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Edited by
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Wood Plaque

Facismile of Gold Medal

45.0022

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Artifacts hold secrets. Some are easily discernible; a few artifacts provide their own answers; and if the researcher is lucky, someone before them has uncovered the provenance, or the story of the piece. Since all artifacts are not created equal, their stories may add up to nothing more than a broad-brush stroke of information. It's an unfair world indeed.



A small wood plaque (11 by 7 inches) in the museum's collection is neither remarkable nor valuable. It could easily be overlooked because of its modest presence. It holds no artistic value (its features are blunt, lacking intricacy or even detail), and it would be easy to dismiss the piece as a curiosity and nothing more. While the artifact is unassuming, the events it represents are not.

The facsimile is of a gold medal presented to Mary Todd Lincoln. Accession #45.0022 is plaster on wood (probably pine), to which someone has tied a piece of twine to display the object on the wall. It was meant, at least from that detail, to be exhibited with a degree of sentimentality or even honor. Other more exact copies in bronze were made and sold.

The original piece on which this item was based was a gold medallion presented to Mary Todd Lincoln in 1866. On the obverse of the medal is

the legend “Dedicated to French Democracy. Twice elected President of the United States.” Sharing the space is a profile of Lincoln. On the reverse side, on a tablet flanked by Lady Liberty and two freed slaves, is “Lincoln, honest man, abolished slavery, reestablished the Union and saved the Republic, without unveiling the Statue of Liberty. He was assassinated the 14th of April, 1865.”

Forty thousand citizens of France donated two sous each to the creation of a gold medal commemorating Abraham Lincoln, which was to be presented to his widow Mary Todd Lincoln. Mary Todd, who adored all things French, spoke and wrote the language fluently. The country was the center of fashion and was young America’s first ally, so there was a connection between both countries on a number of levels.

On December 1, 1866, a group of nineteen French dignitaries approached United States Minister to France John Bigelow. After the presentation of the gold medal in its case, committee member Eugene Pelletan told Bigelow, “Tell Mrs. Lincoln the heart of France is in that little box.”

Mary Todd Lincoln replied to the gift on January 8, 1867. “Gentlemen,” she wrote, “I have received the medal you sent me. I cannot express the emotion with which this proof of the sentiments of so many thousands of your countrymen fills me.”

The museum piece shows just the obverse side of the medallion with Winged Victory on either side, one carrying a torch and the other bearing a laurel wreath. On the plain board back of the artifact is a type written history of the piece. “This plaster facsimile was likely sold after the 1866 presentation.” The item was donated to Lincoln Memorial University by Dr. Stewart W. McClelland on August 10, 1945.

A number of bronze medallions were struck from the mold used to create the gold medal given to Mrs. Lincoln, but this plaque is far less grand than even those pieces. There were certainly many more of these plaques, and they might have even been purchased by some of the original 2-sous donors as a reminder of their contribution.

Mary Todd Lincoln had planned a world tour after her husband’s second term, and there was no doubt she would have visited France. Paris was too brilliant, too enticing to be by-passed; and Mary Todd Lincoln was too enthralled with the French not to enjoy the city of lights.

On October 1, 1868, Mrs. Lincoln and son Tad set sail for Europe,

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arriving in Southampton two weeks later. Spending time in Nice and Frankfort, they then traveled to Scotland, touring that country for nearly seven weeks. When Mary Todd and Tad returned to the United States in May 1871, Tad was ill. He passed away about two months later at 18.

Mary Todd returned to Europe in 1876, arriving back to the United States on October 27, 1880. Less than two years later, she died in her sister's home in Springfield, Illinois.

The wood and plaster plaque in the museum's collection has darkened with age; its features, never more than suggested, are hidden under a layer of grime. The gold medal it represents came to Robert Todd Lincoln after his mother's death, and he gave it to the Library of Congress. The artifact at the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum will never be more than a curiosity, but sometimes even a modest piece can contribute to a larger story.