

Re-Visioning Wildfire: Historical Interpretations of the Life and Art of Edmonia Lewis

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As a feminist historian, one of my major goals is to reclaim the histories of women and to broadcast the diversity of the female experience. In many ways creating a multicultural curriculum is a form of political activism for me. Regarding inclusive history, I strongly agree with Gloria Joseph, who stated that learning history “will help to shatter the prevailing mythology that inhibits so many from acting more decisively for social change and to create a more just society and viable future for all.”¹ My first brief introduction to Edmonia Lewis came in the article “Object Into Subject: Some Thoughts on the Work of Black Women Artists” by Michelle Cliff, which was included in the anthology *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*.² This piece created a desire for me to learn more about the life and work of Wildfire Mary Edmonia Lewis (ca. 1843 – ca. 1911).

In art encyclopedias and critiques, Lewis is often noted as the first African American female sculptor. To be more accurate, her father was African American and her mother was Anishinabe. Orphaned as a child, she was raised among her mother’s people. The majority of her work was accomplished between 1866 and 1876. Her art has primarily been read as a representation of her Black heritage, ignoring her strong connection to her Native American heritage. In an attempt to rectify this oversight, this paper will examine how her Anishinabe ancestry influenced Lewis’s life and artwork, and explain why scholars tend to ignore this ancestry.

Much of Lewis’s early life and later life went unrecorded. It is believed that she was born near Albany, New York around 1843 and named Wildfire. Her father was a free Black and her mother was Anishinabe. Lewis also had a brother, Sunrise. It appears that Lewis spent most of her early years with the Anishinabe. In an interview, Lewis related,

Mother was a wild Indian and was born in Albany, of copper color and with straight black hair. There she made and sold moccasins. My father, who was a Negro, and a gentleman’s servant, saw her and married her ... Mother often left home and wandered with her people, whose habits she could not forget, and thus

¹ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995), 464.

² Michelle Cliff, “Object Into Subject: Some Thoughts on the Work of Black Women Artists,” in Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), 271-290.

we were brought up in the same wild manner. Until I was twelve years old, I led this wandering life, fishing and swimming ... and making moccasins.³

In 1849, Lewis's mother died and her maternal aunts took her in and raised her. Lewis recalled, "when my mother was dying, she wanted me to promise that I would live three years with her people, and I did."⁴

Lewis's artistic explorations really began with her childhood among the Anishinabe. As she stated, "I did as my mother's people did. I made baskets and embroidered moccasins."⁵ She also noted that her mother was extremely creative in embroidery and that perhaps she inherited some of her artistic talent.⁶ In 1859, with the financial assistance of her brother, who had been very successful in the California gold fields, and some abolitionists, she entered the Young Ladies Preparatory Department of Oberlin College. According to Nancy Woloch, "women students followed the ladies course, received special degrees, and entered men's classes only with special permission. Women were admitted to Oberlin in order to improve education for men – by raising the tone of campus life and preventing the growth of vulgar customs that so frequently deprave the all-male college."⁷ Before entering school, Wildfire changed her name legally to Mary Edmonia Lewis, possibly a name more acceptable to her classmates. Lewis showed a talent for art and studied drawing: "I had always wanted to make the forms of things, and while I was at school I tried to make drawings of people and things."⁸ Unfortunately, her education was tragically interrupted in 1862.

Although Oberlin (1833) was one of the earliest colleges to admit women and "colored" people, there was still a strong sentiment against this type of development in the town and even within some sectors of the college itself. One of her teachers went as far as to accuse Lewis of stealing a paintbrush when one was missing. Additionally, her white roommates claimed that she attempted to poison them. While awaiting arraignment, a lynch mob seized Lewis and nearly beat her to death. Later, the case against her was dismissed due to insufficient evidence but Lewis was not allowed to return to school by the administration. After this experience, Lewis strongly contemplated leaving so-called civilization and returning to the Anishinabe, but she said her "love of sculpture forbade it."⁹

With a letter of introduction from William Lloyd Garrison, an early activist in the abolitionist movement and one of the founders of the New England Anti-Slavery Society,¹⁰ Lewis studied with sculptor Edward Brackett in Boston. In a short time she

³ Cliff, 281-282.

⁴ William Loren Katz, *Black Indians*, (New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1986), 131.

⁵ Katz, 131.

⁶ Katz, 131.

⁷ Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 282.

⁸ Katz, 131.

⁹ Katz, 130.

¹⁰ David Goldfield, ed., *The American Journey: A History of the United States* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006), 246.

was able to have her own studio. In 1865, with the financial assistance of the Story family of Boston and sales from her pieces, Lewis left the United States for Rome, Italy. While there, she studied with John Gibson.¹¹ Rome was a Mecca for sculptors with its artistic heritage, skilled stonecutters, and substantial supply of marble.¹² Lewis was welcomed into an expatriate community that included the artists Harriet Hosmer and William Wetmore Story. Lewis closely studied classical sculpture and produced works in the neoclassical style. The neoclassical movement developed in the mid-18th century and attempted to recreate the austere styles of ancient Rome and Greece. Lewis also cut her own marble to avoid the charge that she did not carve the sculptures, a charge often leveled at women artists. For example, in 1863 newspaper articles were printed claiming that Harriet Hosmer, the most famous female sculptor of her generation, did not do her own work. These articles stated that she had her male artisans not only acquire the marble but also to create the finished pieces. In response, Hosmer “defended herself with a libel suit and an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* in December 1864, and she eventually received two retractions from both London publications.”¹³ It must be stressed that in the 19th century, sculpture was overwhelmingly considered a male art form and the common view was that women were incapable of this type of artistic expression due to their weaker nature.

Lewis also expanded the parameters of neoclassicism by exploring atypical topics, such as love, racism, and death in her pieces. At the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, her piece *The Death of Cleopatra* created quite a commotion in the art world.¹⁴ Two years later art critic William J. Clark, Jr. commented,

This was not a beautiful work, but it was very original and very striking one... (Cleopatra) is seated in a chair; the poison of the asp has done its work and the Queen is dead. The effects of death are represented with such skill as to be absolutely repellent—and it is a question whether a statue of the ghastly characteristics of this one does not overstep the bounds of legitimate art.¹⁵

In her lifetime Lewis was criticized not only for the way she portrayed her subjects, but also for the fact that she was “colored.” Some asserted that the acclaim given to Lewis was not due to talent but because she was exotic. She was an extremely religious Roman Catholic, who never married and often dressed in a “mannish” style. It was the prejudice rampant in the United States against the groups that she belonged to (Black, Indian, Catholic, woman) that led her to move to Italy. Henry James in writing of the expatriate women sculptors in Rome singled out Lewis: “One of the sisterhood was a negress, whose colour, picturesquely contrasting with that of her plastic material, was the pleading agent of her fame.”¹⁶ Not only was Lewis’s work criticized because of the

¹¹ Elsa Honig Fine, *Women and Art* (London: Allanheld & Schram, 1978), 111-113.

¹² Stephen May, “The Object at Hand”. *Smithsonian Magazine* September 1996
www.smithsonianmag.com/smit...n/issues96/object_sep96.html

¹³ Carol Kort and Liz Sonneborn, *A to Z of American Women in the Visual Arts* (New York: Facts on File, 2002), 102.

¹⁴ Samella Lewis, *Art: African American* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 39-43.

¹⁵ May, “The Object at Hand.”

¹⁶ May, “The Object at Hand.”

“color,” but also because of her eccentricities. Lewis claimed that she wanted her art to stand on its own merits. In an interview from 1864 Lewis commented, “I don’t want you to go to praise me for I know praise is not good for me. Some praise me because I am a colored girl, and I don’t want that kind of praise. I had rather you would point out my defects, for that will teach me something.”¹⁷

Lewis continued sculpting for at least twenty years, although most of her known pieces were created during the period from 1866-1876. She primarily returned to the United States to exhibit and sell her work. After this period her fame waned, and she “disappeared” from the art world. It is uncertain whether this disappearance was of her own choosing or because the public taste had changed. Most likely it was because neoclassicism became passé by the late 1880s, replaced by romanticism. Her last known commissioned piece, *Adoration of the Magi*, was in 1883. The last known sighting of her was in Rome in 1911. The date and place of Lewis’s death are unknown. As curator Marilyn Richardson commented on Lewis’s later years, “we just don’t know what happened to her.”¹⁸ It is likely that there are other sculptures by Lewis waiting to be rediscovered. Many of Lewis’s known pieces explored both her Native American and African American heritage. So why is Lewis typically portrayed solely as an African American artist today?

One reason Lewis is viewed as an African American artist is based upon the social construction of race, as it existed during her lifetime. Dating back to the 17th century, laws that affected Africans and a small number of Native Americans were passed in the English colonies that made slavery an inheritable condition that passed from mother to child.¹⁹ To make the institutionalization of slavery complete, most English colonies outlawed intermarriage between whites and “colored” people by the 18th century.²⁰ In addition, the legal system did not recognize marriages between “colored” people, although such common law arrangements existed from the colonial period when Blacks and Indians were utilized as indentured servants and later as slaves for life.²¹ Nash noted that, “institutions created by white Americans have disguised the degree of red-black intermixing by defining the children of mixed red-black ancestry as black and using the term mulatto in many cases to define half-African, half-Indian persons.”²² This typology served the economic interests of the ruling class, since classifying these people as Black typically bestowed slave status upon them. Additionally, this classification decreased the population of Native American nations because whites did not acknowledge Black Indians as belonging to the tribe. In contrast to the white practice of racial classification, most of the Native American nations granted full tribal membership to mixed race people if the mother was a member of the tribe.²³ At the time of her birth the

¹⁷ Katz, 131.

¹⁸ May, “The Object at Hand.”

¹⁹ Gary Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early North America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992), 159.

²⁰ Nash, 161.

²¹ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 321.

²² Nash, 290-291.

²³ Roger Nichols, ed., *The American Indian: Past and Present* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999), 4.

Anishinabe also accepted mixed-bloods into the tribe. Although Lewis had an Anishinabe mother and lived among this nation during her formative years, white society classified her as black.

Additionally, the racial classification system was supported by a Western philosophical view of the world. Majority society was dominated by the concept that entities had to be either/or, such as good/bad, masculine/feminine, and light/dark. In contrast, Lewis grew up in a culture much more comfortable with ambiguity, where one could be both/and. For example, one could be a woman and take on the masculine role as a warrior.²⁴ In describing this difference in worldview Awiakta notes,

A given is the dichotomy between humanity and nature, between culture and the powerful forces of the universe. Their relationship is adversarial...this dichotomy is the antithesis of the American Indian belief in the sacred tie to Mother Earth and to the universe as revelations of the wisdom of the Creator, who stands behind. Severance of the tie is basic to Western thought. It ranges God and man together; nature and all identified with it—including indigenous peoples and women are “the other”.²⁵

Even today, majority society attempts to put people into simple categories. Those that attempt to defy easy racial classification are often ridiculed. I have heard more Tiger Woods jokes than I care to recall. Often multiracial people are strongly encouraged to pick one category based upon what they most look like. This attitude has permeated throughout society. Through colonization, many nations have accepted this worldview. The 1998 Miss Navajo Pageant can illustrate a fairly recent example of this type of thinking. One of the contestants, Radmilla Cody, who later won the title, was bi-racial. There were some in the Navajo community who did not believe that she should be allowed to compete. As one person complained in the *Albuquerque Journal*, “Miss Cody’s appearance and physical characteristics are clearly Black, and are thus representative of another race of people. Miss Cody should focus on her African American heritage and stay out of Navajo affairs.”²⁶ From such a statement it becomes apparent how colonization has impacted the thinking of some in this traditionally matrilineal society, to indicate that a person born of a Navajo woman should not be considered a part of the community.

Another probable factor in the interpretation of Lewis’s art and life was due to her early connection to well-known abolitionists, such as Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Lydia Maria Child. Members from this movement were some of Lewis’s earliest patrons, and this relationship was mutually advantageous. In Lewis, abolitionists found an example that they could point to in their moral suasion arguments that “colored” people were not sub-human and capable of creating fine art. Moral suasion was a strategy based

²⁴ Carolyn Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth: The Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* (New York: Collier, 1977), 169-170.

²⁵ Marilou Awiakta, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother’s Wisdom* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993), 170.

²⁶ Martha Ture, “Cody’s Blues,” in *Native American Village* (article on-line); accessed 27 July 2005; available from http://www.imdiversity.com/villages/native/arts_culture_media

upon the assumption that human beings were basically good and moral and that once they were given reasons why slavery was unjust that they would work to dismantle the institution. One pro-slavery argument was that slaves were sub-human and incapable of anything except menial work. In Lewis the abolitionists found a person who refuted such an argument. After all, could a sub-human create pieces such as *The Muse, Urania* (1862) or the bust of *Anna Quincy Waterson* (1866)? For Lewis, she found a group that financially supported and encouraged her vocation. Lewis was not independently wealthy like other female sculptors such as Hosmer, so she had to support herself through commissioned works. This relationship to her patrons influenced the pieces that she created because her abolitionist customers would readily buy busts of historical figures, typically heroes of the movement such as *John Brown* (1864) or *Abraham Lincoln* (1867).

Although abolitionist patrons did influence Lewis's choice of subject, she refused to be dictated to by her benefactors. For example, when Lydia Maria Child told Lewis not to sculpt a bust of *Robert Gould Shaw* (1864) because it was beyond her abilities, Lewis ignored her. Lewis was later able to sell 100 plaster copies of Shaw, which funded her tour of Europe.²⁷ Lewis also became very upset whenever her abolitionist friends attempted to use her as an example in their tactics in the promotion of civil rights.²⁸ Lewis wanted to be recognized as an artist, not as a novelty. Lewis desired her art to speak for itself. Her popular pieces, historical busts and Cupids, gave Lewis the economic freedom to pursue more personal pieces that reflected upon facets of her identity. Included in that identity was her bi-racial heritage.

Focusing upon the realm of race, many of Lewis's personal pieces reflected her bi-racial heritage. Some of the sculptures that drew directly upon her African American background include *Freed Woman and her Child* (1866) and *Forever Free* (1867). The first work has been lost but was described in 1866 by Henry Wreford:

She has thrown herself to her knees, and, with clasped hands and uplifted eyes, she blesses God for her redemption. Her boy, ignorant of the cause of her agitation, hangs over her knees and clings to her waist. She wears the turban which was used when at work. Around her wrists are the half-broken manacles, and the chain lies on the ground still attached to a large ball.²⁹

An abolitionist newspaper described the latter piece in this way:

The noble figure of the man, his very muscles seeming to swell with gratitude; the expression of the right now to protect, with which he throws his arms around his kneeling wife; the "Praise de Lord" hovering on their lips, the broken chain – all so instinct with life, telling in the very poetry of stone the story of the last ten years And when it is remembered who created this group an added interest is

²⁷ Kort and Sonneborn, 134-135.

²⁸ Kort and Sonneborn, 134-135.

²⁹ Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy, eds., *Reading American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 195.

given to it...Will anyone believe it was the small hand of a girl that wrought the marble and kindled the light within it? — a girl of dusky hue³⁰

Lewis also created many religious pieces, which can be read as a manifestation of her religiosity, but also of her African American heritage. Her statue *Moses* (1875) could have a secondary meaning for Blacks. Raboteau notes,

The story of Exodus contradicted the claim made by white Christians that God intended Africans to be slaves. Exodus proved that slavery was against God's will and that slavery inevitably would end, even though the when and how remained hidden in the providence of God. Christian slaves thus applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not yet ended, and so gave meaning and purpose to lives threatened by senseless and demeaning brutality. Exodus functioned as an archetypal myth for the slaves.³¹

Another Biblical figure, Hagar, which Lewis sculpted numerous times, also had special significance to her due to her gender and racial heritage. Commenting on her sculptures of Hagar, Lewis stated that, "I have a strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered."³² According to the Biblical story, Sarah gave her Egyptian servant Hagar to her husband Abraham so that he might have an heir. After the birth of the legitimate heir, Isaac, the increasingly jealous Sarah cast out Hagar and her illegitimate child Ishmael into the wilderness. Remarking on the tale of Hagar, Cliff states,

It is quite impossible to read this story and not think of the Black woman under slavery, raped by the white master, serving the white master's wife, bearing a child by the white master and bearing responsibility for that child—with no power over her own fate, or that of her child. Lewis's choice of Hagar as a symbol for Black slave-women also fits into the Black tradition in America, one immersed in the stories of the Bible...and characterized by the translation of these stories according to Black history.³³

Although critics such as Cliff and Klieebatt read Lewis's work only through the lens of her African American heritage, this overlooks a whole other layer of meaning to her art. Lewis not only executed personal works drawing from Black tradition but also from Native American tradition.

Lewis completed a whole series of sculptures that focused upon Anishinabe culture. It is held that Lewis was initially inspired by Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855). The main character of this poem is not the historic Hiawatha, the co-founder of the Iroquois Confederacy. Ferguson states, "it appears that Longfellow got the real Hiawatha mixed-up with the Native folk hero Nanabozho."³⁴ There were many tales

³⁰ Cliff, 280.

³¹ Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1995), 32-33.

³² Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage* (New York: Paddington, 1974), 159.

³³ Cliff, 283.

³⁴ Will Ferguson, *Canadian History for Dummies* (Toronto: Wiley Publishing, 2000), 17.

about Nanabozho (a.k.a. Nanabush, Menapus, Manabozho, Manabush, Winabojo) among the Menominee and Anishinabe.³⁵ Lewis would have been well acquainted with the mythology, and this was reflected in her works *Hiawatha* (1868), *Minehaha* (1868), and *The Marriage of Hiawatha* (?). Later she also created pieces such as *Old Arrow Maker* (1872). In discussing *Old Arrow Maker*, Driskell says, “It shows a father and his daughter, and of course, he’s teaching her the trade of making the arrows, which is of course a part of the ethnic background that she fits into in the sense of the Native American side, and here she is trying of course to reflect on her own kindred spirit here.”³⁶ In her works, Lewis accurately and lovingly detailed ethnographically her Anishinabe ancestors. It must be noted that this was not the way Native Americans were typically portrayed in the 1860s and 1870s. During this time period the “Great Indian Wars” were taking place, and the mainstream media characterized all Native Americans as uncivilized savages. Articles were written that supported this thesis and illustrated with prints bearing titles like, “The Indian War” (1868), “Indians on the Warpath” (1870), “Indians attacking an Overland Express Coach” (1875), and “Indian Attack on Settlers in Virginia” (1876).³⁷ James Riding In notes of white Americans, “writing and speaking in self-righteous terms, newspaper editors, journalists, scholars, and government officials repeatedly lauded the growth of their country in religious, economic, and political terms. They not only claimed that Indians were barriers to progress but also asserted that the natives did not use the land as God had intended.”³⁸ By denying the humanity of Native Americans, the media was complicit with U.S. policy to get rid of the “Indian Problem” one way or another. Through her art, Lewis was challenging the popular representations of Native Americans.

From this brief examination of Lewis’s life and art it appears that scholars generally tend to ignore her Anishinabe ancestry for three main reasons: the social construction of race, the Western philosophical worldview, and her early connection with abolitionists. To only identify Lewis’s work as that of a Black artist discounts her own identity and the whole body of her art. Lewis was revolutionary in that she attempted to portray two racial groups, who at the time were viewed as subhuman, with dignity and humanity. By extension, she was proclaiming her right to exist on her own terms as a person and as an artist.

³⁵ Sam Gill and Irene Sullivan, *Dictionary of Native American Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 340.

³⁶ PBS Online Newshour, “Testament to Bravery,” 5 August 1996. MacNeil/Lehrer Productions.

³⁷ New York Public Library, “Digital Gallery,” accessed on 14 December 2005, available from: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/>.

³⁸ James Riding In, “American Indians in Popular Culture: A Pawnee’s Experiences and Views.” In Marjorie Zatz and Coramae Richey Mann, eds. *Images of Color, Images of Crime* (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2002), 17.

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The life Edmonia Lewis forged at a time when being anything but white or male would almost certainly relegate you to the dustbin of history stands as an inspiration. Do yourself a favor and don't resist exploring more. We're reblogging this post of ours from 2014 today since Edmonia Lewis has a Google Doodle today! (It's also wonderful to see that Freeman H.M. Murray now has a great Wikipedia page, too.)

Child of Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the problem of art history's Black and Indian subject by Kirsten Pai Buick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Also, don't forget to take a look at the Smithsonian's Collection Search to take a look at the many sculptures, etc. in our museums & research centers! Through following Edmonia Lewis' body of work and through comparisons with other contemporary artists, Kirsten Pai Buick unwinds the bind that Art History has put Edmonia Lewis in, and by extension many other Artists. Buick approaches Lewis not as a woman Artist, or a black Artist, or a First Nation American Indian Artist, but simply as an Artist in 19th Century America, influenced by the world and her own internal muse.

Author Buick's skilled research and writing casts off previous vague and romanticized interpretations of the art and her work, presenting a well-argued innovative appraisal of Lewis. Excellent work! Read more.