

Lincoln on Battlefield of Antietam, Maryland, Alexander Gardner

Lincoln on Battlefield of Antietam, Maryland

Alexander Gardner
American, Maryland,
October 2, 1862
Albumen print
8 5/8 x 7 3/4 in.
84.XM.482.1

Twenty-six thousand soldiers were killed or wounded in the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, after which Confederate General Robert E. Lee was forced to retreat to Virginia. Just two weeks after the victory, President and Commander-in-Chief Abraham Lincoln conferred with General McClelland (at the right) and Allan Pinkerton, Chief of the nascent Secret Service (on the left), who had organized espionage missions behind Confederate lines.

Lincoln stands tall, front and center in his stovepipe hat, his erect and commanding posture emphasized by the tent pole that seems to be an extension of his spine. The other men stand slightly apart in deference to their leader. Both McClelland and Pinkerton have a hand tucked inside their coats, a conventional pose in portraiture. The reclining figure of the man at left in the background and the shirt hanging from the tree are a reminder that, although this is a formally posed picture, Lincoln's presence did not halt the camp's activity, and no attempts were made to isolate him from the ordinary circumstances surrounding the continuing military conflict.



About the Artist

Alexander Gardner (American, 1821–1882)

As an idealistic young reporter and newspaper editor in Glasgow, Scotland, Alexander Gardner dreamed of forming a semi-socialistic colony somewhere in what he thought of as the unspoiled wilderness of America. He selected a place in Iowa, but even though he sent family and friends to live there, Gardner never joined them. Instead, when he disembarked in New York he

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remained. The celebrated American photographer Mathew Brady had probably paid for his passage, though how they came to be acquainted is unknown. Gardner, who had spent his spare time in Scotland studying science, became Brady's assistant for seven years. He was manager of Brady's Washington, D.C., gallery until the American Civil War broke out in 1861.

Working for Brady's studio until 1862, Gardner is said to have made three-quarters of the campaign pictures of the Army of the Potomac. In 1866 he published *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, the first published collection of Civil War photographs, comprised of one hundred photographs by himself and eleven photographers working for him, including Timothy O'Sullivan and John Reekie. It was a commercial failure. After the war, Gardner finally traveled West to his promised land, photographing along the way.

Questions for Teaching

Using as many details as possible, describe what you see in this image. (In this black-and-white image, three men stand in front of a tent. The man in the middle is the tallest and is posed with his hands down at his sides, wearing a formal black suit with a bowtie and a tall stovepipe hat. The man to the left is wearing a worn dark suit and a bowler hat. The man to the right is dressed in a military uniform with bright buttons and epaulets. The tent is pitched on a grassy clearing with trees in the background.)

This picture was taken at Antietam, Maryland, where one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War was fought only two weeks before this picture was taken. How is this history reflected in the image? (The tone of *Lincoln on Battlefield of Antietam, Maryland* is very bleak. The somber facial expressions of the men, coupled with the barren grass and sparse trees, give an overall impression of death and dying. There is also a sense of loneliness about the figure of President Lincoln. Although standing next to two men, he seems totally isolated; he does not acknowledge the presence of either of his companions. He is unresponsive to the camera; rather than making eye contact, he stares distantly off into space, increasing the sense of isolation.)

This image expresses many strong formal qualities. Which of the elements and principles of art are most strongly represented here? (Very distinct vertical and diagonal *lines* and geometric *shapes* are immediately apparent in the tent, pose of the men, and the trees. Upon closer inspection, it is clear that these lines and shapes function to frame and to create *movement* towards the central subject, President Lincoln. For instance, note the way that all of the *lines* in the image draw the eye toward the figure of the president. The tent forms an inverted "V" *shape* directly behind Lincoln, while the vertical tent post and tree trunk in the background further elongate Lincoln's already tall figure, creating a clear *emphasis* on Lincoln's figure in the composition. There are other strongly represented elements as well. Consider the use of light and value in this image; there is a stark contrast between the white of Lincoln's shirt and his black suit, which further draws our attention towards the president's face. There is also a sense of *balance*, with the figures standing to either side of the president in similar poses, like mirror images.)