



The Lincoln Memorial and American Life

Christopher A. Thomas

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Honoring perhaps the most celebrated and important president in history, the Lincoln Memorial is one of our most recognized national shrines. It seems impossible to envision the Mall in Washington, D.C. or national pageantry without it--yet the Lincoln Memorial was almost not built. From the project's inception, the memorial--a modified Greek temple designed by architect Henry Bacon--gave rise to charged cultural and aesthetic debate, including arguments about Modernism and Americanism. Christopher Thomas offers the first detailed analysis of Bacon's design and the memorial as a system, including the statue of Lincoln by Daniel Chester French. Using extensive archival data, Thomas discusses just why the memorial looks as it does.

Because the idea of a memorial to Lincoln raised questions of race, the legacy of the Civil War, and lingering sectional animosities, the project sparked political debate between the legislative and executive branches of government and between political parties. Thomas traces the long and controversial path of the project, ranging from the immediate aftermath of the Civil War through the Progressive era, with its mix of novelty, racism, and imperialism. As he concentrates on the memorial's background, design, construction, reception, and uses--including the many public demonstrations for civil rights and justice that have taken place there--Thomas shows that the Lincoln Memorial is not a neutral symbol of America at all but a partisan and racially coded object, susceptible to appropriation and re-appropriation.

A valuable contribution to American studies, this book combines architecture and art history with American history and politics. It will appeal to scholars in these fields and to any general reader with an interest in Lincoln, the early twentieth century, and the monuments of our nation's capital.

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