

Painting and Politics: The Journal of John Henry Brown

“My business is now dwindling to nothing. I cannot lose sight of the fact, but for this odious war I would now have plenty of employment at increased prices. Aside from any personal or selfish feeling in the matter, I regard this war as most unholy. I think it madness to attempt to settle our troubles by the sword.”¹

As his comments of August 31, 1861, make clear, Philadelphian John Henry Brown was among those Pennsylvanians who did not approve of the Civil War. The forty-three-year-old Brown was a painter of watercolor-on-ivory portrait miniatures, a financially precarious business in the era of photography. A year earlier, in August 1860, Brown had actually received a commission to travel to Springfield, Illinois, and paint the Republican presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln. He noted in his journal at the time that “I hardly know how to express the strength of my personal regard for Mr. Lincoln. I have never seen a man for whom I so soon formed an attachment. I like him much & agree with him in all things but his politics.”²

However much Brown liked Lincoln personally, he steadfastly opposed the politics and policies of the war. Brown’s journal, which records both personal and professional events and doubled as his account book, is preserved at the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia and provides a fascinating glimpse into the thoughts and daily activities of a Pennsylvanian on the home front who viewed the war not as a patriotic calling but as a national tragedy.

Interspersed between notes about portrait sittings, church visits, and the health of his family, Brown’s journal records his fears about military despotism, the suspension of habeas corpus, inflation, the draft (for which he was eligible), and the destructive potential of abolition. He noted the tenor of Philadelphia’s reactions to the events of the war and reported war news coming from the front, but was disgusted by newspaper accounts that he considered propaganda and engaged in a “game of

¹ John Henry Brown, autograph journal/account book, Aug. 31, 1861, AMs 573/14.1, Rosenbach Museum & Library.

² Aug. 26, 1860.

brag.”³ He repeatedly vowed that “the war news is so unreliable that I have concluded not to notice it regularly in this journal,” but he could not escape history, and in his journal he continued to record his thoughts and notes about the conflict.⁴

Brown continued to ply his painting trade through most of the war and his journal is also a valuable record of the ways in which the war inserted itself into both art and business. Although most of his clients were Philadelphians, he also had Southern patrons from whom he was cut off by secession. In August 1861 he noted, “I have two pictures to paint for a family in Georgia, but for which I will in all probability not be paid until the close of the war.”⁵ He blamed the war for a general downturn in his business, although new photographic techniques probably also played a part. But the war also created new situations that required his skills. In August 1862 he “Rec’d a note from Mrs. Alex Biddle, begging me to paint a picture of her Husband immediately, on account of the probability of his going to War very soon,” while in May 1863 he “made arrangements to paint a picture of Gen: Henry Bohlen dec’d who was killed in battle.”⁶

Brown’s experience of the war was bracketed by his painting of Lincoln in 1860 and Lincoln’s death in 1865. Despite his animosity towards Lincoln’s policies, Brown outlined the April 1865 pages in a black band, and he recorded standing in line for two hours in an unsuccessful attempt to view the president’s body when it passed through Philadelphia. He concluded the month with a statement that would have been echoed by all Pennsylvanians, “The War is now certainly over, for which we cannot be sufficiently thankful to God.”⁷

Rosenbach Museum & Library

KATHERINE HAAS

³ June 29, 1861.

⁴ June 29, 1861, see also Aug. 3, 1861, Apr. 15, 1862, and June 30, 1864.

⁵ Aug. 16, 1861.

⁶ Aug. 8, 1862, May 28, 1863.

⁷ Apr. 22, 1865.