EDMONIA LEWIS

INDELIBLE IMPRESSIONS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

We could not be more thrilled to present *Edmonia Lewis: Indelible Impressions* at the Cantor. Edmonia Lewis was a true trailblazer. A major museum retrospective of her work is underway, so we felt very fortunate when Jennifer DeVere Brody, Stanford Professor of Theater and Performance Studies, approached us about sharing three remarkable sculptures tucked away in a San Jose library that she believed deserve to be seen by a wider audience. The last time they were exhibited at a museum was before Stanford undergraduate students were born.

As you walk through *Indelible Impressions* and read the essays that follow, I invite you to do what smaller exhibitions afford us the luxury of doing: observe each artwork closely and slowly. While doing so, you might consider some of the following questions: Why did Edmonia Lewis, a woman of Native American and African descent, decide to carve figures that are reminiscent of sixteenth century Italian sculpture? How was she able to access the education and resources needed to create them, given that she died well before women had the right to vote in this country and came of age before slavery was abolished?

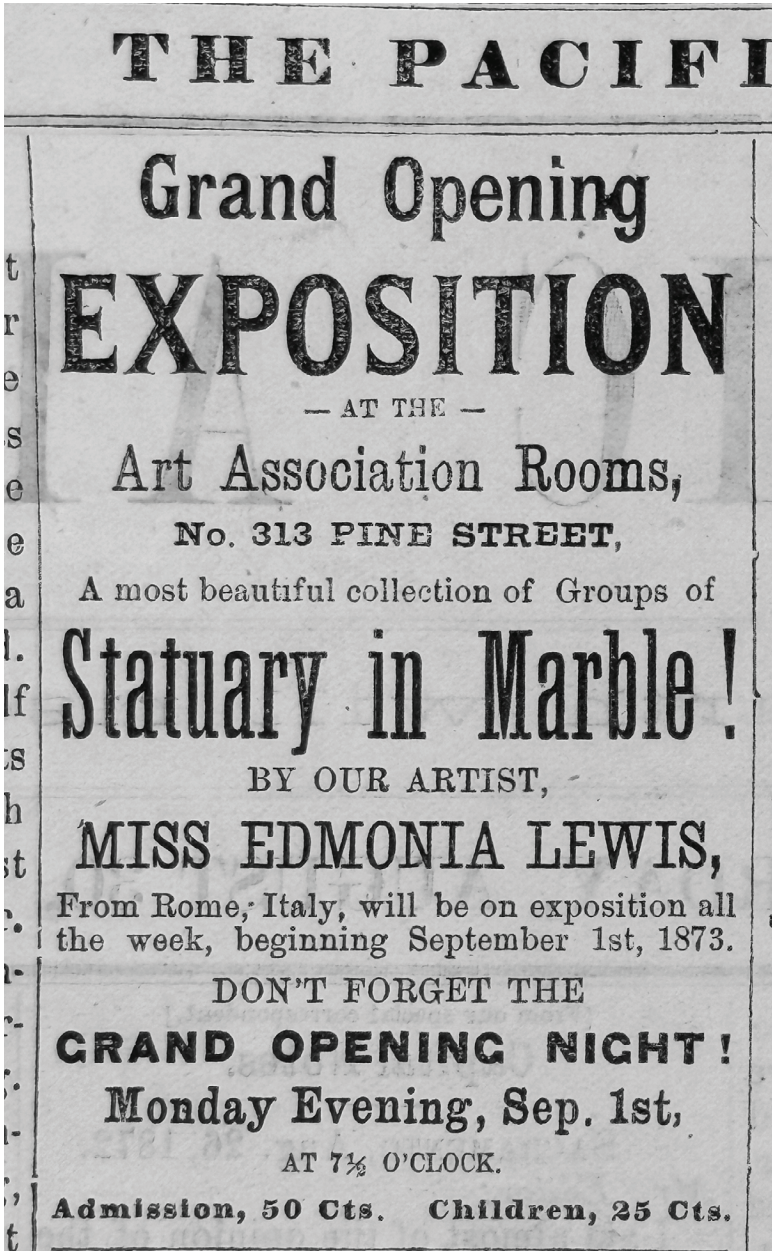
In the answers to these questions, there are deeply compelling stories—and what becomes evident is the remarkable mixture of ambition, talent, and tireless travel that earned Lewis the nickname "Wildfire."

I am so pleased that we can share these many stories with you, and hope they leave you with some indelible impressions of your own to share with others.

Veronica Roberts

Veronica Roberts
John and Jill Freidenrich Director
Cantor Arts Center

Henry Rocher (American), *Edmonia Lewis*, c. 1870. Albumen silver print on card. Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Transfer from Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, Bequest of Eert Hansen Wendell, 2010.68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Newsprint advertisement from *The Pacific Appeal: A Weekly Journal for People of Color,* vol. X, no. 2, August 30, 1873. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

EDMONIA LEWIS: INDELIBLE IMPRESSIONS

Jennifer DeVere Brody

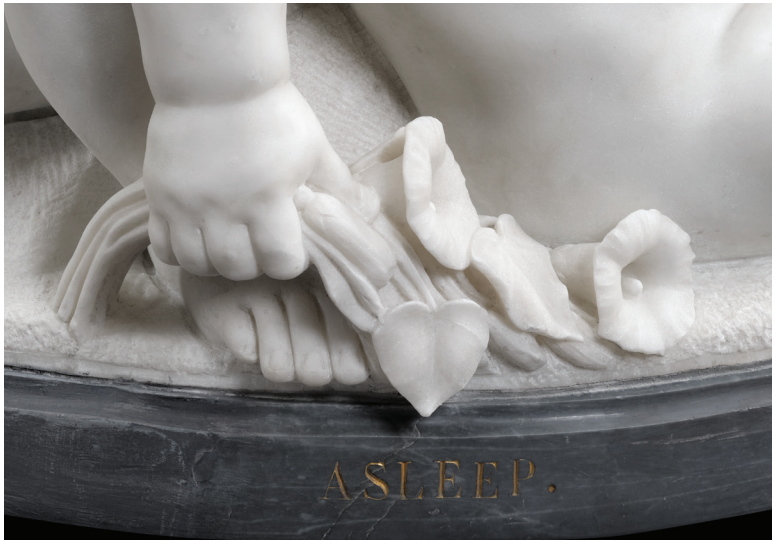
This intimate, single-gallery exhibition features three neoclassical sculptures: a bust of President Lincoln, two cherubic children curled against one another in slumber, and a statue of two toddlers embracing each other as they awaken. Each of these marble works was carved by Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907), an American artist who was of Mississauga-Ojibwe and African-Haitian descent. Born a free person in upstate New York, Lewis lived most of her professional life in Europe and was buried in London's sprawling and famous St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery.

During her peripatetic life, Lewis garnered fame (if not fortune) as the "only colored professor who ever attained eminence in [the sculpture] department of the fine arts."[1] Her decision to become a neoclassical sculptor was bold. It connected her to a revered and challenging artistic tradition harking back to the ancients and legendary artists such as the Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo. In the 1860s and '70s, Lewis came to excel in this style and became internationally renowned for the original sculptures she created in rented studios in Rome, Italy. As essays included here by Tiya Miles and Gloria Bell attest, Lewis's travels between Europe and the United States were well documented in the press and helped attract eminent visitors to her studio in Italy. This exhibition at the Cantor therefore highlights Lewis's consequential stay in the Bay Area that fostered the development of art culture and commerce here. Lewis was perhaps the first expatriate American sculptor from Italy to identify the American West as a new destination to exhibit and sell neoclassical art.

Lewis brought five of her heavy marble works that she carved in Rome on the arduous transatlantic and transcontinental trip via steamship, coach, and railroad to the West Coast of the United States in 1872. These sculptures—*The Marriage of Hiawatha*, *Cupid Caught in a Trap*, *The Bust of Lincoln*, *Asleep,* and *Awake*—were selected not only for their potential market value, but also because they were emblematic of her oeuvre. As a group, they represented her interest in Indigenous subjects from literature (*Hiawatha* was based on the popular ballad by Longfellow), abolitionist subjects as in the bust of Lincoln, and what were known as "fancy pieces" that featured mythological and allegorical subjects. More than sixteen hundred people of varying ages, races, and classes paid to view the works. This trip increased local appreciation for Lewis's art and eventually resulted in the sale of all five sculptures.

Lewis's stay in the Bay complicates stories of Black California, the newfound wealth in the area, westward expansion, and the elimination of Indigenous life in the state. A review in *The Pacific Appeal* of the show's opening in San Francisco stated: "All the statuary on exhibition gives the utmost satisfaction at once to the visitor, and gives all an indelible impression that Miss Edmonia Lewis is deserving of all the encomiums which have been bestowed on her both by the American and European Press. Over one hundred and fifty persons, white and colored, visited the Art Association rooms on Monday the day of the opening."[2]

The three works on display at the Cantor—*Lincoln*, *Asleep*, and *Awake*—are on loan from the San Jose Public Library. The Lincoln bust was sold by local subscription for $500; a local feminist, Sarah Knox-Goodrich, purchased the companion pieces *Asleep* (1871) and *Awake* (1872) outright, later donating them to the library. These rare sculptures appear in a museum for the first time in thirty years. Together, they reveal Lewis's talent for



Edmonia Lewis (American, 1844–1907), *Asleep* (detail), 1871. Marble. San Jose Public Library, Gift of Sarah Knox-Goodrich before 1914. San Jose, CA. Photo by: John Janca

intricate carving and her interest in promoting herself as a professional artist, as her art required extraordinary investments of time and money to create, to say nothing of the training and skill needed to produce them.

Lewis's neoclassical works and life narrative afford us the opportunity to ask new questions about sculpture, portraiture, and colored women artists in the nineteenth century. As a person of Anishinaabe and African descent, Lewis embodies a complex subjectivity that defies racial and disciplinary divides. It is difficult to grasp her significance from a single point of view.

Her chosen mode of artistic expression—figurative sculpture—personifies these natal details of her life. Often, figurative sculptures are made with a frontal view; one side is more finished and presents a preferred view for public consumption. Most of dozens of sculptures of abolitionists, Indigenous subjects, freed people, and biblical and historical figures were meant, by contrast, to be viewed in the round. They cannot be accessed in their totality from any fixed position. Both Lewis's art and life can be understood as multifaceted and volumetric: We must move about them, both literally and imaginatively.

Visitors to the Cantor will have the chance to see these works in a single-gallery space that affords close visual access. You will see Lewis's finely carved *Bust of Lincoln* (1871) which relied upon a photograph of the slain president as the model. This work, discussed here by Caitlin Meehye Beach and Kirsten Pai Buick, stands out as one of the finest portraits of Lincoln and is one of many homages to abolitionists that Lewis created during her career. As such, Lewis's rendering of Lincoln joins the ongoing tradition of Black-identified artists who paid tribute to Lincoln. Lewis bears the distinction of being the first artist to depict newly freed Black subjects: two of her earliest sculptures, made after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, are *Freedwoman and her Child* (1866)—now lost—and *Forever Free* (1867) with its powerful representation of a standing male figure, armed raised with a broken chain. These dual-portrait sculptures, like many of Lewis's works, show two figures on a single base. Lewis often sculpted such dual figures for both economic and ideological reasons: They became a signature of her work. Indeed, both the award-winning *Asleep* (1871) and its companion piece, *Awake* (1872), feature two figures entwined on a single base. Each of the two statues includes finely wrought details such as beautifully carved floral elements, plump toes, and intricate curls of hair; in the sculpture *Awake*, tiny teeth are visible in the parted lips of the two babes. Each of these different statues demonstrates Lewis's talent as a marble carver.

Collectively, these sculptures generate questions such as: How does one select the elements that comprise a commemorative sculptural portrait? Or, more generally, how and why do we memorialize specific people and human forms in art? Lewis's works add to our understanding of how the cultivation of art developed in the Bay Area and provide a historical precedent for contemporary artists working today. Lewis gives us a model for living a life in art as a colored woman sculptor who succeeded despite great obstacles. The concluding essay by Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw argues that Lewis used photographs not only to create portraits, such as the Lincoln statue, but also to publicize herself as a professional artist. Indeed, the exhibition suggests a connection between sculpture and photography in the late nineteenth century that transformed both media.

These are just a few of the touchstones among the manifold topics related to the burgeoning archive of all things Edmonia Lewis. It is my ardent hope that you enjoy viewing these three exceptional sculptures carved by an "unexpected star [who] burst forth from the firmament of American Art . . .".[3]

A SINGULAR MAKER'S MANY MIGRATIONS

Tiya Miles

Edmonia Lewis lived her life in states of exile and experimentation. Her constant movement from place to place was a sign that she was ahead of her time as an Afro-Indigenous female artist confident in her talents and fierce in her effort to succeed in the fine art world. Ceaseless motion was also evidence of Lewis's urge to create and her ardent quest to market and sell those creations. Her frenzied transcontinental, transatlantic itinerary was, finally, an indication of the personal and financial demons she wrestled with.

The writer and suffragist Laura Bullard referred to Lewis as a "struggling genius" in 1871.[1] Being in motion shaped Lewis's life and fueled her art, resulting in a bold thematic range that included emancipation and slavery, Indigenous experience, and Catholic imagery; it also revealed a site of her inner struggle. If Lewis's genius was apparent in her sculptures, her struggle was apparent in the fractured nature of her biography and the habitual nature of her travel that suggested she was searching for a place to belong.

From early childhood, Edmonia Lewis lived in transit, crossing national borders, physical geographies, and social terrains. She continued this pattern of regular migration throughout her life, such that it has been difficult for scholars to pin her down—whether to identify her place of birth with certainty or to claim her as an American artist with clarity. Lewis was, in fact, a cosmopolitan creator whose inspiration and opportunities flowed from her various familial influences, shifting locations, and disparate professional networks.

Mary Edmonia Lewis was born in 1844. Much of her early life has been clouded by mystery, conflicting information, and a simplified, romanticized personal story that Lewis herself told as a means of promoting her art.[2] In the 1970s and 2010s, art historians made significant strides in reconstructing Lewis's life. The 2020s is proving to be another period of discovery, as curators mounting exhibitions on Lewis's work in Salem, Massachusetts; Athens, Georgia; Bozeman, Montana; and Palo Alto, California, dig into archives and genealogical records. New work presents strong evidence that Lewis was born on or near the traditional territory of the Mississauga (Ojibwe) people in present-day Ontario to a mother who was likely Black, Tuscarora, and Mississauga.[3] Lewis's mother, Margaret Groat Mike, died when Lewis was a child. Her father, a Black man named Richard Lewis, who had a son from a previous union, died soon thereafter.[4] These tragedies precipitated Lewis's first sojourns across the Canada–United States border around Niagara Falls.

"When my mother was dying, she wanted me to promise that I would live three years among her people," Lewis told the abolitionist and writer Lydia Maria Child in an 1862 interview. Lewis resided in or near her tribal community with two aunts (whose names will be identified for the first time in forthcoming research by the Mohawk historian Cody Groat).[5] She traveled with these aunts to sell handmade items to tourists in a commercial market that had replaced past economic subsistence patterns. "I did as my mother's people did," Lewis told Child. "I made baskets and embroidered moccasins, and I went to the cities with my mother's people and sold them."[6] This formative period in

Lewis's life, characterized by movement, was also one in which she was learning to become a maker. She said, "I had always wanted to make the forms of things" and suggested that her mother, "famous for inventing new forms of embroidery," was a role model.[7]

In 1859, the teenage Lewis traveled to Oberlin College in Ohio, where she was supported by her brother, Samuel Lewis, who had struck gold in California and started profitable service and rental businesses in Montana. Edmonia Lewis was excited to study drawing alongside the classical curriculum, but her time at Oberlin was traumatic and short-lived. After being accused of poisoning classmates and stealing art supplies, and after enduring a brutal assault, she left before graduating in 1863. Damaged but undaunted, she traveled to Boston in 1864, where she happened upon a large statue of Benjamin Franklin on the street and was awestruck. She had found her calling and knew she must become a sculptor.

Ambitious, determined, and persistent, Lewis edged into the Boston abolitionist circles that could provide her with patrons, tutors, and commissions. Drawing on the experience of her brother who had traveled to Europe, and on the example of women sculptors who worked overseas, Lewis sailed for Italy in 1866. She spent a year in Florence before moving to Rome, where she rented studio space near the Spanish Steps and mingled with American expatriate sculptors and performers—many of them other women—and honed her craft.

Lewis is often thought of as an artist who left America to settle in Rome, but she was never still in that golden city. She traveled back to the United States nearly every year, spending weeks

Henry Rocher (American), *Edmonia Lewis*, c. 1870. Albumen silver print on card. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Transfer from Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, Bequest of Eert Hansen Wendell

and months in urban areas across the country. Sometimes she sent her sculptures ahead to try to find buyers; other times, she brought pieces with her to exhibit and sell them. In the 1860s and 1870s, her travels took her to Boston, San Francisco, San Jose, St. Paul, New York City, Niagara Falls, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Richmond, and Indianapolis—as well as Philadelphia and Chicago, where she displayed her masterpiece, *The Death of Cleopatra*, at major expositions in 1876 and 1878. Her fame grew with her circumlocutions and her concerted effort to market her work through paid advertisements, word of mouth, interviews, printed matter, and raffles shows.

When Lewis traveled to California for two months in 1873, she did so, again, on the advice of her older brother. Samuel Lewis had contacts in San Francisco from his gold prospecting days, and he continued to bank in the city. Edmonia Lewis sold several pieces in San Francisco and San Jose, digging herself out of the crippling debt caused by her habits of making sculptures before securing buyers and overspending on supplies and shipping. The

San Jose Public Library acquired her bust of Abraham Lincoln and other works. In a hotel lobby in San Francisco, Lewis gave a speech before reporters, explaining what drew her to the West Coast: "Well, one reason is that I love to travel. . . . Then another reason for coming here is, that in New York, the artists never thoroughly welcome a brother or sister. . . . Here they are more liberal, and as I want to dispose of some of my works, I thought it best to come West."[8]

Notably, California was the recurring source of Edmonia Lewis's financial stability and recovery. It is where Samuel Lewis made the initial fortune that allowed him to act as her patron, where Edmonia Lewis sold multiple pieces to pay off her debt, and where Samuel Lewis secured savings for his sister's inheritance.[9] California is also the place where Samuel Lewis's identity as Edmonia Lewis's brother, long unconfirmed by scholars, was dramatically revealed. In a public speech in 1991 at the San Jose Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library, Eileen Tenney, a potter who had purchased and restored Samuel Lewis's Bozeman home with her husband and completed a master's thesis on Edmonia Lewis, announced the connection.[10]

While crafting dozens of sculptures, busts, and medallions over the decades, Edmonia Lewis rarely settled into any one place, or any single relationship. She grew apart from her female associates in Rome. She fell out with her overbearing mentor, the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. Her one beloved and lifelong companion, her brother Samuel, died in Bozeman in 1896. After receiving a sizeable sum he had left her (approximately $311,000 in 2024 valuation), Edmonia Lewis moved to Paris, then London, then Kensington, England, where she was buried in 1907, finally at rest.[11]

Lewis moved because she was orphaned at a young age. She moved because she was targeted by racial suspicion and violence. She moved in pursuit of inspiration, tutelage, and opportunities. She moved to afford necessities. She moved to feel more free as a woman of color making art at a time when most of her African American counterparts were enslaved or just emerging from forced servitude and most of her First Nations and Native American counterparts were wrestling with military incursions, governmental imposition, and land expropriation. And as she moved, Lewis was highly aware of her subject position. In 1870, ahead of a show of her new work *Hagar* in Chicago, Lewis produced a promotional pamphlet highlighting her time in Florence and Rome and declaring: "During these few years all know how well the Indian girl has done. . . . God's gift to EDMONIA LEWIS is unconquerable energy, as well as genius; and these two combined to enable her to rise above all *prejudices* of *race* or *color*, and command the respect and honor of all true lovers of art."[12]

Lewis said in this same publication that her "Indian name" was Wildfire. The claim may have been a clever promotional stunt that she learned from the women artists in her family who knew how to craft for a tourist trade. But if truly hers and given to her by her relatives, this name would fit Edmonia Lewis's blazing life. She burned with an inner fire across two continents and five countries. Her passion was bright, her ambition uncontrollable, her determination inexhaustible. Scorched by the traumas of her past and her own creative flame, she blazed her way through the long nineteenth century, leaving an extraordinary artistic legacy in ash and clay.

SCULPTING HUMANITY

Gloria Bell

Edmonia Lewis made an important stop in San Jose in 1873 for an exhibition of her sculptures. As an Indigenous traveler, Lewis bucked conventions and settler-colonial assumptions that Indigenous people had disappeared. Supported by her brother Sunshine, also known as Samuel, she pursued her dream of becoming a sculptor and exhibited her art on Turtle Island and throughout Italy. She maintained correspondence with her brother, who was working in the United States during the 1870s. Although no letters remain, one can imagine how proud Sunshine was of his younger sibling by the fact that he continually supported her career.

What was Lewis's experience like in San Jose in the 1870s? San Jose is part of the traditional territories of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century up until 1873, the California government led a mass genocide to eliminate Native Americans.[1] During this moment of intense anti-Native American sentiment and settler-colonial violence, Lewis defied expectations by exhibiting her works and also challenged norms by traveling extensively, unrestricted by the dictations of an Indian agent.[2] Lewis circumvented settler registers of Indigeneity by installing her works in San Jose in a wigwam. On October 2, 1873, a *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist observed, "Miss Edmonia Lewis occupies a wigwam (so she prefers to call it) at the foot of the main aisle, in which she has on exhibition three unsold pieces of sculpture from her studio in Rome."[3]

Lewis's use of a wigwam recalls Anishinaabe modes of home and her upbringing with her Anishinaabe aunts, as well as her ability to subvert expectations around Indigeneity. Viewers may have been familiar with the form of the wigwam through world's fairs and colonial displays of Native American arts, and thus Lewis tied herself with a strategic use of the Anishinaabe form.[4] One journalist noted that the sculptures presented, "two children wandering amid the flowers until tired and weary they sit down and sleep. The larger is in the attitude of shielding her smaller brother. The companion piece, entitled *Awake*, represents the same group just awakening from their slumber. The calm, placid expression of the sleepers in the one, and the startled expression of the little one on waking, with the reassuring glances of the elder, are delineated with a beauty of finish and naturalness of expression that instantly bespeak the hand of the true artist."

The tender depiction of the children hints at the importance of familial ties and could possibly be a reference to Lewis's loving and supportive relationship with her brother. The subject of children also recalls the difficulties that they experienced losing their parents when they were young and the ongoing grief over that loss. The closeness of the two young figures in both sculptural groups is also reminiscent of the separation of Indigenous children from their parents as the children were forced into residential and day schools during this assimilative period. Lewis's marble oeuvre in San Jose is a signifier of the importance of Indigenous and African American peoples thriving in the city, and the undocumented and unrecognized presence of Indigenous peoples in urban spaces. She created a contemporary space of Afro-Native expression in galleries across the globe with her hand-carved works that appealed to the emotions of many visitors.

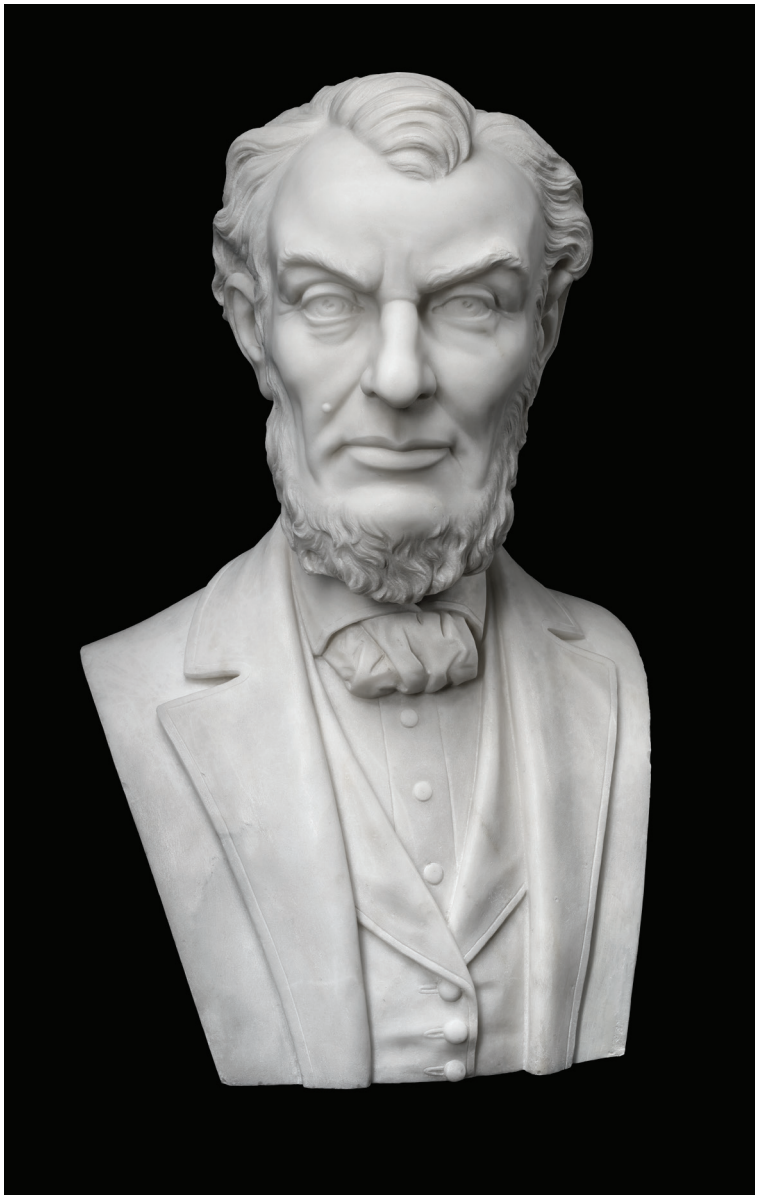
LEWIS AND LINCOLN IN THE BAY AREA

Caitlin Meehye Beach

In 1871, Edmonia Lewis carved this expressive portrait bust of Abraham Lincoln from her studio in Rome. Lincoln appears at life size, with his steely gaze punctuated by prominent cheekbones and dramatically arched eyebrows. Working from engravings and photographs of the late president, Lewis spared no detail in painstakingly chiseling out his famous beard, a mole on his right cheek, and a neatly knotted cravat and simple suit.

Lewis had taken up Lincoln in her art before. In her early days as a sculptor in Boston, she made a name for herself creating portrait likenesses of abolitionists and Civil War heroes, displaying and selling the works at antislavery meetings, abolitionist newspaper offices, and soldier's fairs. In the weeks following Lincoln's assassination just after the end of the Civil War in April 1865, Lewis modeled a plaster portrait medallion (whereabouts unknown) of the president that the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* proclaimed "a marked success."[1] Following her move from Boston to Rome in late 1865, she would return to Lincoln as subject on several occasions, creating this marble bust as well as an 1872 work that would come to be known as the "Central Park Lincoln"—likely one of the first sculptures by a Black American woman to be exhibited in a major city park. Appearing on display in a small museum in New York City's Central Park, the work featured a bust of the president atop a square pillar anchored by four caryatid figures.[2]

In the fall of 1873, Lewis exhibited the Lincoln bust during a trip



Edmonia Lewis (American, 1844–1907), *Bust of Abraham Lincoln*, 1871. Marble. San Jose Public Library, San Jose, CA. Photo by: John Janca

to San Francisco in which she hoped to market "some of her finest statuary" to new audiences in California.[3] The bust made its debut alongside several other sculptures—*The Marriage of Hiawatha*, *Awake*, *Asleep*, and *Cupid Caught*—in an exhibition held at the San Francisco Art Association in September 1873.[4] It was then displayed at several venues in San Jose, including the City Market Hall and the San Jose Catholic Fair; in tandem with these appearances, locals initiated a public subscription campaign to purchase the bust for the San Jose Public Library. As a reporter for the *San Jose Daily Mercury* noted, "Perhaps her most meritorious work is the bust of President Lincoln, and for the purchase of which negotiations are being made."[5] In December 1873, the piece was installed in the library on a bespoke pedestal made by area craftsmen and proclaimed "a masterpiece of workmanship and an ornament to the Library rooms."[6]

American sculpture of the 1870s teemed with Abraham Lincolns. Harriet Hosmer, Vinnie Ream, and Randolph Rogers—fellow American artists who worked alongside Lewis in Rome—were all tasked with monumental commissions, with Ream's and Rogers's statues destined for prominent spaces in the rotunda of the United States Capitol and Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, respectively.[2] Lewis's *Lincoln*, by contrast, proved to be a more speculative affair. Made without a commission, brought for exhibition halfway around the world, and purchased through a grassroots fundraising campaign, the bust stands not only as a tribute to the sixteenth president but also a testament to the ambition and entrepreneurial spirit of its maker.

THE QUESTION OF REALISM

Kirsten Pai Buick

As with the hierarchies of painting—ranging from history painting to portraits, landscape, depictions of everyday life, and still life—sculpture in the nineteenth century had its own hierarchy. The highest, most erudite form that neoclassical sculpture could take was the "ideal work." Like history painting, ideal work was based on history, the Bible, mythology, or literature. Its purpose was to engage the higher sentiments of intellect and morality. Next were portraits of exemplary individuals. From there, "fancy pieces" based on allegory, followed by architectural ornamentation, rounded out the categories. In a century that firmly believed man to be the apex of all species, it only made sense that the human form—particularly exemplary bodies—was emphasized as the epitome of "Art," while architectural ornamentation occupied a space akin to that of still life (natura morte / dead nature / inanimate matter).

Edmonia Lewis practiced and exhibited all forms of sculpture—with the exception of architectural ornamentation, despite the insistence of her white abolitionist patrons. Had she chosen, Lewis would have been quite adept at ornamentation. The skill with which she carves the flowers held by the cherubs in *Asleep* prove this. Lewis uses flowers narratively, however, to acknowledge the high rate of infant mortality in the nineteenth century and to represent "sleep" as a metaphor for death; thus, the flowers become part of a funerary reference—no longer ornamentation for ornamentation's sake. The three works in the San Jose Public Library's collection—*Lincoln*, *Asleep*, and

Awake—are examples of Lewis's portraits and allegorical figures produced in the early 1870s and shown during one of the artist's trips back to the United States from Rome. After docking in New York, she journeyed by train to California to sell work and to maintain her American profile and patronage.

When critics described Lewis's sculpture as "lifelike," the judgment tends to be lost to our sensibilities. For the reason that representations of exemplary humans were the ideal, the use of the term lifelike was faint praise. In the case of the portrait of Lincoln and the allegorical figures of *Awake* and *Asleep*, lifelike is more a verdict on a talent inflected and infected by perceptions of "race" than it is the kind of praise we would understand it to be. Lewis's critics would likely have believed she was incapable of expressing the ineffable qualities that made Lincoln great. Therefore, her statue of Lincoln would represent the limits

Edmonia Lewis
(American, 1844–1907)

Asleep, 1871
Marble

San Jose Public Library,
Gift of Sarah Knox-Goodrich
before 1914. San Jose, CA
Photo by: John Janca

Edmonia Lewis
(American, 1844–1907)

Awake, 1872
Marble

San Jose Public Library,
Gift of Sarah Knox-Goodrich
before 1914. San Jose, CA
Photo by: John Janca

of her talent, elevated by the debt that all Black people were thought to owe "The Great Emancipator." Moreover, the critique of "lifelike" for her allegories registered her inability to truly capture even a lesser version of ideal work. Looking back over the critical engagement with Lewis's work, we can see how the term "lifelike" was used as a negative judgment of her abilities.

We are reminded that "realism" is an ideology, couched in the seemingly objective charge of "lifelike." As an ideology, realism could be weaponized; and this was certainly the case in the critical reception of Lewis's ideal works. Firstly, there was the realism of racial proximity, or closeness between racial groups, thus relying on very little artistry. Her early ideal works were uniformly viewed in this manner: The Longfellow-inspired sculptures *The Old Arrow Maker* and *The Marriage of Hiawatha* (first modeled in 1866) reflected the shared heritage of Lewis

and Hiawatha as Ojibwe; the couple in *Forever Free* (1867) mirrored Lewis's claim to African descent; while *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1875)—Egyptian and the chattel slave of Abraham and Sarah—echoed the condition of Lewis's people who were enslaved. Although Lewis was never enslaved, her work around Blackness and metaphors of enslavement were also interpreted as self-referential and safe choices for a talent limited by race. Henry T. Tuckerman was certainly one such critic who sought to steer Lewis from the realism of racial proximity that threatened to signal a lack of creativity and the drama it could bring to one's subject. Regarding *The Old Arrow Maker* and *The Marriage of Hiawatha*, he expressed the hope that Lewis would abandon the "girlish sentimentality" and the "prettiness of poems" that resulted from a dependence on racial proximity. Tuckerman conceded that such a reliance allowed Lewis to improve upon Longfellow's conception, but that she did so at the expense of the great dramatic characters such as Pocahontas, Tecumseh, or even Montezuma and Malinche.[1]

Second, there was the realism of copying—both conceptual and literal. Lewis's sculpture of *The Death of Cleopatra* (1875) fell to this type of critical engagement. Conceptual copying implied that Lewis stepped into an arena beyond her artistic scope. Rather than view her execution of Cleopatra as entering the discourse surrounding the Egyptian queen and finishing the cycle started by the white, male, American sculptors William Wetmore Story (1862) and Thomas Ridgeway Gould (1873), Lewis's sculpture was seen as overly-dramatic and too real. Story had depicted the defeated Cleopatra as contemplative in the face of death, with features suggestive of sub-Saharan African ancestry. Gould, by contrast, gave her a Greek-looking profile and depicted her in the throes of death. Lewis, on the other hand, concluded the narrative by sculpting a queen already dead. Because Lewis chose to base her profile of Cleopatra based on Roman coins minted during the reign of Marc Antony and Cleopatra, Lewis's literal realism not only addressed the debate surrounding Cleopatra's race, but also served as an indictment of the limits of her artistic talent. Hardly flattering, the coins turned on the aquiline nose of the queen; and as Lewis's source material, Lewis had given us a work that "more nearly resembled the real heroine of history than either of the others," according to the critic William J. Clark, Jr.

Lewis's *Lincoln*, *Awake*, and *Asleep* represent her persistence and her refusal to be silenced by her peers and her critics. She was an artist with something to say about current issues, whether it was the most prominent martyr of the Civil War or representations of childhood through allegorical figures. What remains are the sculptures themselves, which have outlived and survived the racialist critiques of the past. What we are fortunate to behold are exceptional works from an artist unbowed by the pressures imposed on her from without.

THAT ROMAN PORTRAIT IS WILDFIRE

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw

In a well-known carte de visite portrait of Afro-Indian sculptor Edmonia Lewis by celebrity photographer Henry Rocher taken during an 1870 visit to Chicago, the artist stares directly at the viewer with a calm, composed gaze.[1] Her left arm rests on a ledge draped in fabric, while the right hangs at her side, a thin metal band visible on the ring finger. She wears a dark-colored jacket with braided fasteners, fringe at the shoulders and cuffs, and a wide ribbon tied at her collar. Her pose against a plain wall gives the image a formal and somewhat austere sensibility, and her mild expression conveys a sense of firm self-control, betraying little of the free-spirited personality that caused the Native American side of her mixed family to call her "Wildfire" as a youth.

Henry Rocher (American), *Edmonia Lewis*, c. 1870. Albumen silver print on card. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Transfer from Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, Bequest of Eert Hansen Wendell

For over a century, copies of this portrait, and seven others—showing Lewis with or without the jacket, a tasseled fez atop her head, or a velvet drape wrapped about her shoulders in dramatic fashion—formed a specific image of the artist for posterity.[2] Since her choice of clothing and cropped hair echoed those of Harriet Hosmer, her slightly older, much wealthier, and far more famous white contemporary, they seemed to indicate a bohemian artist aesthetic both women shared. Biographers used these affinities to create a context around Lewis's artworks and speculate about her unmarried, homosocial lifestyle.[3] Two other, lesser-known portraits made by Boston photographer Augustus Marshall that show Lewis in the same ensemble and neck ribbon seem to confirm this preferred sartorial style.[4] But when a previously unknown full-length portrait of Lewis made at the Fratelli D'Alessandri studio in Rome was discovered in a Baltimore, Maryland, antique shop in 2011, notions about her closet and conception of self were complicated.

The Roman portrait shows Lewis striking a jaunty pose, arms crossed and one foot jutting forward; she wears an elegantly smocked dress decorated in layers of frilly ruffles. Her serious expression in the other photographs is exchanged for one of open amusement, and her hair, carefully parted and slicked down before, now forms an ecstatic halo around her face. Having chosen a plain background

Fratelli d'Alessandri, Portrait of Edmonia Lewis. Albumen print on card. Walters Art Museum

for the American sittings, at the Italian studio she selected an elaborately painted backdrop of a mountain lake.[5]

Fratelli D'Alessandri were known for their high-quality formal portraits of Italian royalty and for having made the first ever photograph of a pope, Pius IX, in 1850. When Lewis arrived for her sitting at their studio on Via del Corso, she was dressed appropriately in a regal ensemble, and, rather than taming her mane, she had brushed her curls out into a glorious crown. Unlike her time in the United States, where she was careful about appearing ostentatious or vain, when she was far away from its pervasive, anti-Black racism, she embraced her femininity and stood on top of the mountain, self-possessed and powerful, free within herself.[6]

NOTES

Edmonia Lewis: Indelible Impressions

[1] *The Elevator*, August 30, 1873.

[2] "Miss Edmonia Lewis' Statuary Exhibition," *The Pacific Appeal*, September 6, 1873, vol. X, no. 2, column 2.

[3] Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation* (Press of Murray Brothers, Inc., 1916).

A Singular Maker's Many Migrations

[1] Laura Bullard, "Edmonia Lewis," *Revolution Magazine*, March 21, 1871, transcribed in Harry Henderson and Albert Henderson, *The Indomitable Spirit of Edmonia Lewis* (Esquiline Hill Press, 2012), section 26, "Standing Ovations," n.p.

[2] "How Edmonia Lewis Became an Artist," self-published pamphlet (Albany: ca. 1870), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

[3] Karen Kramer, "Convening New Views on Edmonia Lewis's Indigeneity," in *Edmonia Lewis: Said in Stone,* ed. Jeffrey Richmond-Moll and Shawnya L. Harris (University of Chicago Press, 2026); Cody Groat, "On Black-Indigenous Ancestry: Tracing Descent, Legislating Identity," in Richmond-Moll and Harris, *Edmonia Lewis: Said in Stone*. See also Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

[4] The names of Edmonia Lewis's parents are drawn from Groat, "On Black-Indigenous Ancestry."

[5] Groat, "On Black-Indigenous Ancestry."

[6] Lydia Maria Child, "Edmonia Lewis," *The Broken Fetter*, March 3, 1865.

[7] Child, "Edmonia Lewis."

[8] "Edmonia Lewis, the Famous Colored Sculptress in San Francisco," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 26, 1873. Henderson and Henderson, *The Indomitable Spirit of Edmonia Lewis*, section 30, "Travel Cross-Country," n.p.

[9] Henderson and Henderson, *The Indomitable Spirit of Edmonia Lewis*, section 30, "Travel Cross-Country," n.p.

[10] Henderson and Henderson, *The Indomitable Spirit of Edmonia Lewis*, section 6, "The Haitian Connection," n.p. Tiya Miles, interview with Eileen Tenney, August 19, 2023. See also Eileen Tenney, "From Sunset to 'Sunrise': The Path of Discovery to the Samuel Lewis House," https://edmoniaandsamuellewis.weebly.com/.

[11] Henderson and Henderson, *The Indomitable Spirit of Edmonia Lewis*, section 4, "After 1878," n.p. Samuel Lewis will, March 26, 1896, proved January 20, 1898, District Court, Bozeman, MT.

[12] "How Edmonia Lewis Became an Artist."

Sculpting Humanity

[1] Benjamin Madley and Ben Kiernan, "'A War of Extermination': The California Indian Genocide, 1846–1873" in *The Cambridge World History of Genocide*, ed. Ned Blackhawk, Ben Kiernan, Benjamin Madley, and Rebe Taylor (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 412-33.

[2] Many Indigenous peoples in the nineteenth century had to deal with Indian agents but continued to travel globally. For example, read about Jacob White Eyes in Gloria Bell, "Lakota Dandies in the Eternal City: Indigenous Travelers Chief Iron Tail and Jacob Ištá Ská," in *(Un)Following in Winnetou's Footsteps: Representations of North American Indigeneity in Central Europe*, ed. Sanja Runtic, Jana Marešová, and Klára Kolinská (Springer, 2024), 149-172.

[3] "The Farmer's Festival: Third Day of the Great Fair at San Jose," *San Francisco Chronicle,* October 2, 1873.

[4] On Lewis playing with conceptions of Indigeneity in Rome, see Gloria Bell, *Eternal Sovereigns: Indigenous Artists, Activists, and Travelers Reframing Rome* (Duke University Press, 2024), 38.

Lewis and Lincoln in the Bay Area

[1] "Miss Edmonia Lewis," *The Liberator,* April 28, 2865, 2.

[2] The museum was the short-lived Mount Saint Vincent Chapel, which was often referred to in the press as the "Central Park Museum." It burned down in an 1881 fire; in press coverage of this event, it was reported that "the marble bust of Lincoln, by Edmonia Lewis, the colored sculptress, was saved." "Destruction in the Park," *New York Times*, January 3, 1881. For more on Lewis's Central Park Lincoln, see Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Duke University Press, 2010), 22–24.

[3] "Miss Edmonia Lewis," *San Jose Daily Mercury*, September 27, 1873, 2.

[4] "Edmonia Lewis. The Famous Colored Sculptress in San Francisco," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 28, 1873.

[5] "Sculpture," *San Jose Daily Mercury*, September 19, 1873, 2.

[6] The pedestal was designed by the San Jose architectural firm Burkett & McKee and constructed by the Santa Clara Valley Mill and Lumbering Company. "Lincoln's Bust," *San Jose Daily Mercury*, December 18, 1873, 3.

[7] On Lewis, Hosmer, and Ream, see Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* (Penn State University Press, 2014).

The Question of Realism

[1] Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists* (G.P. Putnam & Son, 1867), 603-604.

[2] William J. Clark, Jr., *Great American Sculptures* (Gebbie & Barrie, Publishers, 1878), 141-142.

That Roman Portrait Is Wildfire

[1] https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/201999 (accessed June 7, 2025).

[2] https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/person/18304 (accessed June 7, 2025). Harvard University has copies of five of the eight poses of Lewis known to have been photographed by Rocher. They first entered the Harvard College Library collection as part of a bequest from alumnus and member of the Board of Overseers, Evert Jansen Wendell, in 1918. They were transferred to the Harvard Art Museums in 2010. In her 2010 monograph on Lewis, Kirsten Pai Buick cautions against over-reading these portraits: "As far as we know, this image belongs to the only known set of cartes de visite commissioned by the artist. Rather than a proliferating visual archive of the artist, this carte de visite is but one of a myriad of ways the artist both represents her 'self' and was represented by others. Accordingly, Lewis's carte de visite is no more 'true' or 'real' than the myriad of representations of the artist. It, too, is a construction, strategically inserted into the field of representations of Lewis and thus holding no absolute authority over her. Even so, the photograph does constitute a conscious choice on the part of Lewis, perhaps to construct an image that denies the exotic interpretations favored by the biases of the time." Kirsten Pai Buick, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Duke University Press, 2010), 137.

[3] In previous work regarding the Rocher portrait, I have written, "The photograph embodies what philosopher Walter Benjamin has called a 'spell of personality' with its representation of Lewis as a worldly woman, independent and liberated, artistic and original." Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Washington Press, 2006), 170.

[4] https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2020.10.5 (accessed June 7, 2025). One of the two Augustus Marshall cartes de visite was purchased at auction by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2020. While this image appears elsewhere online, it is unclear to me if there are other copies in private hands or in museum collections. I have also not yet been able to determine when this image of Lewis, or a different one that was sold at auction by Swann in 2019, first resurfaced.

[5] https://broadway.library.sc.edu/content/henry-rocher.html (accessed June 7, 2025). According to literary critic and historian David S. Shields, the German-born Rocher was known for his celebrity portraits and was second only to famed photographer Napoleon Sarony in reputation. Examples of Rocher's work assembled by Shields from the Harvard Theatre Collection and elsewhere, show all of his subjects in elaborate studio settings arranged in front of painted backdrops. The plain wall behind Lewis is a notable exception.

[6] Here I draw upon the famous, closing phrase from Langston Hughes's 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, 692-93.

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—Jennifer DeVere Brody

Stanford sits on the ancestral land of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. This land was and continues to be of great importance to the Ohlone people. Consistent with our values of community and inclusion, we have a responsibility to acknowledge, honor, and make visible the University's relationship to Native peoples.

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Back cover: Edmonia Lewis (American, 1844–1907), *Bust of Abraham Lincoln*, 1871. Marble. San Jose Public Library, San Jose, CA. Photo by: John Janca