

The Object at Hand: The circuitous route of Edmonia Lewis' masterwork, a controversial portrayal of Cleopatra at the moment of death, included stints as decor in a Chicago saloon and as a grave marker for a racehorse



Girls, Guerrilla. The Guerilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

"This [sculpture of Cleopatra] was not a beautiful work, but it was a 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 repellant — and it is a question whether a statue of the ghastly characteristics of this one does not overstep the bounds of legitimate art."

So wrote artist William J. Clark jr. in *Great American Sculptures* (1878) about one of the artworks on display at the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. The person who created it, Edmonia Lewis, was the first professional African-American and Native American sculptor. It is symptomatic of her difficult life and neglected career that her most important piece, *The Death of Cleopatra*, which caused such a stir in Philadelphia 120 years ago, soon dropped out of sight and was not rediscovered until the late 1970s. Miraculously rescued from oblivion, it was recently conserved and has been placed on view at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art (NMAA). "Lost and Found:

Edmonia Lewis' *Cleopatra*" presents the long-missing masterwork, along with other Lewis sculptures in the NMAA collection, through January 5, 1997.

The story of how Lewis' *Cleopatra* was resurrected involves twists of fate, near disasters and serendipitous discoveries, mixed with scholarly research and curatorial concern. It is the latest chapter in the saga of a talented, determined artist whose life was filled with ambiguities, reversals and triumphs. A minority female with limited training and experience, working in a male-dominated field, she overcame enormous odds to become a skilled and imaginative sculptor. Even today, she remains a mysterious figure, because of a lack of information about her peripatetic early life and last years, as well as the scarcity of surviving sculpture. Much of the mystery was of her own making, growing out of her reticent, elusive personality.

Even Lewis' birthplace is uncertain. It was either Newark, New Jersey, or Ohio or, most probably, upstate New York. Born about 1840, the daughter of a black father and a part-Ojibwa mother, she was orphaned in childhood and, it was later said, had been raised by her mother's people.



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With the help of her older brother, in 1859 Lewis entered the Young Ladies Preparatory Department of Oberlin College, the first college in the country to admit women and African-Americans; there, she learned to draw. But trouble came when she was accused of poisoning two white classmates; awaiting the arraignment, she was abducted by a white mob and brutally beaten. The charges against Lewis were dismissed for insufficient evidence; arguing in her defense was African-American lawyer John Mercer Langston, later a Howard University professor, U.S. Minister to Haiti and Congressman.



Courtesy, National Museum of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Historical Society of Forest Park, Illinois

Leaving Oberlin, Lewis moved to Boston, where abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison arranged for her to study with sculptor Edward A. Brackett. Soon afterward, in her small studio on Tremont Street, she created clay and plaster medallions of Garrison, John Brown and other antislavery stalwarts. Although proud of her heritage, Lewis said she wanted her work to be accepted on its own merits, not "because I am a colored girl." Her most popular work was an 1864 portrait bust of Col. Robert Gould Shaw, the young white Boston Brahmin who died leading the all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment in the assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in the Civil War. The following year, with proceeds from sales of plaster copies of the Shaw bust, Lewis sailed for Rome to pursue her career. She was then in her early 20s.

Rome was a gathering place for American writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James and Harriet Beecher Stowe. With its legacy of classicism, and its abundant supply of marble and skilled stonecutters, the city was also a mecca for expatriate American sculptors, notably the aristocratic William Wetmore Story, son of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story.

There was also a contingent of women sculptors grouped around neoclassical sculptor Harriet Hosmer and actress Charlotte Cushman, who made up what Story termed "a set whom I do not like." Lewis was welcomed into the women's circle, described by Henry James as "that strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who at one time settled upon the seven hills [of Rome] in a white, marmorean flock" (*Smithsonian*, February 1992).

"One of the sisterhood," James continued in *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, "was a negress, whose colour, picturesquely contrasting with that of her plastic material, was the pleading agent of her fame. . . ." Those comments aside, Lewis, along with Hosmer, Margaret Foley, Emma Stebbins and Anne Whitney, helped establish a place for women in the field of sculpture. Working in a studio once occupied by neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova, Lewis at first carved her own marble, not only to save money but to avoid the accusation leveled at Hosmer and other women that their work was really the creation of native stonecutters.

One of Lewis' early Italian works, *Forever Free* (1867), portrays a black man who has broken the manacles of slavery and a kneeling black woman prayerfully celebrating the news of emancipation. It is now in the Howard University Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. She also executed several versions of *Hagar*, one of which is now at NMAA. The biblical Egyptian maidservant of Abraham's wife, Sarah, Hagar was cast out into the wilderness. To 19th-century eyes, this sculpture of an outcast, her brow furrowed and hands clasped in despair, symbolized the plight of African-Americans. "I have a strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered," Lewis said.

To develop her skills, Lewis copied classical sculptures from public collections around Rome. A devout Catholic, she created a number of religious works, most of which have been lost. She also produced small, playful "fancy pieces" with titles such as *Awake, Asleep and Poor Cupid (Love Ensnared)*. They were popular with visiting tourists as well as in the United States, to which she often returned to market her work. Her portrait busts ranged from heroic images of Ulysses S. Grant, Abraham Lincoln and Senator Charles Sumner to a small, idealized likeness of a Boston patron, Anna Quincy Waterston. Inspired by Longfellow's immensely popular poem "The Song of Hiawatha," Lewis created works such as *The Old Indian Arrowmaker and His Daughter*. This sculpture echoed the poet's depiction of Native Americans as proud, dignified people, a vivid contrast to the widespread American stereotype of the Indian as an untamed savage. It is likely that Longfellow saw some of these works when he visited Lewis' studio in Rome and sat for a portrait bust. This fine marble likeness, which does full justice to the poet's leonine head and curly beard, is now in the collection of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University. It was the

centerpiece of an exhibition held there last year that traced affinities between the writer and the sculptor.

At the height of Lewis' popularity in the late 1860s and throughout the 1870s, her studio was frequented by visitors intrigued by her mannish clothes, rakish red cap, charming personality and exotic background. Visiting Chicago in the 1870s, she sat for a series of *carte de visite* pictures, posing both in her sculptor's cap and jacket, and in a voluminous dark shawl. Her thoughtful expression and strong hands immediately strike the viewer.

A highlight of Lewis' career came in 1876 when she, along with other expatriates in Rome, sent works to the Centennial Exposition. Lewis sculpted Cleopatra, a popular subject at the time. An astute ruler romantically linked to Julius Caesar and Marc Antony, Cleopatra chose to die from the bite of an asp rather than submit to her enemies.

At that time, one of the most celebrated depictions of Cleopatra was a calm, idealized, regal likeness by Story. Immortalized in Hawthorne's novel *The Marble Faun*, it was a kind of benchmark against which other depictions were measured. Lewis created a fundamentally different image; in a break with the neoclassical canon, which downplayed strong emotions, she portrayed the queen at the point of death. George Gurney, NMAA's sculpture curator, says it is the only sculpture he knows that portrays Cleopatra actually dying or dead. "Perhaps Lewis thought other sculptors had misrepresented Cleopatra and she felt she had new insights," he says. Lewis portrayed Cleopatra seated on her throne, still crowned, her head and left arm hanging with the weight that comes when breathing stops. Yet, even at this desolate moment, as her right hand holds the venomous asp, the queen is a commanding presence.

Exhibited among more than 500 sculptures — 152 of them by Americans — at the Philadelphia Exposition, Lewis' *Cleopatra* caused a sensation. *The People's Advocate*, an Alexandria, Virginia, African-American weekly, reported on visitors' reactions. Except for a sculpture by an artist named Guannerio, said the paper, "*The Death of Cleopatra* excites more admiration and gathers larger crowds around it than any other work of art in the vast collection of Memorial Hall." In his book on the Exposition, J. S. Ingram called Lewis' work "the most remarkable piece of sculpture in the American section."

Following the Philadelphia Exposition, *Cleopatra* was exhibited in Chicago in 1878, where it was again a major attraction. Afterward, apparently unable to sell her two-ton work and perhaps deciding it was too large to ship back to Rome, Lewis put the sculpture in storage. And then, something went dreadfully wrong: in 1892, *Cleopatra* was reportedly displayed in a saloon on the Windy City's Clark Street.

Things only got weirder. Sometime later, the sculpture was acquired by a notorious gambler and racehorse owner, "Blind John" Condon, who installed it atop the grave of his favorite horse, Cleopatra. The grave was in front of the grandstand of his Harlem Race Track in the Chicago suburb of Forest Park. Before he died in 1915, Condon inserted a covenant in the property's deed that required *Cleopatra* to remain in place in perpetuity.

The statue remained on the spot after the racetrack became a golf course and then a World War II torpedo plant, but when a U.S. Postal Service facility was built on the site in the early 1970s, *Cleopatra* was hauled off to a contractor's storage yard in nearby Cicero. As it lay there deteriorating, it was spotted by Harold Adams, a local fire inspector. There was just something about it, he later told the *Chicago Tribune*; "she was like a big white ghost lying out there between all that heavy machinery and crying out to be saved." Adams had the sculpture moved to higher ground in the yard, and his son's Boy Scout troop cleaned it and painted it "so she'd look decent until somebody came along who'd know better what to do for her."

Enter the Historical Society of Forest Park, which acquired *Cleopatra* in 1985 after reading about the sculpture in the local newspapers. Frank J. Orland, a dentist who then headed the society, identified Lewis as the sculptor and made inquiries about her at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and elsewhere. Meanwhile, further paint was applied and a monument carver began to restore broken parts.

A short time later, an author's query ran in the *New York Times Book Review*. It had been placed by Marilyn Richardson, an independent curator and scholar of African-American intellectual history who was working on a biography of Lewis. Did anyone have any information on the work or writings of Edmonia Lewis? it asked. The notice caught the eye of a curator at the Metropolitan; recalling Orland's earlier inquiry, she suggested to Richardson that a missing sculpture might be in Illinois.

Her hopes high, Richardson went to Forest Park, where she was led to a storeroom in the local shopping mall. There was the sculpture, resting among paint cans and discarded Christmas decorations, covered with paint, and scarred by the weather and vandalism.

Richardson contacted African-American bibliographer Dorothy Porter Wesley, and they worked together to bring the discovery to the attention of scholars and the public. On learning of the sculpture, NMAA's George Gurney contacted Orland. Once the folks at the historical society realized what they had, and that they did not have the means to conserve or display the sculpture properly, they turned it over to NMAA. Last year, Chicago conservator Andrzej Dajnowski, working with Gurney, restored the sculpture.

The \$30,000 task was, says Gurney, "a real conservation nightmare." Only one old photograph of the sculpture could be found to guide the reconstruction work on Cleopatra's nose, chin, headdress, breasts and left hand. The asp and missing fingers of the right hand were replaced, and sandals were restored to the feet.

"We've done the best we can to return it as close to its original grandeur as we've been able to deduce from the old photograph," says Gurney, who is known for his scrupulous approach to such matters. "Nothing we did is permanent," he adds. If more evidence of the work's initial appearance surfaces, "everything can be reversed."

And that is entirely possible. Who knows what additional information may come to light, not just about *Cleopatra*, but about Edmonia Lewis herself? It is known that she lived in Rome until at least 1909. Among the visitors to her studio in the 1880s were Frederick Douglass and his wife, Helen. But her later years are shrouded in mystery, including where and when she died. "We just don't know what happened to her," says Richardson, who has investigated in Italy and England as well as this country. Fortunately, the same cannot be said of her most important sculpture.

By Stephen May

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