

# Abe Lincoln's Comeback

**A**RARE photograph plate of Abraham Lincoln in fine attire—a portrait that some say helped win him the presidency—has surfaced after being lost for nearly a century. Though it could fetch an estimated \$150,000 or more, it may be bound for a museum.

The George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, which made the discovery, says that it ranks among the top five surviving glass-plate portraits of Lincoln.

Three years ago, a retired auto worker in Michigan, serving as the executor of a relative's estate, found a box of old negatives in the basement of the relative's house. It contained an 8-by-10-inch sheet of glass, thicker than a window pane, covered in brown emulsion and shattered at the bottom. He showed the box's contents to a local collector of early photographs, who offered to take the plate to conservators at the George Eastman House, in Rochester, N.Y.

Grant Romer, who directs the museum's conservation team, says that when he illuminated the plate, "it went from looking like a mud puddle to feeling like you were standing in Lincoln's presence."

### Crisp Jacket, No Beard

The plate shows a campaigning Lincoln—eager to shed his backwoods reputation—with smoothed hair, a crisp black jacket and tie, and no beard. Chicago photographer Alexander Hesler captured the original image, on a glass negative, on June 3, 1860. Lincoln reportedly liked the portrait, and Mr. Hesler sold prints and published the image on campaign mementos. It later gained prominence among historians and even today is commonly reprinted in textbooks.

In 1866, Mr. Hesler sold his studio



Katharine Whitman

A recently discovered glass plate with a portrait of **Abraham Lincoln**; the pose is said to have helped him win the presidency. Here, the plate is digitally reassembled.

*A museum conservator says that when he illuminated the plate, he felt he was standing 'in Lincoln's presence.'*

to photographer George Ayres, who in later years made three or four backup copies of the Lincoln portrait on glass plates, known as interpositives, on which photographers once

relied to make extra negatives. At least two of these are in Illinois, but the whereabouts of this one, made in 1900, were unknown. It's unclear how it came to the current owner's relative.

Collector demand remains strong for Lincoln memorabilia. Christie's sold a Lincoln print for \$358,000 in 2002, and Chicago's Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, a retailer in Lincolniana, says this interpositive could fetch at least \$150,000.

Even so, the 72-year-old owner of the plate says he plans to either keep it or donate it to a museum. In an interview, he asked to remain anonymous because he wants to avoid offers from collectors and auction houses. For now, Eastman museum conservator Katharine Whitman is trying to reassemble the bottom third of the plate, which was found broken into 26 pieces, and hopes to display it later this year.

—Kelly Crow