

The Lincoln Trilogy (*The American Spirit*), 1939

Clyde du Vernet Hunt (1861-1941)

Bronze

Gift of the heirs of Clyde Du Vernet Hunt, 2004.43



A member of one of Vermont's most distinguished families, Clyde du Vernet Hunt was born in Glasgow, Scotland while his parents, Leavitt Hunt and Katherine L. [Jarvis] Hunt, were traveling in Europe. His maternal grandfather, William Jarvis, served as the American Consul to Portugal from 1802-1810 and introduced Merino sheep and Holstein cattle into the United States. His great-grandfather, Jonathan Hunt, served as lieutenant-governor of Vermont early in its statehood. His grandfather, General Jonathan Hunt, served three terms in the State Legislature before moving to Washington, D.C. as a congressman from 1827 until his death in 1832. Leavitt Hunt served as a colonel in the adjutant-general's department during the Civil War and later worked in the War Department in Washington, D.C.

Clyde Hunt received some of his early art instruction from his famous uncles, painter William Morris Hunt and architect Richard Morris Hunt. After completing his education in engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Hunt went to Paris to study painting with Jean-Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant and sculpture with Jules Coutan. He returned to America to serve in the Spanish American War, achieving the rank of Major before returning to civilian life. Throughout his artistic career he maintained a studio in Paris and a home in Weathersfield Bow, Vermont. Hunt died in Washington, D.C. on February 1, 1941 of pneumonia.

Hunt in his Parisian studio, c. 1900



The Lincoln Trilogy is Hunt's most monumental and ambitious creation. Hunt assembled the group by combining three earlier sculptures: Lincoln, Nirvana, and Fils de France. In 1918, he created a full-size, standing bronze figure of a boy entitled Fils de France. This young boy gazing intently into the distance symbolized the rebirth of France following the devastation of World War I. The marble statue of Nirvana, also produced in 1918, was probably inspired by Hunt's reaction to the horrors of World War I as well. It depicts a seated nude woman lost in reverie. With her head tilted back and her eyes closed, the woman's attitude of tranquility personifies the Buddhist concept of nirvana as a spiritual emancipation from passion, hatred, and delusion. The Bennington Museum owns both Fils de France and Nirvana; the latter is on display in the Church Gallery. These two statues relate stylistically to a tradition of idealized nude figures which was first developed by the Greeks and Romans of classical antiquity. Precedents for Nirvana and Fils de France can be found in ancient statues, in the work of Renaissance sculptors such as Donatello, and in the sculptures of 19th-century artists such as Auguste Rodin.

The statue of Abraham Lincoln differs dramatically from the other two sculptures. It is a tribute to an actual historical figure, rather than a personification of an ideal. Hunt dedicated himself to creating a fitting tribute to Abraham Lincoln whom he revered as an idealist, humanitarian, and emancipator. Throughout his career he created a number of statues of Lincoln. A photograph of the artist in his studio, taken in the 1920s, shows a life-size bronze version of the Lincoln statue in the trilogy, a smaller marble version of the same figure, and a bust of Lincoln.

Lincoln Trilogy plaster model, c. 1928



Hunt was invited to exhibit his work at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1918. This was a remarkable achievement as he was the only American included in the exhibition. He submitted the bronze *Fils de France* and the marble *Nirvana*, both of which received favorable reviews from the critics and public. In 1928, the *Societe des Artistes Francais* asked him to participate in the Paris Salon. He created a large plaster group for this exhibition by combining the Lincoln statue with the figures of *Nirvana* and *Fils de France*. While Lincoln and the boy are exact duplicates of the earlier versions, Hunt enlarged the figure of *Nirvana* and discretely draped the nude female for inclusion in the grouping. Entitled simply *Lincoln*, Hunt envisioned the group as representing the ideals of Faith (*Nirvana*), Hope (*Fils de France*), and Charity (*Lincoln*). He may have been inspired by Lincoln's famous plea for "charity for all and malice toward none." In this context, *Fils de France* became reinterpreted as "young America." The intellectual concept behind the *Lincoln Trilogy* is more successful than the visual relationship of the three figures. The combination of three distinctly individual sculptures of differing scale and spatial orientation has resulted in a somewhat awkward interrelationship.

The artist brought the plaster *Lincoln Trilogy* with him when he returned to America in 1938. The following year he had it cast in bronze for display in front of the Illinois State Building at the New York World's Fair. Hunt's heirs presented the bronze *Lincoln Trilogy* to the Bennington Museum in 1949. John Spargo, Director/Curator of the museum, appended the title "*The American Spirit*" to the statues, an interpretation which was influenced by the nationalism of the 1940s.

- Stephen J. Perkins

Former Curator and Executive Director of the Bennington Museum