Charles Turzak’s *Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts* (1933)

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Visitors at Chicago’s Century of Progress exhibition in 1933 beheld an intriguing sight while strolling among the historically reconstructed buildings—Chicago artist Charles Turzak (1899–1986) sitting in the re-created Lincoln-Berry store carving wood blocks. He was creating images of Lincoln’s life, including ones of his birth cabin, self-education, law practice, political career, and assassination. Before the fair was over, Turzak had compiled the thirty-six black-and-white prints into a privately printed book, *Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts* (Chicago, 1933). In 2009 Dover Publications produced a version of it, bringing Turzak’s project to a wider public. Unfortunately, their addition of so much accompanying text, mostly biographical information about Lincoln and excerpts from his speeches, defeats the wordless, graphic biography Turzak originally intended. No other printmaker—indeed, no other artist—made such a sustained body of Lincoln imagery in the 1930s. And Turzak’s depiction of the life of the sixteenth president is visually the most modern and race-conscious imagining of the Lincoln saga up to that time. In its Depression-era populism and theatrical expressivity *Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts* dramatically reflects its civic and national cultural milieu.

*Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts* is also a visual expression of the Chicago Literary Renaissance, a flowering of writing, printing, and cultural activity from 1910 to 1950. Like the writing of Carl Sandburg,

2. Besides the woodcuts he made for his 1933 wordless biography, Turzak made six other woodcuts of Lincoln in the years that followed: *Young Abe Lincoln Enters Coles County, Illinois* and *Lincoln in New Salem* were created for the WPA-sponsored portfolio, *History of Illinois in Woodcuts*, 1935. These can be viewed at: http://www.library.eiu.edu/artarch/searchArtist.asp?ArtistID=2871. Separate woodcuts include: *Birth Cabin* (based on the one that appears in *Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts*), *Lincoln Portrait, Prairie President*, and *Student Days*, all of which appeared in editions of one hundred each. These can be viewed at: http://home.earthlink.net/~turzak1/page2.html.
Sherwood Anderson, or Edgar Lee Masters, Turzak’s pictures use vernacular forms to reveal the pathos of a regional subject. By his choices of what to depict and the sequencing of his images Turzak composed a Lincoln biography as distinctively as that of any writer. He recognized that, referring to himself as the “artist-author” of his book, limiting himself to neither one nor the other. He also claimed, accurately as it turns out, that his was the first ever such wordless biography on any historical figure.³ Surprisingly, Turzak’s book has not been treated in the Lincoln literature or in the relatively new research about the graphic novel. Nor have art historians considered it.

Turzak’s parents—coal miners who had immigrated from Czechoslovakia—first settled in Streator, Illinois, then moved to Nokomis, Illinois, where Charles grew up.⁴ As a child, Charlie whittled monkey figures out of peach pits and as a teenager made violins. While still in high school, Turzak won a one-hundred-dollar prize in a Purina Mills drawing contest. Their art director suggested that he enroll at the Art Institute of Chicago, which he attended from 1920 to 1923. Industrious and entrepreneurial, Turzak freelanced in advertising, sold insurance, and taught printmaking at Chicago’s Academy of Fine Arts. A trip to Europe in 1929 exposed the young artist to avant-garde art and to the works of the pioneers of the graphic novel. Marriage followed in 1931, to Florence Cockerham (1902–1999), a journalism student at Northwestern University. She was passionately devoted to his career and helped him conquer his childhood stutter. Turzak borrowed fifty dollars from Florence’s wedding gift to pay for the high-quality paper on which he printed the Lincoln biography woodcuts.⁵ In turn, he dedicated the book “To Florence.”

In the 1920s and early 1930s Turzak illustrated books and made prints of Chicago’s famous buildings and sites.⁶ He was one of the earliest artists to join the Works Progress Administration (WPA),

4. Turzak’s only child, Joan Turzak Van Hees, maintains her father’s archives in her home in Orlando-Lake Como, Florida, and frequently discusses it in local talks and in schools. The online biography she maintains—http://home.earthlink.net/~turzak1/index.html—is a major source of information on the artist in the absence of a scholarly biography.
5. “Carving Out Fame: Miner’s Son Abandons Coal to Work with Hands at Art,” Literary Digest, June 27, 1936, 22.
in 1934, and in that capacity painted murals for the (Old) Chicago Main Post Office and the post office in Lemont, Illinois.\textsuperscript{7} He also produced a WPA-sponsored portfolio, \textit{History of Illinois in Woodcuts}, in 1935.\textsuperscript{8} Turzak had parlayed his early gift for wood-carving into a budding career in art, one that was increasingly tied to local and historical subjects. When plans for the Century of Progress were announced, the enterprising Turzak desperately wanted to be part of it.\textsuperscript{9} Organizers may have agreed to his request to carve his blocks in public view because such a sight would not have appeared anachronistic. After all, a man working on a piece of wood with hand tools was something one might have seen in Lincoln’s own time.\textsuperscript{10} But David A. Beronä has observed that: “The irony of this display was that Turzak was demonstrating the oldest graphic medium of reproducing images at a fair that had technological innovation as its theme. He demonstrated the use of the woodcut, considered to be the first medium for the dissemination of visual information to the masses.”\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, it is odd to think of Turzak sitting and working amidst faux-historical log buildings because he was a passionate devotee of modernist architecture and even a friend of Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1938 the progressive architect Bruce Goff (1904–1982) built a house for Turzak in Park Ridge, Illinois, that is now a Chicago Landmark. But the irony extends even further, for Turzak’s Lincoln woodcuts have a dual character. They are meant to look folksy and rustic, suggestive of the reconstructed environment of the Century of Progress’s Lincoln Village. But they are also undeniably avant-garde, both in their genre—the wordless graphic biography—and in their sources in modern art. Similarly, Lincoln is portrayed in Turzak’s woodcuts both as an American folk legend and as something of a contemporary actor who expresses the anguish of his story. This

\textsuperscript{7} The mural \textit{Canal Boats} (1937–38) is based on a slightly earlier print, Turzak’s \textit{River and Canal Boats} (1935).

\textsuperscript{8} These can be viewed on permanent display at the St. Charles (Illinois) Public Library and at its website, http://www.library.eiu.edu/artarch/displayAll.asp?LibraryID=819).

\textsuperscript{9} In 1931, with Henry Chapman, Turzak produced a large (57 x 95cm) illustrated tourist’s map of Chicago with all the sites noted, including the future site of the Century of Progress (Tudor Press: Boston). It is illustrated in Robert A. Holland, \textit{Chicago in Maps: 1612–2002} (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 194–95.

\textsuperscript{10} It is worth noting that although Turzak was carving his blocks at the fair, he was not printing his woodcuts. Although the colophon in Turzak’s book is emphatic that the prints were actually made at the fair, photographs and first-hand testimony are still lacking. In any case, he was not dressed in period costume. Conversation with Joan Turzak Van Hees, September 14, 2011.

\textsuperscript{11} Beronä, preface to \textit{An Abraham Lincoln Tribute}, xi.
duality reflects the historical and progressive aims of the fair and more generally the conflicted socio-political atmosphere of the 1930s.

Making his woodcuts in a public venue—essentially “performing” the art-making process—is unique in the history of Lincoln imagery. But Turzak had seen something like it before. While a student at the Art Institute of Chicago he undoubtedly saw professor Lorado Taft (1860–1936) deliver one of his well-known “Clay Talks.” Taft, while speaking to the audience about the history of sculpture, gradually transformed a clay bust of an attractive young woman into an old crone. Another example of an artist working directly in public view was Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (1886–1957). In 1932 he was commissioned to paint images of the history of Detroit in the Garden Court of the Detroit Institute of Art. Turzak must certainly have known of Rivera’s high profile and well-publicized art performance, especially as it occurred at exactly the time of the fair. In any case, Turzak was not shy about working where people could see him. He was a familiar sight sketching on the street in Chicago, along the lakeshore, and in restaurants.

At the nadir of the worst financial crisis in America’s history, Chicago mounted an ambitious world’s fair. The Century of Progress International Exposition officially opened on May 27, 1933. But the Lincoln Village of re-created buildings—two log cabins, the Lincoln-Berry Store, the Rutledge Tavern, and a smaller version of the Wigwam—opened a year earlier, in 1932 (fig. 1). Viewed from above, the fair was a sprawling affair, covering more than four hundred acres of lakefront. The former Meigs Field and McCormick Place occupy the site today. Nominally, the Century of Progress was dedicated to the centennial of the founding of Chicago, but it was also meant to celebrate an economically optimistic and modern future. Showcased there were a newfangled kitchen, the Goodyear blimp, the Sky Ride, Sally Rand’s notorious fan dance, a display of baby incubators occupied by real babies, and the promise of high-speed transportation. But also conspicuous was the theme of history—of Chicago, of Illinois, and of the country. The Lincoln Village (also re-

ferred to as the Lincoln Group or the Lincoln Exhibition) was located in the central part of the fair at about 27th Street amidst such other historical attractions as Fort Dearborn and the DuSable Cabin. It was by no means the only “village” of the fair. There was the Belgian Village, Colonial Village, Seminole Village, Oriental Village, Black Forest, Spanish Village, and others, each with its own atmosphere, buildings, and enactors. Visiting them was like experiencing chapters in a lakeside pop-culture encyclopedia. Despite the accuracy of the re-creation, no one could mistake the Lincoln Group for another time and place. Giving the illusion away was Lake Michigan just behind the buildings, the parked cars, and the palm trees adjacent to the Ripley Believe It or Not attraction. Even so, the contrast between the Lincoln Village and the hyper-modern surfaces and technology of the rest of the fair must have been stark. Nor was the Lincoln Group the only place in the fair where the sixteenth president was memorialized. The Illinois Building, located more northerly near the center of the fair, featured three rooms dedicated to Lincoln.15

The years 1932 to 1934, the period of the fair, were important consolidating years for the public’s memory of Lincoln. Cultural historian Barry Schwartz has called the 1930s “Lincoln’s Decade,” observing that at that time “the mold of the Lincoln we know today was cast.”16 The sculptor Gutzon Borglum (1867–1941) was planning a colossal bust for the Mount Rushmore project and had hired his own son, Lincoln Borglum, to work on it full-time. In 1933 President Roosevelt founded the Civilian Conservation Corps, which in the next couple of years would help in the reconstruction of New Salem. More generally, in this period there was renewed admiration for Lincoln the statesman, as the country faced its most dire economic crisis.

The arts, especially imagery with American and patriotic subjects, were becoming more popular in the 1930s. Art was seen in such public venues as the Century of Progress and, in the next few years, in the WPA’s efforts to decorate post offices, schools, and public buildings.17 Art was no longer meant exclusively for people of means. A

17. On the art and culture of this period in Chicago, including treatment of Turzak’s murals, see Heather Becker, Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive and WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904–1943 (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002).
larger audience bought artistic prints, produced in multiples unlike paintings or sculptures, their lower price adding to their appeal. “A . . . painting is frequently beyond the budget of the ordinary buyer,” Turzak wrote in a 1937 catalogue, “Whereas, by means of the print medium, a larger public can experience the joys of owning an original work of art at a moderate cost.” Even so, Turzak’s woodcut biography of Lincoln was priced at $3.50 in a period when a gallon of gas cost about a nickel, a woman’s leather handbag not quite three dollars. But he had good reason to think it would sell. There was a mass interest in books in the 1920s and early 1930s, from the surge in encyclopedia sales (and salesmen), to George Macy’s lavishly illustrated books of.

his Limited Editions Club, to the Great Books Movement, which was born at the University of Chicago just a couple miles south of the fair.\textsuperscript{19}

Turzak’s Lincoln biography is of a very high quality, not surprising considering his own exacting standards. The woodcut images are a uniform $3\frac{1}{2}$-by-$4\frac{3}{8}$ inches; the book is a slim octavo bound in a white fabric—“washable,” as Turzak’s prospectus proudly advertised. nestled inside a black slipcase, each copy was signed and numbered by the author, who distributed an edition of fifteen hundred copies. Unlike other wordless books of the modern era, Turzak’s Lincoln woodcuts were printed directly from the wooden blocks and not from metal plate reproductions (electrotypes) of them, as was standard practice. “The artist assumed this great risk to his blocks,” Turzak informed potential buyers, “to give lovers of beautiful books this extraordinary treat.”\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, the book is essentially a portfolio of woodcuts that had been carved at the fair.\textsuperscript{21} Since the Lincoln Village opened many months before the rest of the Century of Progress, and since Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts was published some months before the fair’s closing, it is possible that Turzak and his wife were selling it as a souvenir of the fair. Not a sunny yarn about Old Abe, readers were in for something startling when they opened Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts.

The Lincoln portrayed inside is wildly theatrical and expressive, completely unlike the staid dignitary of traditional biographies or public sculptures. At least six of Turzak’s woodcuts show Lincoln holding his hands to his face; others show him lying or kneeling on the ground. Several depict him with his eyes closed or wracked by grief. Lincoln had never been represented like this before. One reason this biography is so dramatic is because Turzak used as his sources graphic novels, Hollywood film, and contemporary theater.

During his trip to Europe, Turzak saw the work of the Belgian printmaker Frans Masereel (1889–1972), who is regarded today as the inventor of the woodcut novel. Turzak absorbed the splintered, theatrical

\textsuperscript{19} The Limited Editions Club was founded in 1929 by George Macy. Illustrated books were offered to subscribers in an edition of 1,500—the same number as Turzak’s Lincoln biography. A few years later, in 1935, Macy established the Heritage Club and the Heritage Press, which produced unlimited runs of books previously published in the Limited Editions Club. On the Great Books Movement, see Alex Beam, A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books (Jackson, Tenn.: PublicAffairs, 2009).

\textsuperscript{20} Turzak, Prospectus for Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts, 1.

\textsuperscript{21} It is possible that Turzak had started work on the blocks before the fair, perhaps drawing the images on them beforehand, and only finished them in the Lincoln-Berry Store. “Carving Out Fame,” 22.
Expressionism of Masereel’s wordless book, *Passionate Journey* (1919). The American wood engraver Lynd Ward (1905–1985) also influenced Turzak with his *God’s Man* (1925), the first book-length graphic novel published in the United States. Although the woodcut style of Masereel is closer to the technique of Turzak’s woodcuts, it is to Ward that Turzak owes a greater debt. Ward’s rangy surrealism has more of an American populism about it, as does Turzak’s. Further, Ward’s figures are more antic and more conflicted. Masereel’s characters more often than not are in dramatic settings—the city, in brothels, in the studio—whereas Ward’s and Turzak’s exhibit psychology and inner struggle. Ward’s career also shares some similarities with Turzak’s. He, too, had been to Germany in the 1920s, where he studied wood engraving and came under the spell of Masereel’s wordless books. And like Turzak, he also collaborated on books written by his wife.

Contemporary drama was also an important source for Turzak’s Lincoln biography, especially John Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln* (1918), an extremely popular and oft-produced one-act play. The play stages Lincoln’s private struggles over the agonizing challenges of the impending Civil War. Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln* was “the first Lincoln play to be a work of genuine dramatic art . . . [and] . . . the biggest hit of the 1919–1920 theatrical season.” Like Turzak’s biography, it is a study of the inner man. “My concern,” Drinkwater told his audience, “is with the profoundly dramatic interest of his character.” Given all the references to specific lines from the play in the titles of Turzak’s prints, it is clear that the printmaker knew it intimately. Indeed, it played in Chicago for twelve weeks in the 1920s, and afterwards on the Chautauqua circuit. This blockbuster also established the historical

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26. The words of the title of the woodcut “Providence Brought Me The Leadership of This Country” were never actually spoken by Lincoln. Turzak has borrowed them directly from Drinkwater’s play. The actual line is “. . . Providence has brought me to the leadership of this country . . .” *Abraham Lincoln: A Play*, 15.

drama as a suitable one for contemporary theater; capitalizing on the success of *Abraham Lincoln*, Drinkwater followed it up with plays on *Oliver Cromwell* and *Mary Stuart* (both in 1921). Similarly, after Turzak completed the Lincoln biography, he dedicated the next decade and a half of his career to woodcut-illustrated books and calendars of famous eighteenth-century Americans.

Finally, Turzak drew on American popular films, particularly two by D. W. Griffith: the silent epic *Birth of A Nation* (1915) and *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), starring Walter Huston. As a book of sequenced images, Turzak’s graphic biography, is, of course, akin to a silent film. Flipping through a book of pictures imitates the sequential images of a movie. When the novelist Thomas Mann was asked which film had made the greatest impression on him, he replied that it had been Masereel’s *Passionate Journey*. And even within Turzak’s individual woodcuts, there is evidence of film techniques, such as montage. Like silent films, which were popular with immigrant audiences because no English was required to enjoy them, so Turzak’s biography was not limited by the addition of text. Newer Americans might have especially related to the woodcuts that showed Lincoln working hard, traveling, striking out on his own, improving himself with reading, and owning his own business.

All of Turzak’s sources—the graphic novel, drama and film—account for some of the expressivity of his treatment. But his own talent as a storyteller and artist accounts for much of it, too, as the following examination of some of his woodcuts reveals. Though there is not room to discuss each one here—the Dover reissue reproduces them in their entirety—those discussed below are in the order they appeared in *Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts*.

The frontispiece portrait of Lincoln is based on the well-known Alexander Hesler photograph of the Republican presidential candidate taken in Springfield in 1860. To it Turzak has added a beard, an


29. In the mid-1930s, Turzak made images for annual calendars produced by the Federal Hardware and Implement Mutuals Company (Dallas). The calendars featured woodcuts of the lives of such American historical figures as Jefferson (1936), Franklin (1937), Washington (1938), and Hamilton (1939). Like Turzak’s Lincoln biography, each one began with an image of the subject’s birthplace.


alteration akin to how illustrators hastily made this change to existing images after the president-elect grew his whiskers in late 1860.

The biography begins with an image of Lincoln’s birth cabin. Its title, “Let Us Have Faith . . .,” is a quote that comes from the closing sentence of Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech. But it is unclear how this relates to the humble structure in which he was born. Perhaps Turzak meant it as a general phrase of comfort for the Depression that was, in 1932, reaching its lowest point—faith that greatness could arise from hardship. In any case, Turzak’s cabin appears to be based on the birth cabin reconstructed in the Lincoln Village. Additionally, the opening titles of Griffith’s Abraham Lincoln featured a drawing of a similar cabin rendered from the same point of view. Two other Turzak woodcuts of Lincoln’s childhood that follow feature rare depictions of his sister, Sarah (1807–1828)—The Lincoln Family and The Grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln—the latter showing the grieving boy kneeling at his mother’s grave.

In the 1920s and 1930s the relationship between Ann Rutledge and Lincoln was elevated to a national legend. Griffith’s 1930 film dwelt at length on it. That Turzak would devote two images to this story—and only one to the entire Civil War—is testimony to the importance of the romance in the popular imagination. Turzak’s sentimental woodcut Abe and Ann—the couple is shown holding hands, touching heads, and forming a heart shape with their bodies—is quickly followed by Ann Rutledge’s Grave, which shows Lincoln, flowers in hand, face down across Ann’s fresh grave.

The pose of the two fighters locked together in Lincoln Wrestling Jack Armstrong is taken almost verbatim from George Bellows’ famous Ashcan School painting, Stag at Sharkey’s of 1909. Even if Turzak had not encountered it personally at the Cleveland Museum of Art or seen it reproduced in books and magazines, he could have seen Bellows’ lithograph version in person in the collection of the Art Institute. Such a borrowing indicates Turzak’s awareness of contemporary painting.

In the 1920s and 1930s, scholars and historians were exploring Lincoln’s psychology, and this scholarly turn is reflected in Turzak’s complex and symbolic The Dual Personality (fig. 2). As Lincoln retreats

32. The complete line: “Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.”


34. Bellows’s painting, Stag at Sharkey’s (1909), can be viewed at: http://www.clevelandart.org/exhibceb/highlights/html/4835439.html, a site maintained by the Cleveland Museum of Art.
inward and away from his crude-faced countrymen, a giant, smiling, semi-transparent theater mask hovers above. It inventively symbolizes the difference between the private and the public man. Related to this, there are several references to loneliness in Drinkwater’s play, where Lincoln describes himself as “a lonely man.” Elsewhere in the play, the chorus proclaims that Lincoln “has his lonely thoughts, and makes/ A world of those.” That Turzak can portray an incorporeal mask in woodcut—its symbolic nature is inventively suggested by its transparency—is a testament to his mastery of the medium. He may have been aware of the use of masks in contemporary theater of the 1920s, as in Eugene O’Neill’s The Great God Brown (1926) and Luigi Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921). In any case, the mask suggests Turzak’s love of the theater.

In Mary Todd and Lincoln (fig. 3), set in the house at Eighth and Jackson in Springfield, Abraham is shown bent over in grief and covering his face. Considering the placement of the image in the biography, it must represent the death of the Lincoln’s second son, Eddie (1846–1850). This is the first time in the biography that Mary appears, and Turzak shows the couple in two distinct physical and emotional spaces. More intriguing is that none of Lincoln’s children appear in the biography. Turzak himself had no children at that time, his only daughter, Joan, being born three years later in 1936.

Slavery is one of the most important themes in Turzak’s book—it is treated explicitly in three woodcuts—perhaps not surprising given his own interest in social justice. In Slavery or Freedom (fig. 4) Lincoln’s pose is very like the crucified Christ, hung on the issue of slavery and, like the country itself, cut in half by it. The drawing and execution of the chains and the reversed areas of white and black are virtuoso examples of the woodcutter’s art, especially considering the hard end-grain maple blocks from which Turzak made these woodcuts. In The Debate (fig. 5), Lincoln strikes the same dramatic pose. Lincoln’s oral evocation of the issue of slavery has materialized the corpses in the

35. Abraham Lincoln: A Play, 86.
36. Ibid., 71.
38. Another woodcut by Turzak, Vandalia 1824 (1935) depicts the early attempt to convene a state constitutional convention to legalize slavery. An example can be seen in Western Illinois University’s WPA Collection: http://www.wiu.edu/ArtGallery/collection/wpa/pages/turzak_vandalia.htm. Turzak’s treatment of the history of slavery was thorough. I can find no other artwork of this event.
Figure 2. The Dual Personality, woodcut, 1932–33, from *Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts* (1933). Figures 3 through 11 also are from this source and are the same scale.

Figure 3. *Mary Todd and Lincoln*
Figure 4. Slavery or Freedom

Figure 5. The Debate
audience’s imagination. A broad shaft of light, perhaps meant to be the light of God, or of Truth, reveals three hanged African Americans, the light providing an area of contrast against their bodies and on Lincoln’s hands. The branches of the trees resemble lightning bolts. Of course, no such scene ever took place. But this woodcut may also allude to Turzak’s own day, when lynching was not uncommon and was gaining national attention. Chicagoans especially would have been acutely sensitive to such images of racial strife. A decade before the fair, the city had erupted in violence towards blacks in the infamous Red Summer of 1919. Turzak and his viewers would have recalled a spate of hangings of black men in Chicago. Images of lynching also appeared in contemporary wordless novels. Printmaker Lynd Ward’s *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932), for instance, published the year before Turzak’s Lincoln biography, includes pictures of lynched black men. The startling depiction of the hanged men in this image by Turzak takes the reader far from the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. Curiously, Lincoln’s famous opponent appears nowhere in Turzak’s book.

In *A Prayer for Unity* (fig. 6), Lincoln kneels against a large map of the United States with one hand raised charismatically on it, as if touching the very country itself. Again, his face is buried in grief. We see his top hat and umbrella on the floor beside him, suggestive of his recent arrival in Washington. Similarly, in the first scene of Drinkwater’s play, Lincoln consults a map of the United States hanging on the wall of his home. After the departure of a delegation of men asking him to consider the presidency, Lincoln again approaches the map, “kneels . . . possessed and deliberate, burying his face in his hands.” This dramatic gesture ends the first scene. The title of Turzak’s woodcut exactly describes what Lincoln is doing—praying for unity among the warring states.

The gesture Lincoln makes in *Deliberation* (fig. 7), of one hand holding his face and the other clenching his wrist, is unusual and apparently Turzak’s own invention. The same gesture also appears in a previous


42. *Abraham Lincoln: A Play*, 17.

43. Ibid., 23.
Figure 6. A Prayer for Unity

Figure 7. Deliberation
woodcut, *Loyalty to a Principle*, a symbolic image where Lincoln stands before three trumpeting allegorical figures representing truth, justice, and freedom. Lincoln’s head and hands occupy the entire picture space; the viewer is forced to experience his intensely personal agony. But what specifically is he deliberating? Considering where this woodcut falls in the biography, it represents him struggling with the decision to go to war. In both of Griffith’s Lincoln films, just after the president signs a petition for seventy-five thousand volunteers, he reluctantly signs the document, hands it to a secretary, then tears up and puts a handkerchief to his mouth. It is worth noting that this woodcut was used for the original dustcover for Turzak’s book, signaling that this particular Lincoln biography will be intensely dramatic.

A single image, *Four Dark and Deliberate Years* (fig. 8), stands for the entire conflict of the Civil War. That Lincoln’s head, with eyes closed, is in the background of it all suggests that the war was his own personal nightmare. A very similar composition appears just three prints later in Turzak’s woodcut of Lincoln’s death. Turzak achieves a filmic, montage quality here with the ranks of men, cannons, and soldiers. It recalls the sequence of the army readying itself for battle in the 1930 Griffith film. The word “deliberate” in the title is curious, but the previous woodcut, *Deliberation*, provides a clue. Turzak suggests that the Civil War years represented Lincoln’s own private torment, as he deliberated on its course and meaning. *The Gettysburg Address* (fig. 9) is the only image in the biography that shows Lincoln giving a specific speech—he holds the apocryphal envelope—and the image resembles a religious icon. His face is strangely lit; behind his head is a corona formed from the hatch marks of the graveyard lawn. Rows of macabre skulls and crosses alternate with weeping spectators. Overall, the picture recalls Mexican art, especially *Day of the Dead* (*Día de los Muertos*) images.

In the quirky and inventive woodcut *At the Theatre* (fig. 10), Lincoln is shown sitting on the left rather than on the right, as was actually the case. Turzak has also moved the stage, the actress (presumably Laura Keene) and the orchestra directly under the presidential box. The woodcut fairly bursts with intricate ornament and pattern as seen in the curtains, flags, chandelier, and even in the brooch Mary

44. The title of *Loyalty to a Principle* is also derived from a line in Drinkwater’s play. Asked about the timing of announcing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln defends himself, saying: “My duty, it has seemed to me, has been to be loyal to a principle, and not to betray it by expressing it in action at the wrong time. That is what I conceive statesmanship to be.” *Abraham Lincoln: A Play*, 80.

Figure 8. *Four Dark and Deliberate Years*

Figure 9. *The Gettysburg Address*
Todd wears. The female figure at the far right could be “Susan,” the Lincolns’ maid in Drinkwater’s play who is placed in their box at the time of the shooting. The skeleton behind the Lincolns represents the imminent threat of death and again recalls Mexican art, and perhaps even the conventions of opera.

There are three distinct scenes in *The Assassination* (fig. 11). The effect is one of cinematic montage and is a masterful image with which to conclude the biography. It shows the most detailed image of Lincoln’s face the viewer has yet seen, suggesting an earned intimacy with him by the end of the book. Lincoln’s oversized head is shown half behind the curtains of the stage; he is truly at his own final curtain, exiting the theater of politics and of life, as it were. Booth is shown striking a dramatic pose and/or dragging his broken ankle as he brandishes the dagger with which he slashed Major Rathbone. For viewers in the 1930s, this woodcut doubtless called to mind a recent tragedy. Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak (1873–1933) was shot in 1933 during an assassination attempt on the life of Franklin Roosevelt. The president-elect was shaking hands with Cermak at an event in Miami, Florida, when an assassin fired at the pair. Standing in front of Roosevelt, Cermak was hit in the torso and died shortly after. Turzak may have felt a special sympathy for him, as the mayor was from a similar Czech immigrant background.46

The final woodcut in Turzak’s book is not pictorial. Its stark simplicity contrasts with the crowded composition and jumbled action of the previous woodcut. In simple, hand-drawn text against a plain background appear the words “‘And Now He Belongs To The Ages’ Stanton.” The page functions as a kind of cenotaph, or grave monument—a meaning beyond images. A final connection to Drinkwater’s play is that it too ends with the famous words of Lincoln’s secretary of war.

The Lincoln woodcuts Turzak made at the Century of Progress were a watershed for his style and for his career. Afterwards he no longer produced the suave tourist prints of Chicago he had made before the fair. Perhaps it was the experience of sitting amidst Lincoln’s rustic buildings—no matter they were re-creations—that made his style more populist and regional in character. After this he would apply his biographical woodcuts to American historical figures such as Benjamin Franklin, the subject of his next illustrated book. This time, however, it

Figure 10. At the Theatre

Figure 11. The Assassination
was not produced by Turzak himself; it was picked up by a successful New York publishing house a year after the fair.  

47 Turzak spent his later career painting and doing freelance work for companies such as General Mills, Westinghouse, and General Electric. In 1958 he moved with his wife and daughter to Orlando, Florida, where he would spend the rest of his life. In 1960 Turzak sold the rights to the Lincoln woodcuts. In the ensuing decades his graphic biography was reprinted as a children’s book: *True Stories about Abraham Lincoln* (1973, and later editions).  

48 The woodcuts that younger readers might find upsetting—those dealing with slavery, the war, and the assassination—are omitted, an implicit testament to their power.

In the years since the appearance of Turzak’s *Biography in Woodcuts*, artists and illustrators have been decidedly influenced by its emotional treatment of Lincoln. Bill Mauldin’s “Weeping Lincoln” is one of the best-known political cartoons of the twentieth century, and it is certainly indebted to Turzak. It first appeared in the Chicago *Sun-Times* on the day of John F. Kennedy’s assassination (November 22, 1963).  

49 In Mauldin’s picture, Daniel Chester French’s colossal statue has come to life and, like Turzak’s Lincoln, covers its face in grief.

Charles Turzak’s woodcut biography remains the most dramatic visual treatment of the Abraham Lincoln story. Learning from the graphic novel masters Masereel and Ward, Turzak also imaginatively borrowed from contemporary art, drama, and film. The folksy modernism of his wordless picture book links it to the visual culture of the Depression era. Produced in public, in the context of the Century of Progress exhibition, *Abraham Lincoln: Biography in Woodcuts* emerges as a key monument in the imagery of the sixteenth president.

49. Mauldin’s *Weeping Lincoln* can be seen at the Library of Congress website: http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010646070/. 