



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2014 Volume I: Understanding History and Society through Images, 1776-1914

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## **Making Art Against the Odds: The Triumph of Edmonia Lewis**

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by Kimberly Towne

In this unit, geared for middle school art students, I will be able to explore how an artist's identity shapes their work and how their cultural and historical context also shapes an artist's work. I will do this by focusing on the work of one artist. Edmonia Lewis was biracial; her father was African American and her mother was of Native American descent. Born circa 1844, she was a free woman of color during the Civil War. She was able to become America's first African American sculptor of note. She was attracted to subjects that reflected her identity, both Native American subjects and African American, and yet she worked within the popular Neoclassical style. While she gained recognition during her life, she ultimately was forgotten and only recently has begun to gain her rightful place as an important American artist. She will be a good role model for students because she overcame several substantial societal limitations. She pursued her dream of being an artist despite being Native American and African American, at a time in history that made being either was extremely challenging. Students will learn different strategies for looking in depth at artwork and will create pewter casting reflective of their own personal identity and their contemporary life in America.

(Developed for Art, grade 8; recommended for Art and Art History, Secondary and Upper Elementary grades)

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