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

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### **Introduction**

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"If we want to understand a work of art, we should look at the time in which it was created, the circumstances that determined in style and art expression as well as the individual forces that led the artist to his form of expression." <sup>1</sup>

"Against all odds, Mary Edmonia Lewis aspired to be a sculptor. Who can really say when her dreams began? That she had them at all is rather miraculous." <sup>2</sup>

These two quotes, by Vicktor Lowenfeld and Kirsten P. Buick respectively, sum up my unit. I want my students to understand that art is a reflection of the time and place in which it was created and that artists own personal identity influence the artwork. I will accomplish this by focusing on Edmonia Lewis, a sculptor of great accomplishment, who had a miraculous dream to be an artist, as Buick said. What I find truly inspirational is that she achieved her dream.

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. Raised by her mother's Chippewa tribe after being orphaned at the age of 4, she was able to become America's first African American sculptor of note. Her work, while reflective of the fashionable Neoclassical style, is also reflective of her heritage. She was attracted to subjects that reflected her identity, both Native American subjects and African American. Yet she worked within the Neoclassical style, which was based on the imitation of Greek and Roman sculpture. 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. The country was being torn apart by the Civil War, and, yet another challenge, she was a "she", a female, at a time when it was extremely hard for women to become artists and doubly so to become sculptors, since this was the most physically demanding of the fine arts. In this unit, 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 have always been interested in the story of Edmonia Lewis. I have long felt she would be a wonderful subject for a unit for my middle school art students but have never had the time or opportunity to develop this idea. This seminar, "Understanding History and Society through Images", has presented me with the perfect opportunity. Edmonia Lewis' story is truly a reflection of the time in which she lived. This unit also will give me the chance to connect to several aspects of art history and the culture contemporary to her life. I felt such a unit would also give me the opportunity to explore art history in depth. Since she was a neoclassical sculptor, I decided this should be an Art I unit. My 8<sup>th</sup> grade class takes art for high school credit, Art I. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the students study civics in their social studies class. Looking at Neoclassical art and how that movement was reflective of the democratic ideals of America will connect well to their civics class. Their textbook is filled with Neoclassical art and architecture. Providing a background into this art style should support their civics

curriculum. This Course Unit also gives me the opportunity to think about strategies appropriate to teaching art history. I feel I can explore art history teaching strategies with my Art I students.

## School Details

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I teach in an International Baccalaureate program, which is basically a school within a school. It is an inner city middle school and I am the only art teacher. We have 90-minute block classes, which alternate each day. Therefore, I teach two 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes, two 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes and two 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes, each for the entire year. Almost all of the students remain in art for all three years, so by the time they get to 8<sup>th</sup> grade they have had two full years of a fairly intense art program. Beginning this fall, 2014, the Middle Years Program (MYP) has new curriculum guidelines for art and the other subjects. Creating this unit is enabling me to begin to explore the new objectives and key concepts of these new initiatives. There are Global Contexts, which involve the students in learning concepts in context. While there are six options, I have chosen to focus on two: Identity and Relationships as well as Orientation in Space and Time. There are four key concepts for the Arts in the new curriculum guide: Aesthetics, Identity, Change and Communication. Within my unit, I will focus on just one of these, Identity. My unit will focus on the personal identities of artists and how that influences their work, as well as how the artist's "orientation" in space and time (in other words, when and where an artist is working) influences the work.

### Objectives

In this unit I will focus on how art expresses the identity of the artist and the ideals and beliefs of the community to which the artist belongs. Each artist has an individual identity based on his or her unique life experiences. Artists also are members of communities that have beliefs and values, which can influence an artist's work. My hope is that the students will look at art through a new lens of understanding. They will see how art is a reflection of the time and culture in which it was created. As Addiss says in *Art History and Education*,

"Art comes alive only when we become part of the process. In the same way, art history is alive only when we become part of its process. It is not enough to memorize images or learn the names and dates of famous masters. Art history offers us much more-the chance to participate in the entire world of artistic expression: from prehistoric times to the present day and from Africa, Asia and Europe to our own towns, schools and homes. In the process we will also discover that art history can be one of the most exciting ways to investigate the cultures of the world and their histories. Like every other activity, the more of ourselves we put into it, the more we will gain in return, ultimately leading to sharing the vision of artists of the past- and perhaps finishing the artist in ourselves" <sup>3</sup>

## Strategies

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I approach my art curriculum in terms of the Eight Human Commonalities expressed by Ernest Boyer. This will work with the new IB curriculum guide. Exploring how people, from different times and cultures, have dealt with an idea gives students an opportunity to not only to see the similarities and the connectedness of being human but also to allow them to begin to understand and appreciate the cultural reasons that make people different. Hopefully, this will elicit a respect and understanding of diversity as well as a greater appreciation and affinity for history and various cultures. When the students approach an idea from the perspective of human commonalities, I hope that they will be able to take the idea and apply it to their own life and own experiences, thus making the unit personally relevant. Looking at personal identity and historical and cultural contexts fits well into this concept of human commonalities.

By using these universal commonalities as a focus of instruction, students should become able to see that their learning is vital and is part of something significant, important and relevant. They will see how all humans deal with the same issues and how they themselves must deal with these issues. By looking at the common ground that the students and individuals from other cultures or time periods have shared, hopefully will generate a deeper understanding and appreciation for the students' common bonds with them. Students need, in the world of increasingly global implications, to be able to see their own personal needs, values, beliefs, and experiences in relation to those of diverse people throughout the world and throughout time. Edmonia Lewis is a wonderful example of how an artist deals with multiple challenging issues and therefore is an exemplary role model for my students.

I will explore and employ some strategies for looking at art that I typically don't use and compare them to some of the strategies I use frequently. I often use the Feldman method of art criticism where students describe, analyze, interpret and judge a work of art and the technique of comparing and contrasting two works. I am also going to use a method with which I was familiar but had not used before, Visual Thinking Strategies. I am also going to use a method that I learned about during my research, Connotations and Denotations. I feel that by encouraging the students to really look at the four images by Edmonia Lewis, they will be able to become engaged in her work and begin to draw conclusions even before we go over the history.

### **Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) <sup>4</sup>**

This strategy uses three broad questions to organize the looking and analyzing of artwork. It is designed to create discussion and to have students' ideas and interpretations to be based on what they actually see (the evidence in the artwork). The questions are as follows:

1. What's going on in the picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find?

### **Connotations and Denotations <sup>5</sup>**

This strategy is designed to help students look at work long and to help them gather evidence to help form an interpretation of the piece. First the students list everything they see (denotations) and then what these visuals might mean (connotations). It requires that any interpretation is based on evidence in the artwork. Originally used to help understand text, it is a useful tool for helping to understand artwork.

## Compare and contrast

In using this strategy, I show the students two pieces of art and have them compare and contrast, often using a graphic organizer like a Venn Diagram. I frequently make it a game and have them work in groups, competing to see which group can find the most similarities and differences. They are to focus on what they see and then afterwards, using their notes, we have a group discussion on what the works might mean.

## Feldman Method

The Feldman Method of art criticism has been around since before I started teaching. It is so commonplace that I don't think teachers even use the name but just the strategies. There are four steps: description-what can you see in the work of art, analysis-what are the relationships between things in the work of art, interpretations-what do you think all of this means and Judgment- what is the evaluation of the work of art based of the first three steps. I often use graphic organizers to help students with this.

## Background Information

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During the antebellum period, many American female artists went to Italy to work and study. There were many advantages in moving to Italy for these women. High quality marble was readily available, many talented stone carvers were available to help complete sculptures, and examples of Greco-Roman sculptures were abundant, to name just a few. Also there was an attitude that Italy, especially Rome, was more open minded than America was in terms of its views on women. The number of American female artists in Rome was so large that, the author Henry James called them "The white marmorean flock." <sup>6</sup>

Generally, American sculptors would create a small model in clay or plaster and then hire Italian stone carvers to help create larger versions of the small Marquette. This was advantageous to women because they could create large, monumental sculptures without having to physically do all of the manual labor. Many of these women worked in the Neoclassical style. This style, inspired by Greco-Roman culture and art, emphasized the idealization of figures. The sentimental style, which was popular in the US at this time, also idealized women, but utilized contemporary dress and avoided nudity. <sup>7</sup> In order to be successful, both professionally and financially, sculptors had to have multiples variations of any given sculpture. There would be plaster versions or small marble copies of the large pieces. Selling these smaller, relatively inexpensive copies created much of the income for the artist and enabled their name and work to reach a larger audience. For example, in order to help pay for her trip to Europe in 1865, Edmonia Lewis sold 100 plaster copies of the bust she had made of Col. Robert Gould Shaw. <sup>8</sup>

## Neoclassicism

Neoclassicism was the style of sculpture predominantly used during Edmonia's working career. It was reaching for the idealization of Greek sculpture, instead of the very decorative style of the Rococo. After the American Revolution, artists looked for ways to create an American identity. To do this, they looked to the ideals of Greece and Rome. Inspired, not only by democracy, but also by the classical forms of Greco-Roman art, American artists found that the neoclassical style suited them well. Neoclassicism was therefore found in Europe as well as America. It began during the American and the French Revolutions and continued during the

Napoleonic wars. It provided an art form that used classical symmetry, idealized figures and depictions of values, something that was important during those chaotic times. In America, it enabled a sense of connectedness between the new, young country and the classic history and culture of Greece and Rome. Neoclassicism also served as a way to help unify the many different regions in America. <sup>9</sup> By having one style of art that was the predominant style, helped diminish the regional differences.

Often artists would create sculptures that would reference issues of the day but within the constraints of Neoclassical. Since the style made work look superficially similar, the subject matter became an arena for showing the differences between artists. Edmonia Lewis chose to work in marble within this technically demanding style, selecting subjects that reflected her own personal identity.

### **Edmonia Lewis' context**

The most recent book on Edmonia Lewis, *Child of the Fire* by Kirsten Pai Buick, focuses on challenging the previous work on Edmonia Lewis, one that maintained that her sculptures were reflections of her identity as a Native American and an African American. This book, which began as a dissertation, argues that her work is more a reflection of the time period than her personal identity. Despite this being the most recent published work, I am not going to focus on the author's point of view. While certainly Edmonia Lewis' art was reflective of the context in which she was working, one cannot discount the impact her personal identity had on her subject choice and her work. I will discuss how her own life impacted some of the choices she made in her career. With the students, I will focus on how Edmonia Lewis' work is unique and ultimately different than the rest of the "the white marmorean flock."

### **Edmonia Lewis (ca. 1844-1907)**

Edmonia Lewis' biographical facts are difficult to pin down. In interviews, she would often give simple answers or say something that has been later shown not to be true. Like all of us, I think she edited her story for her purpose, which was to be a successful artist. Thus, she used her story to best effect. I will share the most commonly accepted facts of her life with the students. Edmonia Lewis was born somewhere between 1843 and 1845 near Albany, New York. The Smithsonian American Art Museum states that she was born in 1844, although other scholars given other dates. She said, in an interview, that her father was an African American and her mother a Chippewa Indian, implying her mother was full blooded. Her mother was probably mixed race, part African American and part Native American. Since Edmonia was orphaned when she was four, she was raised, until she was twelve, by her mother's tribe. <sup>10</sup> Specifically, she was raised by two of her aunts, her mother's sisters, living near Niagara Falls. They made and sold souvenirs to the tourists visiting the Falls, e.g. baskets, moccasins and snowshoes. But for the most part, the tribe hunted and fished in the area. <sup>11</sup> One can understand that she identified her mother as Native American and did not bother to explain the specific details of her mother's racial background. She described her childhood as being spent fishing and making baskets and moccasins. Her older brother, made well off by the California Gold Rush, paid for her to go to school when she was twelve and, in 1859, for her to attend Oberlin College, a major abolitionist center, Oberlin, in Ohio, had accepted women since 1832 and African Americans since 1835. It was here that she changed her name from her Indian one, "Wildfire" to Mary Edmonia Lewis, although she rarely used Mary. <sup>12</sup>

Despite the desire for the campus to be racially harmonious, it, and the town, was not. She boarded in the house of the Reverend John "Father" Keep, who as a trustee of Oberlin had cast the deciding vote to allow women and African American to attend the college. Since she was young, probably under fifteen, and an orphan, Mrs. Keep gave her a second floor room to use by herself, which may have created some issue with

the other girls. She was the only African American girl out of twelve girls boarding at the Keeps' house. <sup>13</sup> In January 1862, two white girls, who were students and boarded with Edmonia, accused her of trying to poison them. Needless to say, there was a scandal and a great deal of publicity and the case eventually went to trial. During this time, she was severely beaten by vigilantes. In court, she was defended by John Mercer Langston, an African American lawyer, who went on to be the first dean of law at Howard University. She ultimately was acquitted because of insufficient evidence. Despite these events, she stayed in school. Yet in February 1863, she was accused of stealing art supplies from the college. Again she was acquitted, but was not allowed to graduate. <sup>14</sup> The woman in charge of the female students at Oberlin decided to simply not accept Edmonia's registration for her final term. Thus Edmonia was never considered for expulsion, and just ceased to be a student. <sup>15</sup> Edmonia, not surprisingly, never mentioned these events. <sup>16</sup>

Shortly after Edmonia had started at Oberlin, John Brown was arrested for his raid on Harper's Ferry. Brown's father had been a founder of the college and two of the men who were with Brown were African Americans from Oberlin. One was killed and one arrested. Needless to say, Oberlin was very involved with the trial and many on the campus were distraught at the outcome. The college rang the chapel bell for an hour when Brown was hanged. Surely this made an impact on Edmonia and later she made a medallion of John Brown and several busts of him, however none have been located. <sup>17</sup>

After what must have been a very challenging time she moved to Boston with her brother's support and a letter of introduction to William Lloyd Garrison. Through him she met both abolitionists and artists in Boston. She found a studio space in the same building as Edward Mitchell Bannister. Beginning her art career by creating medallions in clay and plaster, she focused on northern Civil War heroes such as Col. Robert Gould Shaw and abolitionists such as John Brown. She discovered, while in Boston, that the fact that she was "considered triply disadvantaged as a black Indian woman, Lewis offered a tempting opportunity to those eager to demonstrate their support of human rights." <sup>18</sup> She met Lydia Maria Child, a famous abolitionist, who befriended Edmonia. Lydia was interested in this young mixed race girl who wanted to become a sculptor. Child later wrote that Edmonia told her "I don't want you...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." <sup>19</sup> Child was very encouraging of Edmonia receiving instruction, being aware of the years of training that other successful female artists of the time had such as Harriet Hosmer, but Edmonia did not follow Child's repeated encouragements. She went directly into sculpting and doing what she needed to do to be successful. She was determined and not at all deterred by people's opinions of her, her work, or struggles with money. As Bearden said, "A skilled survivor, she knew how to win sympathetic support and shrewdly made pieces that would fit any pocket book, not just those of the rich-a tactic she learned from selling Chippewa souvenirs." <sup>20</sup>

On May 28, 1863, Edmonia watched the fanfare for Col Robert Gould Shaw, the son of a wealthy, abolitionist family in Boston, and his 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment, all African Americans, as they set off to fight in the Civil War. Despite advice suggesting that Edmonia not try to depict the heroic Shaw because of her lack of experience, she did so anyway and the bust was well received. His parents felt it was enough of a likeness that they gave permission for copies to be sold. A friend and supporter of Edmonia, Anna Quincy Waterson wrote a poem about Edmonia bust of Shaw.

"EDMONIA LEWIS. [*The young colored woman who has successfully modelled the bust of Col. Shaw.*] She hath wrought well with her unpractised hand, The mirror of her thought reflected clear This youthful hero-martyr of our land. With touch



harmonious she has moulded here A memory and a prophecy—both dear: The memory of one who was so pure That God gave him (what only can belong To an unsullied soul) the right to be A leader for all time in Freedom's chivalry; The prophecy of that wide, wholesome cure For foul distrust and bitter, cruel wrong, Which he did give his life up to secure. 'Tis fitting that a daughter of the race Whose chains are breaking should receive a gift So rare as genius. Neither power nor place, Fashion or wealth, pride, custom, caste, nor hue Can arrogantly claim what God doth lift Above these chances, and bestows on few. A. Q. W." <sup>21</sup>

Having sold a sufficient number of copies of the bust she created of Shaw and medallions and busts of John Brown, Edmonia was able to pay to go to Rome to study and work in marble, considered the highest form of sculpture. During the winter of 1865-66, when she was around the age of twenty, Edmonia set up a studio in Rome, near the Piazza Barberini. There in Rome she began to carve marble. Despite her lack of formal training and experience in sculpting, she was willing to try full figures in the round and sculptures with multiple figures. In some of her work, her inexperience with proportions is evident but she clearly improved. While most sculptors used workmen to undertake the carving, Edmonia did much of the work herself. Only later in her career did she hire help. Cushman also paid to have one of Edmonia's clay sculptures turned into a marble sculpture. Her reluctance to use assistants might help explain her limited output: it may result from concern over expenses or wanting to make sure that she was credited for the work. Harriet Hosmer had been accused of not making her own sculptures and Edmonia would have known about this controversy. <sup>22</sup> In response to this accusation, Hosmer wrote "The Process of Sculpture", published in *Atlantic Monthly*. She explains the step-by-step process of sculpting, hoping to refute the accusations that she did not create her own work. <sup>23</sup> Also, unlike many sculptors of the time period, Edmonia would make marble sculptures before she had a commission. She would then sometimes send these uncommissioned works back to Boston patrons who were asked to help sell them in order to raise money for materials and to pay for the shipping, which was expensive. <sup>24</sup> In Rome, Edmonia found people who took her under their wing such as Harriet Hosmer and Charlotte Cushman. She was able to set up her studio in an old studio of Harriet Hosmer that previously had been Antonio Canova's and had historical significance. Cushman sent all of her acquaintances to Edmonia's studio helping make it a popular stop for people visiting Rome. She was written about in papers in both London and America. She was under a microscope and was considered a strange, exotic creature. She alternated from playing into the myth of being a naïve, child-like Indian to being rude when asked questions. <sup>25</sup> Edmonia was most popular in the late 1860s and 1870s during which time her studio was a popular stop for Americans on the Grand Tour in Rome.

Despite being warned not to carve marble unless she had a buyer or a commission, Edmonia was single minded in her resolve to continue working in marble. Borrowing money, she created a two-figure sculpture, which has become perhaps her most famous piece, *Forever Free*, (1867-1868) which celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation. She proceeded to ship it to Samuel E Sewell, with the bills for the marble and shipping. Samuel E. Sewell was a wealthy abolitionist, who needless to say was surprised. Immediately, he had to pay \$200 to keep it from being auctioned off by the custom agents. Sewell eventually raised the funds to pay the balance of \$800. Unfortunately, this act did little to endear her to several people who had been her supporters. They felt it was presumptuous for this young girl to not only make it against advice but then to send it overseas with the bills to someone who had no idea what was coming. Her career was a dichotomy of success and struggle, of being a "wonder" because of her identity and being dismissed because of the same. She went on to have a relatively successful career, given that she was woman of mixed race, working in the post bellum era. The Centennial (1876) marks the end of the Neoclassical period and the beginning of



Romanticism, led by Auguste Rodin. Rome was replaced by Paris as the center of sculpture and many Americans left Rome and returned home. Edmonia did not. <sup>26</sup>

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1883 and there would have been severe challenges for Edmonia if she had returned to the U.S. There had been a marked increase in racism after Reconstruction. Despite her style of sculpture going out of vogue, her religious sculptures had an audience and continued to sell. But she did continue to include images related to her identity. For instance, a lost altarpiece, done for a church in Baltimore, depicted the three wise men, one being white, one being African and one being Asian, with the African wise man having the greatest prominence. <sup>27</sup> But by 1900 Edmonia had basically been forgotten. When and where did Edmonia Lewis die has been a long time mystery. It was only solved in 2010. I will share this with my students because I want them to know there are mysteries that can be solved...not all of the research is done. Marilyn Richardson, a cultural historian, was able to find that Edmonia had died in the Hammersmith area of London, leaving a small financial estate. Richardson had spent several years and had gone to many countries looking for proof of her death. <sup>28</sup>

Despite her popularity during her early career, it wasn't until the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s that people began to look at the young mixed-race girl who managed to become a successful sculptor immediately after the Civil War. A great deal of Edmonia's energies went into just being accepted by her fellow artists. As Romare Bearden states, "Within that framework, she struggled to honor in her work those whom she felt represented the best in American life-Colonel Shaw, John Brown, Lincoln, Sumner, Longfellow and Harriet Hunt. She also honored her own dual heritage in such works as *The Old Indian Arrowmaker and His Daughter* and the *Hiawatha* series and *Forever Free*. In *Cleopatra* she dared to break away from sterile conventionality. Hers was a daring life." <sup>29</sup>

Ultimately her artwork became less allegorical and more naturalistic than that of other sculptors' working in the Neoclassical style. Her work connected in a different and deeper way with the issues of the day.

## Specific sculptures

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There are forty-six sculptures by Edmonia that have been referenced in written work but many are unknown. <sup>30</sup> In my unit, I will focus on three. The Smithsonian American Art Museum has eight of her sculptures, which is the largest collection. I will be using three of these. Howard University has one, which I will also be using.

### Forever Free

Done just four years after the Emancipation Proclamation, this marble sculpture depicts an African American slave at the moment of emancipation. His arm is raised with the broken chain still attached. Kneeling next to him is a woman, his wife or mate, with more racially neutral features and long straight hair. The male has clearly ethnic features and hair and is standing heroically almost defiantly. The female is fully clothed which in and of itself is unusual. Often female slaves in Neoclassical sculpture were depicted nude or semi-nude to suggest their sexual availability or as a reference to classical nudes. It is in the Howard University Art Gallery, Washington, D.C.

## **Old Indian Arrowmaker**

There are at least three versions of this subject, which was quite popular. Two are owned by the Smithsonian. Made in 1872, the sculpture shows the Indian and his daughter: he is making arrows while she is making moccasins. The daughter, apparently modeled after Edmonia's earlier versions of Minnehaha, doesn't look as naturalistic as the father. The father is clearly Native American, based on his features while his daughter is more idealized.<sup>31</sup> It is a small sculpture, just under two feet, and is filled with intricate details. The authentic Chippewa clothing, moccasins and jewelry are very well done and the sculpture has strong texture, something not typically found in Neoclassical work.



## Hagar

Carved in 1875, in marble, this sculpture depicts the biblical Hagar, the slave of Abraham who had a son, Ishmael, with Abraham, and then was later sent away to the wilderness. While the sculpture was meant to depict an African slave, the features and hair are modeled in a more idealized manner with no characteristics that would be associated with Africans. Hagar has Caucasian features and straight long hair. Edmonia commenting on another version of Hagar, now lost, that she had done, says "I have strong sympathy for all

women who have struggled and suffered." <sup>32</sup> The sculpture is in the Smithsonian American Art Museum but not currently on display.



***The Death of Cleopatra***

"The Death of Cleopatra" is considered by many to be Edmonia Lewis' masterpiece. Carved of Italian marble, it

is five feet tall and weighs two tons. The subject is Cleopatra VII, who was the queen of Egypt from 51-30 B.C. In the sculpture she is depicted at the moment of her death, sitting on her throne, her head back and the deadly asp still in her hand. This very realistic portrait depicts Cleopatra just after the bite of the asp which, depending on how you read her expression, may have challenged the Victorian notions of sentimentality about death. Regardless, the sculpture created a stir in the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Exposition was a juried exhibition and Lewis was the only black artist but not the only female one. The sculpture was shown in Memorial Hall close to another version of *Cleopatra*, by William Wetmore Story, a contemporary Neoclassical sculptor who was convinced that women could not produce worthy marble sculptures. Edmonia's work was later displayed at the Chicago Industrial Exposition in 1878. Lewis decided after that exhibit to store it in Chicago instead of shipping it back to Rome <sup>33</sup>. The sculpture was next seen in a saloon in 1892 and then was sold to the owner of a racetrack where it was used as a grave marker for a racehorse named Cleopatra. The statue stayed in place, even though the land's use changed from racetrack to golf course to factory, until 1972, when the postal service built on the land and the sculpture was moved to a salvage yard. <sup>34</sup>

In the mid-1970s, a Boy Scout troop "rescued" the statue and cleaned it and painted it. In 1987, the sculpture was given to the Forest Park Historical Society and was identified two years later as "The Death of Cleopatra" by Edmonia Lewis. It was then given to the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art in 1994 where it was restored. <sup>35</sup> The sculpture is done in the neoclassical style and is slightly larger than life sized. Most of her works before Cleopatra were smaller pieces. As she had gained knowledge and experience, her works had become larger but none like the scale of Cleopatra.





## Contemporary artists

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In looking for some contemporary artists who might work well with my main focus, how an artist's personal identity informs their work and how the historical and cultural context of that artist informs their work, I had some difficulty. I could think of many contemporary artists who exemplified the idea of personal identity informing work but I struggled with deciding on an artist(s) who exemplified how historical and cultural context informs artwork. But while looking at artists, I realized that what I was struggling against was the differences in the times periods. I was trying to, in essence, make a round peg fit in a square hole. During Edmonia Lewis' time, Neoclassical sculpture was not only the predominant form of art but was truly the only option. To be successful, one had to work within that style. Thus everyone did. "Paradoxically, the art of her [Edmonia Lewis] day demanding a style, Neoclassicism, that made the work of one artist virtually indistinguishable from that of another." <sup>36</sup> What I kept looking for was a predominant style that was reflective of 2014 that my potential artist(s) would be working within. Then I had the aha moment, where I came to terms with why I was struggling to find an artist that was fitting my ideas...it was because there isn't a prescribed style. Contemporary art is very much about being individualistic, using any subject, any media, and any style. It is about novelty and uniqueness. This concept is so very different from Edmonia Lewis' time. I believe by explaining contemporary art in contrast to Edmonia Lewis, my students will actually gain a better understanding of the cultural context of art making in 2014.

Since I no longer felt constrained to find an artist or artists who was working within a specific style, I realized that many contemporary artists could be used in this unit because so much of contemporary art is about personal identity. So I selected three artists, all of whom have some parallelism to Edmonia Lewis. They are Kara Walker, Yinka Shonibare and Kehinde Wiley. All three use their personal identities in their work and all three look to history and other art for inspiration, much like Edmonia Lewis copying famous statues and using poetry and historic figures for inspiration.

### **Kara Walker**

Born in 1969, focuses on gender, race, class and sexuality in her work. She is most well known for her installation pieces where she uses cut black paper silhouettes, depicting, what seems at first glance, scenes from the antebellum south. But upon closer inspection, many of the images have strong violence, in an almost bizarrely fantastical way. Many of her images are not suitable for middle school students, so I will be very careful in selecting which ones to share with my students. Kara Walker is a female African American artist who deals with race and gender issues in her work and has a very specific point of view.

### **Yinka Shonibare**

Yinka Shonibare, born in 1962, deals with cultural identity, race, class and colonialism in his work. He is well known for his installation pieces that use brightly patterned "African" textiles, which are actually Dutch wax printed cotton. In his work, he explores his dual identity, British and Nigerian. Born in England, he lived in Nigeria from a large part of his childhood. He also, in some work, references Western European art.

### **Kehinde Wiley**

A graduate from Yale, born in 1977, Kehinde Wiley is known for his large scale, realistic painting of African American men depicted in heroic poses from Western European art history. Dealing with class and race, He

poses his models, who are not trained models but people off of the street, in traditional poses found in Old Master paintings depicting royalty, nobility and aristocrats.

## Classroom activities

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### Lesson One

I will be looking at the 4 sculptures using the 4 different looking at art strategies-one per sculpture with the students.

#### *Hagar*

For this piece, I will use the Compare and Contrast method, in conjunction with Hiram Powers' *The Greek Slave*, 1851, in the Yale British Art Center. Students will work in pairs to fill out a Venn diagram, comparing and contrasting the two works.

#### *The Old Arrowmaker and his Daughter*

Using Connotations and Denotations, using a graphic organizer, the students will work individually and then share their observations with the others at their table. Then as a group we will review the graphic organizer, allowing students to add to their work.

#### *Forever Free*

I will have the students look at this sculpture using VST as a whole group discussion. Using the three broad questions, I will guide them, through questioning, to consider each of the questions as specifically as we can. I will have the students take notes and use the notes to create a sketchbook page.

#### *The Death of Cleopatra*

I will actually explore this work as a bridge between Lesson One and Lesson Two. For this sculpture, I will have the students use the Feldman's Method of Art Criticism. Since the students have used this method before, I will have them develop questions that could be asked for each of the steps. By the students thinking about what questions would be relevant, I hope they would be considering the answers to the questions and thus looking deeper.

### Lesson Two

In this lesson, the students will write an autobiography of *The Death of Cleopatra*. They will research the facts of what happened to the sculpture and then use that information to create a timeline, which will inform their writing. During the class period, Edmonia's biography, the context in which she was working and an overview of her artwork will be presented.

### Lesson Three

As a culminating studio project, I will share three contemporary artists, exploring how their personal identity

and context influences their work. The students will then design a medallion that will reflect their own identity and their place and space, in Richmond, VA in 2014. The medallions will carve into plaster by the students and then, facilitated by myself, will be cast-using pewter. I have students carve the medallion and then one by one, they will come to the pewter casting station, where they will don fireproof gloves and eye protection. They hold the ladle and I use the blowtorch to melt the pewter. On my say, they pour the molten pewter into their model. It cools rapidly and within a few minutes, is ready to be removed. Students then use small files to clean the edges. There are many wonderful books and websites on pewter casting, both how to do it and tips to be successful while teaching it to students.

## Field Trips

While teaching this unit, I hope to take my students on several field trips. While focusing on Edmonia Lewis, I want to also have the students explore a local Neoclassical sculptor, Edward V. Valentine, and a work by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the Shaw Memorial. By looking at Valentine, we can take a field trip to the Valentine Museum, which has his art studio. It is one of only four surviving 19<sup>th</sup> century sculptor studios and is open to the public. By visiting his studio, the students will have a unique opportunity to see how a Neoclassical artist of that time period worked. Since we take an annual trip to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, we can also see the Shaw Memorial model, created by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, which was done in 1897. During the trip to DC, I plan on adding the Smithsonian American Museum of Art to the itinerary. At this museum, there are eight sculptures by Edmonia, although not all on display. The sculptures are *Hagar*, *Old Arrowmaker*, *Poor Cupid*, *Moses*, *Young Octavian*, *The Death of Cleopatra* and *Anna Quincy Waterson*.

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