

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Edmonia Lewis
(July 4, 1845 – September 17, 1907)

“First Black/Native Sculptor to Gain International Prominence”

Mary Edmonia Lewis was born July 4, 1845, in Albany, New York to a mixed black and Chippewa woman and a Haitian black man. Edmonia's parents died when she was very young, and she was raised by her aunt and the Chippewa people in the Niagara Falls area. Edmonia had an older brother, Samuel Lewis, who migrated west during the California Gold Rush. Samuel profited from the gold fields, which he used to send Edmonia to Oberlin College in Ohio.

Although Oberlin was one of the first to admit black people as well as white women, Edmonia faced harassment and discrimination. Edmonia thrived in drawing at Oberlin. In 1862 she was falsely accused of attempting to poison two white coeds. She was cleared of all charges but continued to be the subject of verbal attacks and even a physical assault that left her bedridden for days. Oberlin's administration refused to allow Edmonia to re-enroll to complete her graduation requirements. With Samuel's help, she moved to Boston to study with master sculptor Edward A. Brackett. Shortly into her apprenticeship, Edmonia began to sculpt her own work. Edmonia moved to Boston and opened her own art studio.

In 1864, she created a sculpture of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the white commander of the all-black 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. The sculpture became popular among Bostonians, and she was soon able to sell over 100 plaster copies of the work. She also made popular medallion portraits of abolitionists such as John Brown and William Lloyd Garrison. Her art began providing a financial means to support herself.

In 1865, Edmonia moved to Rome, Italy. She joined an international artistic community that included writers, poets, artists, and other women sculptors such as Harriet Hosmer, Anne Whitney, Margaret Foley, and Emma Stebbins. Edmonia began to work in marble and adopted a neoclassical style. She continued to find inspiration in the images of abolitionists and Civil War heroes.

Edmonia's sculptures of African, African American, or Native American people were particularly popular among American tourists in Rome. One of her best known works is *The Death of Cleopatra* (1876) a 3,000-pound, marble sculpture depicting the Egyptian queen after her suicide by a venomous asp. The work was presumed lost for over a century but was ultimately rediscovered at a salvage yard in the 1980s. It is now on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC. Some of her most famous works included *Forever Free* (1867), which depicted a black woman and black man celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation; *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1868), a sculpture of an Egyptian handmaiden; and *The Old Arrow Maker and His Daughter* (1872), a sculpture of Native Americans (which was acquired by the National Museum of Art in Washington, D.C.). The Smithsonian holds eight of Edmonia's marble sculptures from between 1866 and 1876, including those depicting Moses, Hagar, Cupid, and Young Octavian. Edmonia Lewis disappeared from public view in the 1880s. Although there was an engagement notice, there is no marriage record and no children.

Edmonia Lewis died in London, England on September 17, 1907 of kidney disease. She is buried in the St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery, in London. In 2017, a group raised money to restore her gravesite.

In January 2022, the US Postal Service issued a Forever Stamp honoring Edmonia Lewis. The stamp art of Edmonia is a casein-paint portrait based on a photo of her by Augustus Marshall.

