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Article Summary: Omaha in Lininger's time was just moving beyond its frontier stage into a period of greater sophistication and culture. The gallery that he created helped to stimulate interest in art in the Midwest.

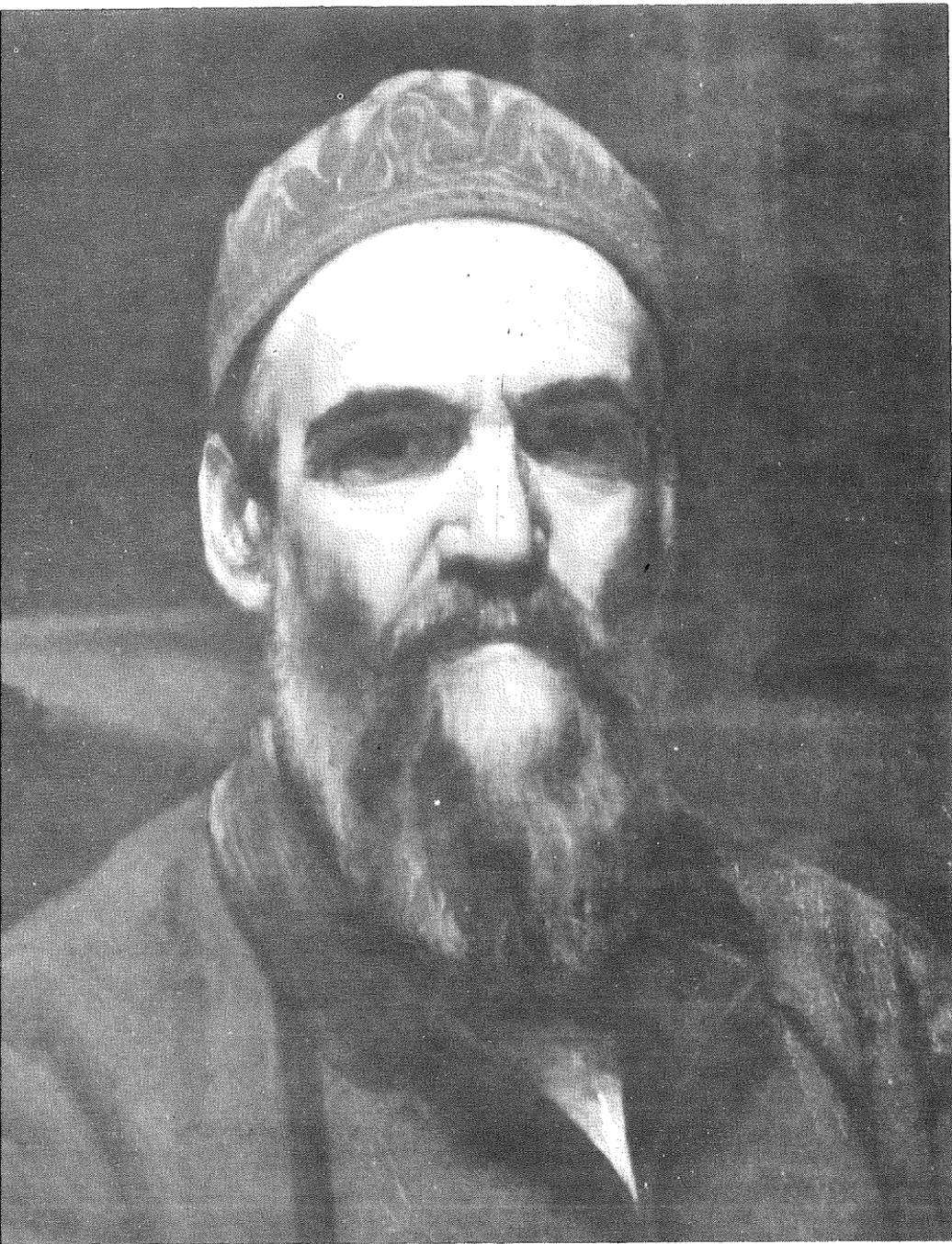
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Photographs / Images: George W Lininger dressed as a Renaissance man of wealth (J Laurie Wallace painting, 1891), Lininger's home and art gallery at 224 North 18<sup>th</sup> Street, interior view of Lininger Art Gallery, J Laurie Wallace, Lininger



*George W. Lininger, Omaha art patron, was painted in the habiliments of a Renaissance man of wealth by J. Laurie Wallace in 1891. Lininger disliked the portrait and it remained hidden until 1927. Courtesy Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha.*

## GEORGE WASHINGTON LININGER: PIONEER MERCHANT AND ART PATRON

By MICHAEL J. HARKINS

**G**EORGE WASHINGTON LININGER, merchant, art patron, politician, and philanthropist, was partially responsible for fostering the development of art in the pioneer community of Omaha, Nebraska. His private gallery, built near downtown Omaha in 1888, became a center of the arts for almost two decades.

He was born on December 14, 1834, in the rural town of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where his father both farmed and had a tailor shop.<sup>1</sup> As a boy Lininger was intrigued and mystified by his father's descriptions of his native Germany with its medieval castles, moats, and German nobility. These tales and the quest for adventure stimulated him to dream of a future journey to his ancestral homeland.<sup>2</sup>

When George was fourteen, his father organized the first large party to emigrate from his vicinity in Pennsylvania to another rural area in Illinois. It was there in north central Illinois, near the newly settled town of Peru, that Lininger grew to early manhood. His parents quickly shifted occupations after moving to the new state and opened a store and hardware business in Peru, with young George taking an active role.<sup>3</sup> As Lininger grew older he dreamed of becoming a sea captain. This prompted him as a young man in his twenties to join the navy and serve out an apprenticeship.<sup>4</sup> After leaving the navy he was married in 1856 to Caroline M. Newman of Knoxville, Illinois, who had often visited relatives in Peru.

While in Illinois, Lininger's health became endangered, and on advice from doctors, he left Peru with his family and moved to Kansas. The climate and living conditions in Kansas did not improve his health; following an outbreak of malaria, the family moved again, finally settling in Council Bluffs, Iowa.<sup>5</sup>

Life in Council Bluffs agreed with his health, and the family decided to make this area their home. In 1870 Lininger entered a partnership with the wealthy Iowan, Edward Shugart, and together they established a farm implement firm. After several years in Iowa they expanded the firm and established its headquarters across the river in downtown Omaha, Nebraska. Business in Council Bluffs declined, and in 1873 Lininger and Shugart decided to close this branch to concentrate on business in Omaha. In the same year Lininger moved his family to that community.

Lininger rapidly became prominent on the Omaha business scene after the move. In 1874 he dissolved partnership with Shugart and formed G. W. Lininger and Co., an implement firm which engaged in wholesale and retail trade. Joseph Metcalf and Henry DeValon, two prominent Omaha lawyers, assisted the infant firm. During the years 1876 to 1879 the firm grew to its greatest heights.<sup>6</sup> In Omaha, Lininger employed two hundred persons and had branch houses located throughout the Midwest. He also sent traveling agents throughout the country.<sup>7</sup> At forty-five he controlled the largest implement sales firm in the world with a main building covering 70,000 square feet of floor space.

He manufactured few items but jobbed out every conceivable type of farm machinery in large quantities.<sup>8</sup> For six years the firm's annual capital was a million dollars. By 1879, however, Lininger could no longer suppress a desire to travel, and he sold his firm to the Haines Brothers from Philadelphia.

From 1880 to 1892 he made three extensive trips to Europe and the Orient, visiting a total of thirty-three countries. Three months after selling his firm, the family sailed for Europe on the steamer *Scythia*. This was the start of his art collecting career.<sup>9</sup> In Europe he purchased art objects and paintings, adding them to a small private collection

in Omaha which he had begun in the 1870's. Returning home in 1881, he could not resist reentering the implement business and that year established a second firm, Lininger-Metcalf and Co.<sup>10</sup> Four years later, in 1885, he again sailed for Europe and the Orient on the *Etruria* of the Cunard Line.<sup>11</sup> His last voyage was undertaken in 1892 with his family, during which time he concentrated on major art centers in Europe.

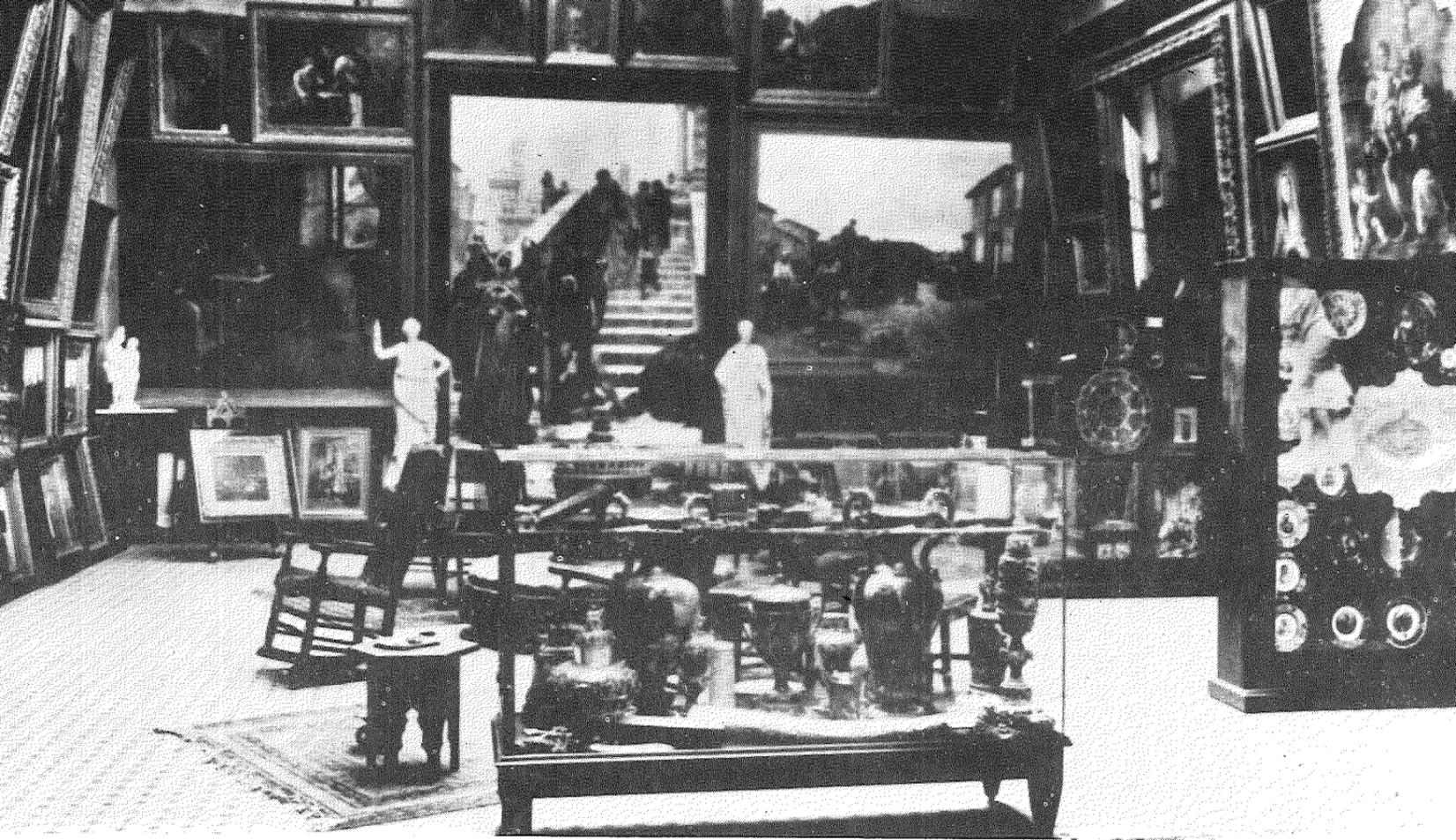
Lininger was for many years deeply involved in civic and political affairs. In 1878 he joined other community leaders in promoting the sale of stocks to erect a combined opera house and chamber of commerce building in Omaha. A year later he served as a member of the city council and in 1887 he represented Omaha in the Nebraska State Senate. In 1890 he ran for mayor but was defeated.<sup>12</sup> In the 1898 campaign Lininger, by then an Omaha millionaire, made a bid for the Republican nomination for governor but was unsuccessful in the final convention caucus.<sup>13</sup>

Although hardly a success in politics, Lininger still contributed to the city by helping to establish parks, playgrounds, and boulevards. His greatest effort was directed toward the construction of Omaha's water works, an endeavor which proved successful late in his public career.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout his public and private life Lininger continued to collect art and to display it for friends in his home. An idea continually coming to his mind was that of an art gallery to display his growing collection.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, in September, 1886, he decided to construct his gallery and the following month the architectural firm of Mendelsson, Fisher, and Lawrence accepted the contract to erect a structure extending to the rear of his home.<sup>16</sup> During the construction Lininger personally conducted the laying of "brick and terra cotta designs with grey colored beltings of the early Renaissance style" in the front of the gallery.<sup>17</sup> In size the gallery was thirty-five by seventy feet. A glass skylight admitted light for daytime viewing, and after the development of electricity, electric lights were used for night activities. The Lininger Art Gallery, built at a cost of \$15,000, opened its doors in November, 1888, at 224 North 18th Street on a site now occupied by the Omaha Civic Auditorium.<sup>18</sup>



*George W. Lininger's home was located at 224 North 18th Street in Omaha. His art gallery was constructed at the rear of the house. Courtesy Bostwick Frohart Collection; owned by KMTV, Omaha.*



*The Lininger Art Gallery contained paintings and objets d'art from Europe and the Orient. Courtesy Fred Thomas, Omaha.*

It was here in this new gallery that Lininger would bring his ancestral traditions of a long forgotten German *junker*. Here, too, the intellectual and business leaders of the city would nightly discuss international, national, state, and city problems, and of course Lininger acted as the moderator. The gallery, with its ancient atmosphere and beauty, served at times as Lininger's throne room. It was from an Egyptian throne chair purchased while in Egypt that he ruled his gallery. Strange though it then seemed, some of the regal splendor once admired by Pharaohs of Egypt now stimulated the elite of Omaha.

The establishment of his gallery eventually led to the founding of the Western Art Association in 1889, which enticed J. Laurie Wallace, pupil of Thomas Eakins, to become an Omaha resident. Wallace was director of the Art League and instructor at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1882 to 1888. It was from Chicago that Lininger persuaded Wallace to come to the expanding pioneer art community of Omaha. For many years Wallace was active as a portrait painter, an occupation which he found most lucrative. With Lininger's financial support Wallace established and operated the Omaha Academy of Fine Arts. For a time there were rumors of secret meetings between Lininger, Wallace, and Eakins. It was believed by many in Chicago, New York, and Omaha art circles that Lininger was trying to lure Eakins to Omaha through Wallace. Eakins, a portraitist and genre painter, was at this time professor of painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The difficulties that he experienced with his medical painting may have led him to consider leaving Philadelphia in the late 1880's<sup>19</sup>

The Trans-Mississippi International Exposition, held in Omaha in 1898, greatly popularized Lininger and his gallery. Before the Exposition opened Lininger made major improvements in his gallery: the ceiling was freshly tinted in soft colors; new ground glass skylights were added to give a touch of color to the pictures; a new coat of paint was added to the outside of the building; and the old conservatory was converted into an additional gallery. During the Exposition some 20,000 persons viewed the paintings in his gallery,



*Artist J. Laurie Wallace  
came to Omaha  
on the invitation of Lininger  
in 1889. Courtesy  
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha.*

which was open daily from nine to five.<sup>20</sup> A letter in the permanent catalogue of the gallery expressed Lininger's feelings at this time: "These . . . years of free art in Omaha have made a marked improvement on the people who visit and study the pictures."<sup>21</sup>

The gallery included about three hundred paintings of noted artists of the period. Among some of the major paintings were: the "Arab Dance," a painting by Simoni that was awarded first prize at the Exhibit of Water Colors at Venice, Italy, in 1887; "David with the Head of Goliath," a larger-than-life-size painting insured for \$50,000 by Lininger; and a Limoges enamel on copper by Leonard Lemosin, valued at \$20,000.

One of Lininger's prize possessions was the "Return of Spring," by William Adolphe Bouguereau, a Parisian artist. The picture was shown in 1886 in Paris and later was sent on tour in the United States. When shown in Omaha in 1891, an employee of the Orchard & Wilhelm Co. objected to the picture because of its nudity and hurled a chair at it. The

picture was returned to Bouguereau in Paris, who restored it. The painting was then purchased by Arthur Tooth and Sons of London, and was later bought by Lininger through Tooth's New York branch. Lininger paid \$10,000 for the painting which was once valued at \$50,000. Today, the painting is in the collection of the Joslyn Art Museum.<sup>22</sup>

Early in 1900 the number of visitors to the gallery began to decline. At age sixty-six Lininger's health began to fail. Doctors advised him to limit his activities and to take a long rest. The gallery was never again the center of community interest that it was during the 1890's. In 1907 this pioneer merchant and art patron died and all activities in the gallery ceased. From the time of his death until the death of his wife in 1927, the gallery was seldom open to the public. Only close friends and relatives visited the Lininger home, and a select few of them were admitted to the gallery. At the death of Mrs. Lininger the collection was sold at public auction.<sup>23</sup>

The sale of the complete gallery commenced on July 17, 1927, and lasted three days. Merrill E. Northwall, who was in charge of the sale, tried to keep the collection in Omaha by selling only to local people. Although Northwall's plan was not an entire success, George Brandeis of J. L. Brandeis & Sons, an Omaha department store, and Charles W. Martin, an Omaha insurance agent, were the largest single purchasers. Mrs. Sarah Joslyn purchased some of the works and later bequeathed them with part of her estate to Joslyn Art Museum, which she had founded. The University of Nebraska purchased a number of items, the most interesting being a set of early surgical instruments unearthed in Pompeii, as well as three Egyptian mummies.<sup>24</sup> Today, the objects purchased by the University may be viewed at the University of Nebraska State Museum in Morrill Hall at Lincoln.

The "Return of Spring" by Bouguereau was purchased from the Lininger estate for \$2,000 by Charles W. Martin. A number of years later this painting was given to his nephew, Francis Martin, who in turn donated it to the Joslyn. Of the three hundred paintings sold, approximately half were retained in Omaha. Many of these are now at the Joslyn Art Museum. With the destruction of the house and gallery on



*George W. Lininger entered the political arena after achieving success as a business leader.*

July 31, 1927, this era of Omaha's art development came to an end. Collections at Joslyn Art Museum have been augmented by bequests from Lininger heirs and gifts from purchasers of art at the original auction.

George Lininger had an ambition to stimulate art in the midwest and his gallery fulfilled that dream. But after his death, one Omahan recalled, a void existed: "[Gone were the] pleasant, leisurely days when on Thursday and Sunday the townsfolk made their way to the . . . gallery, on an average of one thousand per month, there to spend a little while in the atmosphere of quiet and beauty." Not until the opening of the Joslyn Art Museum in 1931 were these days to return. In the heyday of the Lininger Gallery, it was featured in *Baedeker's World Wide Guide* as a noted attraction in Omaha.<sup>25</sup>

George Lininger's numerous efforts in art activities, one of which was to send J. Gutzon Borglum to Europe to study art,<sup>26</sup> were directed toward the establishing of some type of sophistication and culture in Omaha. To a certain extent he succeeded, and because of his efforts and ideas a foundation

was laid upon which the Joslyn Art Museum was to build. Thus, George W. Lininger, pioneer merchant and art patron, served well the Omaha of his time—a city passing from its frontier stages into a realm of sophisticated cultural development.

### NOTES

1. Louis Shumate, undated and unpublished manuscript concerning the George W. Lininger Art Gallery, in the private papers of the Joslyn Memorial Art Museum. (Hereinafter cited as Shumate, "Lininger Gallery.")

2. *Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), July 31, 1927, 4.

3. Lininger clippings, "Early Omaha Art Activities," located in the Main Branch, Omaha Public Library papers. (Hereinafter all references to clippings, unless otherwise designated, will be found in this collection in the Omaha Public Library.)

4. *Omaha World-Herald*, (Evening), July 31, 1927, 1.

5. Shumate, "Lininger Gallery."

6. Personal scrapbook and diary of George W. Lininger; private papers of Francis Martin, art collector, Omaha, Nebraska.

7. James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha Nebraska and South Omaha* (New York: Munsell and Co., 1894), 475. (Hereinafter cited as Savage and Bell, *History of Omaha*.) Interviews in clippings disagree with the information in Savage and Bell concerning numerical references to the implement firm. Thus, more accurate figures are used here.

8. Clipping, *Daily Spirit*, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, July 30, 1897.

9. Undated clipping, *Omaha Republican*, November, 1879.

10. Undated clippings, *Implement World*, magazine published in Omaha, ca. 1880 to 1900.

11. Clipping, *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 19, 1885.

12. Savage and Bell, *History of Omaha*, 3, 304.

13. Personal scrapbook and papers of George W. Lininger, Martin papers.

14. Clipping, *Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), March 14, 1927.

15. Shumate, "Lininger Gallery."

16. Undated clipping, *Omaha Daily Bee*, 1886.

17. Francis Martin, unpublished manuscript, "Reviewing Early Omaha Art Organizations and Activities," Martin papers. Another copy of this manuscript, with slight variations in detail, may be found in the private papers of the Joslyn Memorial Art Museum.

18. Clippings, *The Omaha Watchman*, November 9, 1888, Martin papers.

19. Undated clippings, *Growth of Art Taste*, magazine, published in Omaha, ca. 1880-1900. In addition to clippings from this publication found in the papers of the Main Branch, Omaha Public Library, random pages of this obscure magazine may be found in the Francis Martin papers. Eakins' two most famous paintings are the *Clinic of Dr. Gross* (Jefferson Medical College) and *Clinic of Dr. Agnew* (University of Pennsylvania). *The Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 9, 475.

20. Clippings, *The Omaha Watchman*, November 9, 1888, Martin papers.
21. Published catalog of the George W. Lininger Art Gallery, Martin papers. Less complete copies of the catalog may be found in the Joslyn Museum papers, the Omaha Public Library papers and at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
22. Undated letter Andrew Stone, New York Art collector to Francis Martin, Martin papers.
23. Personal interviews with Francis Martin, Omaha, Nebraska, and Fred Thomas, Omaha, Nebraska, December 23, 1969. Francis Martin attended the auction in 1927, and Fred Thomas was the executor of the Lininger estate.
24. *Omaha World-Herald* (Evening), July 31, 1927; and Shumate, "Lininger Gallery." The surgical instruments are on view in a map case in the Ancient World Exhibit in the State Museum, University of Nebraska.
25. Undated clippings, *Springfield Telegraph*, Springfield, Illinois; Omaha post card of the Lininger Gallery, published by H. G. Unberzagt, Omaha, Nebraska, 1890. Both of the items cited may be found in the Omaha Public Library papers, the Joslyn Art Museum papers, and the Martin papers.
26. J. Gutzon Borglum is the sculptor who carved the Mount Rushmore, South Dakota, heads of four Presidents. Thousands view monthly the work of a man supported and educated by George W. Lininger. See Martin Papers.