Review

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This unusual and very useful book skillfully combines a chronology and illustrations. A chronology of the creation or other key date in the production of Lincoln artifacts (and a few stories and myths) runs throughout the book, in parallel with extensive illustrations of that *materia Lincolna* to sate the collector’s interest. Though it does not provide estimates of market prices for the hundreds of items described or shown, this book is in most respects a substantial improvement upon Stuart Schneider’s *Collecting Lincoln* (1997) and Mabel Kunkel’s *Abraham Lincoln: Unforgettable American* (1976), the only comparable books in the field.

To liken all this *materia* to a doctor’s ointments and elixirs is merely to acknowledge what fever continues to afflict the Lincolniacs (Robert W. Johannsen’s term) in their quest for curiosities, rarities, valuables, and ephemera: Lincoln opened a bank account at the Springfield Marine and Fire Insurance Co. on March 1, 1853; he authorized the Navy Medal of Honor and the striking of two hundred of them on December 21, 1861; his silhouette adorned a Grateful Dead “birthday bash” poster in San Francisco in 1967 (so keep your eyes open for old checks, old medals, old cigar wrappers, and not-that-old rock ’n’ roll memorabilia).

Reed has particularly keen antennae for stamps, coins, and currency, but he does not neglect photographs, folk art, or *MAD* magazine (see the February 1957 and March 1964 issues). He is wise to have done so, because no standard guides to the subfields have appeared since Robert King’s *Lincoln in Numismatics* (1933) or Eric Borsting’s *Abraham Lincoln on United States and Worldwide Stamps* (2001, and missing from the otherwise fine bibliography), the latter being very good but, after Lincoln’s Bicentennial, already a bit out of date.

Engravers and printmakers, those all-too-anonymous coiners of two-dimensional life, are widely represented. Of the making of little statuettes of the sixteenth president there is no end, and Reed sagely focuses on only the major sculptors. Yet collectors of one or ten such
icons are not absent from the higher reaches of Lincoln scholarship, and those more thematically minded readers will find much of interest in this assemblage. Ponder, and perhaps write a book, on why only a single known example survives today of a beardless Lincoln portrait by Edward Mendel on a fifty-cent note (1862) made for a Columbus, Kentucky, market; why Mary Lincoln feared that the gold Lincoln-tribute medal from France would never reach her hands (January 3, 1867); why the best World War I–era biography (Lord Charnwood) and entertainment (John Drinkwater’s play) emerged from Britain, not the United States—and do not neglect to assimilate into the argument a German broadside of 1918 depicting war widows entreating Lincoln-in-the-clouds for mercy (Figure 3.43); why publicity photos for the 1938 film *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* retouched Raymond Massey’s stovepipe hat to make it taller (Figure 1.23); or why musical antimodernists got Aaron Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait* banned from Eisenhower’s inauguration (January 1953). Read carefully: merely scanning the pages may cause one to miss the recurring appeal of Lincoln to African Americans (see, for example, images from 1898, 1940, and the Black Panthers in 1970). Somewhere amid the mania for Lincoln collecting, serious topics in culture, personality, and nationhood lurk.

The book, however, has two weaknesses. First, a minor one. Reed shows the original “blind memo” of August 23, 1864, for example, in which Lincoln told his cabinet how to proceed in the event that McClellan was elected president; but the image credits in the back are organized by source, not by item pictured, so one must hunt at length to find credit 1.151 (Library of Congress)—not that this historic document is collectible, but rare *cartes de visite* and cartoons are. Though many of the items depicted in the book come from Reed’s own collection, readers like to know where originals reside. Second, his penultimate chapter, “Lincoln the Icon, 1959–2009,” probably over-illuminates how often, since the Baby Boom generation reached puberty, the Lincoln legend has been masticated and spit back out as flotsam, jokes, and junk. In fact, the gravity of Lincoln’s example continues to be as sensitively weighed in books and the arts today as it was long ago. The shift from his famous face adorning paint or syrup ads (circa 1900–1930), to icon as kickball (circa 1978), has not been as dramatic as one might think—nor that important to collectors.

This review merely skims the surface of Reed’s fine book. Its intelligent text and captions complement the hundreds of images. His concluding chapter takes up the designs of the newest coins and stamps in thought-provoking ways.