

little difference. Whether his arm was bent or straight, whether he was Archer Alexander or not, the black man still kneeled, and so he forfeited his manhood. The pamphlet recording the dedication tried to gloss the pose by claiming that he was "represented as just rising from the earth," and indeed an approving notice published in the black journal from Hampton, *Southern Workman*, echoed this more optimistic description. There was enough ambiguity in the pose to permit many different narrative interpretations, from Lincoln "blessing" the slave to his "beckoning the slave to rise," but most contemporary viewers who wrote about the group followed Douglass and recognized that the slave was in the act of crouching, not rising. Aptly, the *New York Evening Post* just before the dedication described the slave figure as "almost prostrate."⁷⁶

Ball's design was a failure to imagine emancipation at the most fundamental level, in the language of the human body and its interaction with other bodies. This was the very language in which sculpture dealt, and in which the concept of race originated. That is why the outcome of this long monument campaign was so significant. The abstract goal of political equality, enshrined in the politics of Reconstruction, could not be achieved without a more profound rethinking of what equality meant in the experience and understanding of the body. At this basic level the Freedmen's Memorial offered a stark lesson. Instead of representing a new order, it reasserted the old racial structure and power relations of slavery. And insofar as it equated masculinity with power and domination, it held no future promise of emancipation for the black man at all. For in a masculine universe ruled by this logic of domination, not everyone can dominate. Some men must sink to their knees if others are to stand up and assume power. In Ball's world—which in many respects is still our world—equality is not simply a long way off; it remains outside even the imagination.

DOUGLASS made one more extraordinary assertion in his oration at the monument, cutting against the celebratory grain of the event. He argued that Lincoln "was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men," and therefore the duty of commemorating him really belonged to those white men, not to the former slaves who were never "the special objects of his consideration." (How well the story of Archer Alexander would support his argument!) Nevertheless the freedmen had a right to build their monument and it would serve a purpose: it would defend black citizens against the "slander" of ingratitude. When "it is attempted to scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood," Douglass concluded, "we may calmly point to the monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln."⁷⁷ Douglass at once swept aside the paternalist argument that his race owed Lincoln a

special debt of patronage, as a manumitted slave would an old master, and reframed the monumental enterprise as a way of joining in a truly shared national memory. It was not the color-blind enterprise—the “people’s” monument—he had advocated in 1865 and later worked for, but it was a contribution to a common commemorative cause.

For Douglass this was above all a monument to Lincoln, which would take its place alongside other monuments to Lincoln in a shared civic space. But this is not what the monument became, in part because the design Douglass so disliked would not allow it. With its kneeling slave setting the work apart from all other monuments to Lincoln in America, the monument soon acquired special status as the definitive sculptural treatment of emancipation. First the nomenclature changed: the “Freedmen’s Memorial Monument to Abraham Lincoln,” as it was called in its dedicatory pamphlet, became known as the Emancipation Monument. A replica was erected in Boston in 1879 as “the emancipation group” (fig. 4.6), paid for not by freedmen but by the wealthy benefactor and abolitionist Moses Kimball; the inscription left no doubt of its purpose by declaring in the first line, “A Race Set Free.”⁷⁸ From then on the name seems to have stuck, appearing for example in an African American textbook of 1882 on emancipation.⁷⁹ By 1916 Freeman Murray acknowledged that the group had become the single most commonly reproduced image of emancipation, the very “exemplification” of the concept. Dismayed by its black figure, he made a spirited case for unfastening the work from this referent. As a monument to Lincoln, he had fewer objections to it (though he would prefer the figure of the slave removed altogether); as a monument to emancipation, he found it perverse, more the image of “a man who has perhaps escaped extreme punishment by commutation of sentence, than a man who feels that he is one of those who, as the Declaration of Independence expresses it, ‘are, and of right ought to be free.’”⁸⁰ This is the sharpest critical analysis we have of the narrative energy of the slave figure—one who is responding to salvation bestowed unexpectedly from above, rather than feeling the impulse for freedom from within—but it did not succeed in dislodging the canonical status of the work. The monument was reproduced on a three-cent stamp commemorating emancipation in 1940, and black historian Benjamin Quarles devoted the first chapter of his *Lincoln and the Negro* to its history (“Charlotte Scott’s Mite”). As late as the 1960s the monument was still prominently featured in magazine articles about African American landmarks, despite its popular epithet “Shine, sir?”⁸¹

Here is a rare case of a public sculpture creating a potent image that enters the culture at large. As that image travels from monument to book illustration to postage stamp, the honorific power and ideal status of the original medium drain away, and the image comes to seem natural, con-



4.6 Thomas Ball, *Emancipation Group*, 1879, Park Square, Boston.

denying as it does a whole historical mythology of emancipation. The fact that the emancipated themselves “erected” it—their total lack of participation in the design process glossed over by this conventional rhetoric—then serves as further confirmation of the image’s authenticity. As the image is reproduced and recirculated, ever more distant from the original context of its production, it becomes archetypal, lodged in the collective consciousness even of those who despised it.⁸²

With the idea of emancipation affixed indelibly to this one image, the monumental Lincolns of the future no longer needed to represent it. Once Lincoln had his kneeling slave, the slave could then disappear from the commemorative stage. Emancipation had become marginal: a black debt, a black theme, a black monument. The pressures of external events certainly played their part, helping to reinforce the internal logic of commemoration. Reconstruction officially ended the same year the Freedmen’s Memorial was dedicated, and with it the old dreams of political

equality were finally extinguished. The whole idea that emancipation might change the nation itself—and the very nature of freedom for both white and black—could now be forgotten. From here on out the Lincoln of commemoration could become the “white man’s President,” as Douglass had asserted, and emancipation could become the black man’s gift. Lincoln could reemerge as the mystical “preserver” of Union, rather than the creator of a new nation.⁸³

Ironically, then, Ball’s monument paved the way for a new “white” image of Lincoln, which the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens provided in his celebrated work of 1887, the only monument to Lincoln erected in the decade following the Freedmen’s Memorial (fig. 4.7, 4.8). Saint-Gaudens boldly dispensed with the conventional scroll and all other references to the Emancipation Proclamation. The sculptor was committed to a “realism” that eschewed artificial sculptural devices like the scroll which Lincoln would not actually have held or used. Saint-Gaudens’s problem was to make the ideal Lincoln (the soul, the moral stature) emerge from within the physical Lincoln, represented truthfully with the clothes and props of his own time.⁸⁴ This was the old chestnut of portrait statuary but Saint-Gaudens took it more seriously than any other sculptor before him (with the possible exception of Ward), thinking the problem through down to the smallest particulars of pose and the most subtle folds of drapery. Theatrical narrative conceits like Ball’s had no place in this rigorous project.

After experimenting with many different poses, seated and standing, arms crossed in thought or holding forth a document, Saint-Gaudens devised a brilliant synthesis.⁸⁵ He posed Lincoln standing before a chair of state, as if he has just risen to address an audience gathered before him; he tilts his head down in thought, while he rests his left hand on his coat lapel and holds his right hand in a fist behind his back. Here the narrative conceit of the monument meshes seamlessly with the physical act of viewing: we become Lincoln’s audience. The idea of associating a standing figure with an empty seat was entirely novel in public sculpture, and it served to amplify the combination of traits Saint-Gaudens sought to register in the figure itself. This was the man of decision and the man of reflection brought together in one body and one moment. Though paused in thought, the body projects vigorously in space, not simply in the advanced left foot but in the huge forward arc created by the swelling chest and the coat draping off of it. The perfectly still left hand we see from the front is counterbalanced by the repressed energy of the right, tensed behind his back; the continuous lines of the coat and the trouser seam are disrupted by the watch chain tumbling haphazardly down the vest. The modeling of the tousled hair and the creased clothing maintains this subtle equilibrium of superficial disorder and underlying structure, energy, and calm.



4.7-8 Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Stanford White, Lincoln Monument (*Standing Lincoln*), 1887, Lincoln Park, Chicago. *Below*: Detail of statue.



Although Saint-Gaudens toyed with the idea of putting a document in Lincoln's hand, perhaps a reference to the proclamation, in the end he decided to remove all referents to external achievements and, radically, to internalize the figure both in its composition and significance. Lincoln stands before an audience but concentrates on his own thoughts, gazing in on himself; we too gaze in on him and divine his character, not his accomplishments. We bring our knowledge of his act of emancipation to the figure, but in the process the specific historical act becomes transfigured into an eternal moral quality intrinsic to Lincoln's "ideal" self. For all Saint-Gaudens's fidelity to contemporary details, the figure stands apart from history and its messy irresolutions and becomes a pure embodiment of moral perfection. Whatever contribution Lincoln made to the destruction of slavery is thereby elided, absorbed instead into Lincoln's inner "essence."

With the omission of any sort of political iconography in the sculpture, a heavy burden fell on the inscriptions to situate Lincoln as a historical figure. These consist of quotable aphorisms on the exedra behind the statue, and two documents inscribed on small bronze globes that frame the steps in front: the Gettysburg Address and the so-called Greeley letter, in which Lincoln clearly explained that his paramount objective was to save the Union, with or without slavery. This was the very same document often used by apologists of the Confederacy to prove that the war had nothing to do with slavery. The inscription is easily overlooked since the sculpture is the overwhelming center of attention, but the message of retreat from the cause of emancipation is still unmistakable and surely deliberate (though the documents do not tell us who was responsible for choosing the texts).⁸⁶

Saint-Gaudens was invited to design the monument by a committee that did not have to raise any funds, the money having been given by the bequest of a wealthy Chicago benefactor. The committee actually corresponded initially with Thomas Ball, but eventually decided to go in a new direction, choosing Saint-Gaudens without even seeing a preliminary design from him. Both sponsor and artist had a free hand and did not need to strive for popular consent.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the final work became the most popular monument to Lincoln in America, achieving a reputation as the definitive portrayal.⁸⁸ The favorable criticism of the work, multiplying in the 1890s, tended to argue that Saint-Gaudens had made a "loftier" Lincoln by removing the historical onus of emancipation; the same critics applauded the choice of the Greeley letter (which they attributed to the artist) precisely because it put Lincoln in his "true" historical perspective. "Journey to Chicago and kneel before the bronze statue by Augustus Saint-Gaudens," wrote Charles Henry Hart, unwittingly recollecting the pose of Ball's slave, and you will discover that "it is not Abra-

ham Lincoln the liberator of slaves, but Abraham Lincoln the Saviour of the Union."⁸⁹ The most grandiloquent summation of its effect came from Lorado Taft, perhaps the most influential critic ever of American sculpture, who declared in 1896, "One stands before it and feels himself in the very presence of America's greatest soul."⁹⁰ Divorced from any specific history, Saint-Gaudens's Lincoln came to personify those qualities of moral order and decisive action essential to the postwar conception of America itself.⁹¹

Saint-Gaudens, in effect, emancipated Lincoln from emancipation, and thereby emancipated white viewers from its historical burden. However confused and degrading Ball's figure of the slave was, it did draw attention to the issue of the freed slaves' continuing presence in society. It was an interracial monument, making African Americans visible in a medium that had insisted on their invisibility, their imperviousness to sculptural representation. Faced with this slight opening, Saint-Gaudens decisively closed the door. By supplanting the Freedmen's Memorial with a newly definitive Lincoln, he helped to dissociate Ball's monument from the national memory of Lincoln and to consolidate that monument's hold on the now marginal theme of emancipation. By creating a "white" Lincoln purged of responsibility for the millions of emancipated, he helped make Ball's Lincoln the patron saint of an increasingly subcollective "black" memory.

At the same time that Saint-Gaudens solved the political problem posed by the commemoration of Lincoln, he solved the aesthetic problem that Lincoln seemed to typify. As critics like Marianna van Rensselaer argued, Saint-Gaudens's Lincoln revived the standard portrait monument, turning the most unpromising of contemporary figures into eloquent sculpture. Here was the "ideal" Lincoln embedded in the prosaic likeness, without any theatrical props or artificial narrative conceits.⁹² In effect Saint-Gaudens had finally realized, in a mainstream monument, the sculptural promise that some critics had seen years earlier in Ward's figure of the *Freedman*—a synthesis of the real and the ideal. But Saint-Gaudens managed this achievement without recourse to the black body, without its liberating indeterminacy. He achieved his synthesis by erasing the black body and instead devising a new sort of sculptural decorum for the contemporary white hero. Whereas the example of the *Freedman* ultimately could not be repeated, Saint-Gaudens's ideal could be and was. The new era of sculpture once promised by the *Freedman* was opened in his absence.

We can bring this story fittingly to a close by taking a brief look at the final efforts of Harriet Hosmer in the 1890s to carry out her lifelong dream of a monument to Lincoln and emancipation. Still active in her sixties, she pursued the commission for yet another monument to Lincoln

in Chicago, this also funded by a citizen's bequest. Hosmer was well aware of Saint-Gaudens's now celebrated statue, and she proposed a design intended not to "clash" with the work but to be its "complement."⁹³ Where his was a single figure, hers would be a group; where his was "realistic," hers would be frankly ideal; where his abandoned the representation of emancipation, hers would embrace it. She spent several years making and revising a model, and for awhile she seemed to have the inside track for the commission. But the sponsors, after paying her for the model, eventually became fed up with her endless reworkings of it and decided to give the commission instead to Saint-Gaudens.⁹⁴

Hosmer's basic scheme for the monument survives in descriptions published in contemporary newspapers. Again it was an ambitious pyramid of sculpture, but without the "realistic" central cycle of African American history that had defined the earlier monument's program. On top was a seated figure of Lincoln in meditation, poised above the inscription "God sent me a vision." That vision was represented on the level underneath, in the form of a seated "African Sibyl," dressed in a tiger skin, who twists up toward Lincoln while grasping an open book inscribed with Lincoln's words, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." Clinging to the huge lower leg of this Michaelangelesque allegory of Africa is a nude black child with broken chains, who looks up toward the sibyl and Lincoln. (One drawing of this group does survive in a photograph [fig. 4.9].) Balancing the group on the other side of the monument was a female mourning victory of classical Greek features, meant to counterpoise the idea of Greek beauty and civilization to the idea of the primitive embodied in the African group.⁹⁵

It should be obvious by now how thoroughly Hosmer departed from her earlier representation of emancipation. The new design aggrandized the figure of Lincoln at the expense of the material and historical weight of the emancipated slaves. Lincoln here becomes not merely the agent but the prophet of emancipation, acting out of nothing less than divine inspiration. The African American representation now is entirely subsumed within the narrative of Lincoln's moral grandeur. Where the earlier representation had been an independent cycle, culminating in an image of martial manhood, the new group shrinks the emancipated body to one black putto, representative of a race in its infancy, still cleaving to its African origins. That allegory of Africa, while majestic and mysterious, functions at the same time as a sign of the primitive, contrasting with the civilized norm of the Grecian allegory on the right. The idea of racial backwardness is clearly encoded in the African group, leaving no room for reading African American agency into the historical process of emancipation or its aftermath.



4.9 Harriet Hosmer,
African Sibyl, design for
portion of Lincoln
Monument, circa 1890
(now lost).

Hosmer proudly announced that she had come up with a bold design that would revitalize the old neoclassical school of ideal sculpture, long since supplanted by the realism of Ward and Saint-Gaudens among others. She told the newspapers, "This I consider the triumph of my desire to incorporate classic beauty of outline and grace with a modern subject in a manner that will, at a glance, tell its own story. It is a foundation on which to erect the new school, which has been my constant dream."⁹⁶ She thought she had fashioned an ideal narrative on a pre-eminently modern subject; it was simple and unified, told allegorically but without the old neoclassical resort to piles of abstruse signifiers based on ancient mythology. Its poetic impact, she reported, was confirmed by no less than Browning and Tennyson. She also thought that political circumstances were now right for such a design. She had been working on it at least since the early 1870s, and now its time had apparently come. "Now that sectional prejudices have died away between what was the North and South, I believe it will be received in the spirit in which it was designed and executed—merely a work of modern art. A few years since it would not have been."⁹⁷

The problem was that Hosmer's monument was no longer modern at all. The new artistic "school" she hoped to exemplify had already been

pioneered, in much different form, by Saint-Gaudens, who had shown convincingly how to represent the ideal within the prosaic outer forms of contemporary man and contemporary life. The poetic mode favored by Hosmer and her British luminaries belonged to a different world, of expatriates living in the glow of antiquity, not of businessmen in New York and Chicago whose money and influence were becoming the driving force behind public sculpture. It must have been an especially bitter ending for her when, in 1897, the commission for the second Lincoln in Chicago went once again to Saint-Gaudens. The majestic seated figure he produced—which anticipated by several years Daniel Chester French's much better known effigy for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington—even further distanced the historical figure of Lincoln from the travails of emancipation, but neither he nor Hosmer lived to see the monument erected.⁹⁸

THE great contrast between Hosmer's original model for a Lincoln monument, designed for the Western Sanitary Commission in the summer of 1866, and her final design presented in the early 1890s tells us much about the historical distance traveled in between. When Hosmer devised her slave-to-soldier cycle, black men were serving as federal soldiers in the Reconstruction South. Emancipation was still in progress: the possibilities seemed bright, or at least open-ended. Hosmer's model did not so much commemorate emancipation as bring a vision of it to life. By the 1890s, however, emancipation was over. It now belonged to history, and it already had its definitive commemorative image in Thomas Ball's monument to Lincoln. Accordingly Hosmer's final work "remembers" emancipation as if across a vast stretch of historical time. The subject enters the realm of myth: Lincoln becomes prophet, Africa becomes sibyl, slaves regress to a mythical infancy.

Hosmer's temporal retreat—from the contemporary world of the soldier to the mythological realm of the sibyl—coincided with a broad political retreat from the goals of Reconstruction. By the turn of the century, the last remnants of the political gains created by Reconstruction had been overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, which sanctioned the Jim Crow regime of "separate but equal." In this climate, a monument to emancipation was hopelessly old-fashioned. Hosmer's only choice was to push memory backward, into a past even more remote from the present. Had her monument been erected, it might have seemed passé to many critics but its retreat from the living struggle of emancipation probably would not have troubled them. The optimistic fervor of the 1860s lay dormant, never entirely forgotten but no longer acknowledged publicly. Many decades would pass before its memory could be effectively revived.