the back of the canvas is inscribed 'Painted by E. Croasdale, and retouched by S. J. Ferris, 1863.'" Clearly there is nothing here that could not have been learned by examining the picture referred to. Apparently the author of the note had nothing to guide him except a portrait, or a description of a portrait. From other sources it appears that Elizabeth Croasdale was a daughter of an old Quaker family of Bucks County, Pennsylvania; that she was a graduate of the Government Art Training School, South Kensington, London; and that from the year 1873 until 1885 she was Principal of the Philadelphia School of Design. Among the five Philadelphia artists who are known to have made paintings of Abraham Lincoln from life, Elizabeth Croasdale is not listed.

These are the facts in brief about the painting and the artist. They are very scanty and, in regard to the painting, leave unanswered many questions which might be raised.

What was the exact date of the work? Was it from life? Was it from a photograph? Was it partly from life and partly from a photograph? Was it from several photographs? Was it from another portrait? From several other portraits? Did Elizabeth Croasdale paint two portraits of Lincoln? Was one a copy of the other, and, if so, which is the painting owned by Dr. Bye? These problems cannot be resolved from the external evidence available. Perhaps some light may be thrown upon them by an examination of the internal evidence.

First, the question of the date. The most definite source concerning the time when the painting was done is the family tradition, which puts it in the year 1861. This tradition, however, is perhaps not very strong, because it has been transmitted through a relative, by marriage, of the Croasdale family. Since there is no apparent reason for an error in the family tradition relative to the date, unless forgetfulness, the year 1861 would be accepted without question were it not for internal evidence. It is true that the painting *could* have been done as early as 1861, because, while Lincoln wore no beard before his election in 1860, he began to grow a beard soon afterwards and had already developed a considerable growth as early as January, 1861, as may be seen in the German photograph of that month. The length of the beard, and especially the expression of the face, suggest strongly that the painting was done later, probably in 1863 or 1864. The eyes and the beard, for example, conform rather closely to those displayed in the Brady photograph of February 9, 1864, the photograph declared by Robert Lincoln "to be the most satisfactory likeness" of his father.

A statement that the painting was done in 1863 or 1864, however, would have to be qualified by the condition, "if it were done from life." Because the same tradition which represents the painting as a portrait from life, declares it to have been done in 1861; and while it may be more difficult for tradition to preserve a date correctly, than to carry such a fact as a painting having been done from life, nevertheless the rejection of the date 1861 seriously undermines the validity of the rest of the tradition. To the extent that we may doubt that the painting was done from life, to that extent must we believe, in the absence of other evidence, that it may have been done even later than 1863

or 1864, even, perhaps, after Lincoln's death. We know that Elizabeth Croasdale was living as late as the year 1885. In that year, she gave up her position as Principal of the Philadelphia School of Design on account of poor health. It is reasonable to suppose that Elizabeth Croasdale would not be likely to paint pictures then or later. So the year 1885 may be taken as the latest probable limit for the time in which the painting may have been done. This is not to suggest that it *was* done later than the 'sixties. It is merely to point out a possibility opened up by a questioning of the tradition that the painting was done in the year 1861, and from life. The fact that there is evidence of the existence of an Elizabeth Croasdale painting of Lincoln inscribed with the date "1863," tends to confirm the suggestion that the painting which is known was also done in the early 'sixties. It indicates that Elizabeth Croasdale was interested in, and working upon the Lincoln figure at that time; and it strengthens the probability established by the family tradition, that the painting at issue was produced in the year 1861 or not many years later.

The fixing of the date of the painting, then, depends to a considerable extent upon the answer to the question: "Was the painting done from life?" Here, again, the strongest argument derives from the family tradition. It was observed above that a rejection of the year 1861 as the date of the painting would weaken the validity of the rest of the tradition, but it does not destroy it. In the absence of opposing evidence, the contention that the painting was done from life would have to be accepted. There is no external evidence to show that the work was not done from life. There is, first of all, no evidence from the life of Lincoln. As was noted above, at least five Philadelphia artists are known to have made portraits of him. May there not have been a sixth? There is nothing positive to oppose the suggestion. An argument drawn from lack of evidence would have little force in view of the facts that Lincoln often sat for a portrait and that the matter was not always one of sufficient importance to be made note of by contemporaries. Nor is there any other external evidence which makes it probable or improbable that the painting was from life. What evidence there is makes it possible, but only possible, that Lincoln sat for the painting. In this connection it may be worth

noting that the fact that Elizabeth Croasdale was Principal of the Philadelphia School of Design from 1873 to 1885, in a city where five other artists made portraits of Lincoln, is favorable to the contention that her painting was from life. It should also be observed that Stephen J. Ferris who, according to Mantle Fielding, retouched a painting of Lincoln by Elizabeth Croasdale in the year 1863, was scarcely the type of artist who would spend his time, while Lincoln was alive and being painted and photographed with comparative frequency, retouching a picture which was not from life. On the other hand, Ferris was a young man, only twenty-eight years of age, at the time, who did not gain his greatest prominence until some years afterwards. There is the possibility, of course, that the painting retouched by Ferris was from life and that the one which is known today is a copy of the other. It is clear from the meager sources available that there is nothing in the external evidence which militates against the known Croasdale painting being from life.

As to the conclusion which should be drawn from internal evidence, there is a division of opinion among the authorities who have examined the picture or photographs of it. First, what are the arguments of the proponents? The chief and, indeed, the only weighty argument from internal evidence advanced by those who contend that the painting was done from life, is that there exists no known photographs or portraits from which it was evidently copied. It may be stated, too, that the opposing authorities, those who think the painting a copy, practically admit the truth of the last statement. A list of those who make up what may be called "the affirmative" will show how thoroughly the field has been searched for a possible original photograph or portrait. First, there is Dr. Bye, the present owner. Dr. Bye is not officially an authority on Lincolniana, but as owner of the picture, as an artist, and as one professionally concerned with the restoration of old masters, he is fitted both by interest and training to give an authoritative opinion on the subject. Dr. Bye is convinced that the painting is from life. Secondly, there is Dr. Louis A. Warren, director of the Lincoln National Life Foundation at Fort Wayne. He has assured Dr. Bye that he knows of no picture closely resembling the Croasdale painting, and that he, therefore, believes the latter to have

been done from life. Dr. Warren's opinion is all the more valuable because he has made a special study of Lincoln portraits and photographs. Thirdly, there is Mr. Benjamin P. Thomas, executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association. Mr. Thomas, having compared the Croasdale painting with photographs, is "inclined to think that the opinion of the Croasdale family that it was painted from life may be correct." Finally, the Custodian of the Lincoln Collection at Brown University, Miss Esther C. Cushman, while not committing herself as to whether the painting was done from life, after making a careful study of the photographs of Lincoln in her care, has agreed that there is none from which the picture seems to have been copied. It may be observed, in connection with all these opinions, that attention has been concentrated entirely on the resemblance of the Croasdale painting to photographs and portraits. No other approach to the internal evidence is suggested.

Practically the same is true of those opinions which have been given against the family claim that the painting was done from life. The most important of these pronouncements are those made by Frederick H. Meserve, Harry McGill Bland and Rufus Rockwell Wilson. All these men are outstanding authorities on pictures of Lincoln. Mr. Meserve has made a vast collection of photographs concerning the whole Lincoln period. Mr. Wilson has published a volume on *Lincoln in Portraiture*. Mr. Bland is reputed to be the greatest living authority on the paintings of Lincoln. They unite in the belief that the Croasdale painting was not done from life. True they give no particular reasons in support of this opinion; but their opinion, as such, is probably the most weighty that could be secured on a basis of an examination of the internal evidence. On the other hand, they fail to point to any photograph from which the Croasdale likeness might have been copied. Mr. Meserve's verdict on this latter point is especially important, owing to his exhaustive study and collection of Lincoln and other photographs.

One more opinion, quite neutral as to other matters, may be given on the subject of a photographic origin of the Croasdale painting. Harry E. Pratt, executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, when asked by Dr. Bye for information which might help solve the question of the origin of the Croasdale painting in 1836, replied: "I have

looked through all our data here in the office and that of the Illinois State Hist. Soc. and do not find anything that would aid you in identifying the picture you mention." It may be said then, that everyone who has given an opinion on the subject has agreed that there is no evidence which goes to show that the Croasdale painting was copied from a photograph.

In connection with the question of resemblances between the painting and any particular photograph, an interesting view was expressed by Dr. Louis A. Warren: "The finding of it [a photograph of Lincoln from which the painting may seem to have been copied] would not necessarily imply that the painting is not from life as nearly all of the painters did have photographs made of their subjects in order to assist them in the making of their canvas." This is a strong argument in support of the validity of the Croasdale tradition that the picture was done from life, because it destroys any finality that might otherwise be possessed by a judgment based on the finding of a photograph even closely resembling the painting. The finding of such a photograph might suggest strongly that the painting was only a copy, but without the support of other evidence, it could never be taken as definitive proof.

The same observation applies in the case of a suggested multiple photographic origin of the Croasdale painting. If Elizabeth Croasdale used one photograph to assist her in painting Lincoln from life, she might just as easily have used several. That there are similarities existing between the painting and several known photographs, is quite true. For instance, the outline of hair and beard is similar to that in the Gettysburg photograph of November 15, 1863. The collar and shirt resemble those in the Brady ambrotype of February 27, 1860. It was observed above that parts of the figure in the painting—the expression of the eyes and beard—are like the corresponding parts in Brady's photograph of February, 1864, but it is easy to push such comparisons too far. It would be strange if one portrait of a man should not bear many resemblances to various photographs, especially in the case of a man like Abraham Lincoln, whose careless strength and rugged individuality thrust themselves into every outline and every attitude. Certainly one must guard against over-emphasis on these resemblances.

What is true of comparisons between the Croasdale painting and one photograph or several photographs, is equally true of those made between the painting and any Lincoln portraits. Rufus Rockwell Wilson, for instance, believes that it looks "very much like a copy of the portrait painted by Atwood." Miss Esther C. Cushman, on the other hand, while noting that there is a resemblance between the Atwood portrait and the Croasdale, regards the latter as more like several other portraits, such as that by Lambdin (when reversed), and those by Cogswell and Mathews. Here, again, the conclusion cannot be final. One portrait may resemble another portrait not because it was the sole source of the second, but because it was used as a supplementary aid, or merely because a picture of the same subject, just as may be true of two photographs taken at different times. Here, too, what applies to one portrait, applies equally to a group. As with photographs, so with portraits, no definite conclusions can be drawn from mere resemblances.

There remains to be discussed the question of whether Elizabeth Croasdale painted two portraits of Lincoln rather than just one. Further, if she painted two, is the known painting the first or second work. The answer to the first of these questions, of course, depends largely on the validity of the note in Mantle Fielding's *Dictionary* which contains the statement that Elizabeth Croasdale "painted a portrait of Abraham Lincoln and on the back of the canvas is inscribed 'Painted by E. Croasdale, and retouched by S. J. Ferris, 1863.'" The details of this inscription are such that they could scarcely have been invented, but must have come, directly or indirectly, from a picture to the author. The use of the word "portrait" in the note, however, has no great significance in respect to whether the painting was from life. It would be natural enough for anyone who knew so little of "E. Croasdale" as to assume that the artist was a man, to take for granted that the painting was from life and use the word "portrait" in describing it. There is room, however, for little or no doubt that a picture bearing the above inscription exists or once existed. It is possible, but not at all probable, that the inscription was mistakingly put on a painting which was not done by E. Croasdale. It is equally improbable that the inscription quoted by Mantle Fielding was once present on the known painting and later erased.

Aside from these rather far-fetched possibilities and the equally untenable one that the known painting was not done by Elizabeth Croasdale, the evidence all points to the strong possibility that Elizabeth Croasdale painted two pictures of Abraham Lincoln. This conclusion is supported, in the first place, by the facts that the inscription in the Fielding note describes the changes made in the painting after it had left the artist's hands as a "retouching," whereas in the known painting, as Dr. Bye says, the background has been damaged and restored, but the face and body have not been altered. A "retouching" implies additions, more probably to the figure, and could scarcely be construed as meaning a restoration after damage. Stronger evidence that there were two Croasdale paintings of Lincoln is the existence of a half-tone print,² which apparently has been cut from a sale catalogue, because it is listed as "lot No. 10." There is nothing to show from whose catalogue the print was taken, but it resembles the known painting closely. It shows, however, certain differences from the painting which could scarcely be accounted for in the making of a half-tone. When these facts are considered in conjunction with others which are known, the existence of a second Croasdale painting becomes almost certain. In the first place there is the note in Mantle Fielding's *Dictionary*, with the inscription which is not found on the known painting. Next, there is the family conviction that the painting which they possessed had never been removed from the house, published or sold before the year 1936. Finally, there is Mr. Meserve's—"recollection of having been told that a Philadelphia dealer was trying to sell a portrait of Abraham Lincoln alleged to be from life by Elizabeth Croasdale." All these facts would be accounted for if there were two Croasdale paintings, one inscribed, one not inscribed; one put up for sale, one not put up; one published in the form of a half-tone print in a sale catalog as early as the year 1926; the other not published or offered for sale for another ten years or thereabouts. Against the conclusion that two Croasdale paintings were made, there are only two weak arguments: one the improbability that, because having painted one portrait of Lincoln, she would not paint a second; and the

² This print is in the Lincoln Collection in Brown University Library.

other, that were the inscribed portrait in existence, it would be well-known and available.

If, as thus seems likely, Elizabeth Croasdale made two paintings of Lincoln, which was done first, and which is more likely to have been done from life? Here answers must be in the realm of almost pure surmise. It may be assumed, however, with a certain degree of probability, that if either painting was from life, it was more likely the first one done; because this conclusion involves a simpler assumption than the other. In other words, it is a more complicated and therefore less plausible assumption that Elizabeth Croasdale first painted Lincoln from photographs or portraits, and afterwards from life, than that she painted him from life and then simply made a copy or another version of her own work. It would seem, then, though the matter is close to pure conjecture, that, if two paintings were done and one was from life, it was the first and not the second, which was done from life. As to which of these two possible pictures the known painting is, it can only be said that the evidence points almost equally both ways, perhaps a little more strongly to its being the one first painted. The family tradition puts the known painting in 1861. The date on the inscribed portrait was 1863. But the Lincoln in the known painting looks more like the real Lincoln of later years; and because the inscribed portrait was marked 1863 is not evidence that it was painted in 1863, but only evidence that S. J. Ferris retouched it at that time. It would not help matters to know who wrote the inscription. It may be said here that, after all the evidence has been sifted, there is really nothing of great weight opposed to the tradition of the Croasdale family that the painting which they preserved was done in the year 1861 by Elizabeth Croasdale and from life. Until further opposing evidence appears, that tradition will not, apparently be seriously undermined.

There remain a few more questions connected with the Croasdale painting which it might be appropriate to discuss here. These questions are concerned with the artistic and the historical values of the picture, and with the quality of Elizabeth Croasdale's work. As to the value of the painting as a work of art, curiously enough, most of those who have passed judgment have contented themselves with saying that they thought it a good or a poor picture, or a good or a poor

likeness, without discussing in any way the qualities of the work. A. M. Kennedy, Sunday Editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, writes that when the painting was in his hands in 1937 in connection with possible publication on the occasion of Lincoln's birthday, "several critics . . . consulted considered that the likeness of Lincoln was not good." Mr. Meserve thought that Harry Bland "does not regard the portrait highly." Miss Cushman, on the contrary, thought that "the Croasdale portrait is a very good one." Dr. Bye is more specific, while remaining moderate in his praises. "I do not," says Dr. Bye, "regard the painting as a great work of art. It is sincere, conscientious painting, able and technically well executed. But it makes no claim to penetrating portraiture, or virtuosity. Its chief value is historical or antiquarian. It has been considerably praised by lovers of Lincoln—Collectors of Lincolniana." Dr. Bye says again: "My opinion of the portrait is that it is as good as any I ever saw of Lincoln, better than most. There were so few good portraitists living in Lincoln's time." There is little else to be said here about the artistic qualities of the painting, that being a matter for experts to decide, but it should perhaps be recalled, in connection with the question of the picture's likeness to Lincoln, that it closely resembles in certain respects the Gettysburg photograph of November, 1863, the Brady photograph which Lincoln's son thought "to be the most satisfactory likeness" of his father.

What of Elizabeth Croasdale's ability as an artist? Was it such as to enable her to paint a good picture, or a picture as good as the one which bears her name? Unfortunately, at this time, there is available none of her other work on which a judgment might be based. In the absence of such material, we may again quote from Dr. Bye. "In any event," he writes, "E. Croasdale was not an eminent artist. Just a good example of her time, good enough to be a teacher way back in the days when artists were few." More significant on this point is her later career. Her appointment to the position of Principal of the Philadelphia School of Design points, in the absence of other evidence, to the probability that she was a reasonably good artist. There is nothing in her career, either as a student or a teacher, which is out of keeping with the quality of work which appears in the Croasdale painting.³

³ A few comments on Elizabeth Croasdale's work as a teacher and on the character of her education, made by Theodore C. Knauff in

Passing from the artist to the picture, it may be said that the chief value of the painting to-day, as Dr. Bye agrees, is historical or antiquarian. "Historical" is probably the better word. If the Croasdale painting is from life, it is, indeed, very valuable. By this is not meant a money value, though Lincoln portraits have brought large sums. It is rather that a painting from life is different from any other sort of reproduction. It gives not only a view, but an impression and an interpretation. If the artist succeeds in producing a work of art, the result is a composition of many things that a photograph cannot catch and that no historian can ever adequately describe. A good portrait is a good likeness, but means more than a mere likeness. It brings out of the subject what may often or usually remain hidden, and it pictures for us as nothing else can, the human soul clothed in flesh and blood. Of this quality, there seems to be not a little in the Croasdale painting. It shows us Lincoln, not amused or genial, as he frequently was, but looking rather stern and somewhat sad, perhaps tired from over-strain, but erect, and not bending under the strain. It seems to convey the impression of a man with the strength of granite, but not hard or unfeeling, rather the reverse; a man imbued with large and lofty aims, but constant, and full of practical purpose; idealistic, but not excitedly enthusiastic; one who has experienced the tragedy, as well as the greatness, of human life, and has still kept faith with his ideals. This is Lincoln, not at his most amusing, but at his best. It is a rare and a great view of him, and we seem to owe it to Elizabeth Croasdale. That alone should be enough to make the Croasdale painting and its creator of the greatest significance alike to lovers of Lincoln, and to lovers of historical truth.

If, on the other hand, the painting is not from life, it fails to possess much of the value it would otherwise have. This is not to argue that a great painting cannot be made by

An Experiment in Training for the Useful and Beautiful, A History (Philadelphia, 1922), 87, bear out this statement in an indirect way, by conforming with Dr. Bye's estimate of the quality of the work displayed in the Croasdale painting: "The untiring work of Miss Croasdale, who had been trained at the South Kensington Museum in London, followed the routine of that institution. . . . The old course in art as in design had placed undue emphasis on and given excessive time to the mechanics and mathematics connected with perspective and geometry."

working from photographs or other pictures. It simply means that a painting from life is far more closely related historically to its subject than is one not so painted, and, other things being equal, is quite likely to be in many respects more historically true and artistically great. Nevertheless, even if the Croasdale painting is not from life, it is not without great historical significance. It was painted by an artist who was of good ability when capable artists were few, a woman who was living at the same time and in the same country as her subject touched by the same questions and breathing the same atmosphere. No doubt Elizabeth Croasdale had at least seen Lincoln on public occasions, if not privately, and the impressions received on those occasions would, to a trained artist, be of great value in giving life and personality and historical accuracy to a work otherwise copied from pictures. Thus it seems safe to affirm, and the affirmation is borne out by many who have seen the painting and compared its qualities with the established portraits, that the Croasdale likeness, even if it is not from life, compares favorably with those which are known to be from life, and hence, especially until the tradition that it was done from life has been disproved, it ought to be regarded as deserving an honorable position in the company of Lincolniana.