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Bronze Lincoln mask finds home at UIS

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Abraham Lincoln's tired face cast in bronze has gazed at tourists, fast-food patrons and more than a few walls.

But now the bronze — one of 15 taken from an early plaster casting of sculptor Clark Mills' 1865 life mask of Lincoln — will have a new home among University of Illinois Springfield students.

The Rick and Dona McGraw family, owners of the local McDonald's franchise, has donated the bronze to UIS, where it will be displayed in the information commons area adjacent to the lobby of Brookens Library.

"It is an emotional-looking piece," said Vicki Megginson, associate chancellor for development at UIS. "It gives me chills when I look at it."

The mask has been in Megginson's office while university officials decided on a place where it could be secure and where students and the public could see it.

"You can see every crevice, almost every pore on his face," Megginson said. "I've become kind of attached to it."

Mills took the original plaster mold of Lincoln's face on Feb. 11, 1865, just two months before his assassination. The mask shows the great toll the Civil War had taken on Lincoln's health with his tired eyes and wrinkled face.

"It's just an incredible piece of work. The first time I saw it I was really taken aback. It's like seeing what Lincoln really looked like," said UIS Chancellor Richard Ringeisen.

The McGraws' bronze is taken from the original plaster casting of the Mills mask once owned by Lincoln's private secretary John Hay and much later by Lincoln collector Lloyd Ostendorf.

The Thomas Mack family displayed the mask in the downtown McDonald's after the Long Nine project in Athens ran into financial trouble in 1983, and the McGraw family acquired the mask when they bought the McDonald's franchise from the Mack family in 1989.

It was the only item the McGraws saved from the downtown restaurant when they decided to remodel the building.

"My dad said he was the only thing worth keeping," said Dona McGraw. "He kind of moved around from one location to another."

The McGraws approached Megginson about donating the cast to the university because they saw UIS as a perfect fit.

"Here, he will be special. We're thrilled he now has a final home," said McGraw.

UIS is "a great place to study history of all sorts, especially Lincoln," said Ringeisen.

McGraw joked that the mask has been stored in the family's home for years in locations such as the basement, a bedroom, and even looking out a window.

"He's been around in our family for years," she said. "But we didn't have an appropriate place where people might appreciate it," she said.

Chris Detro can be reached at 788-1510.

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