

Black Artists through HISTORY

ENRICHING
YOUTH

BLACK ARTISTS THROUGH HISTORY, LESSON 1 Old Arrow Maker, by Edmonia Lewis, 1872

1- Mary Edmonia Lewis (ca. 1844– after 1909) sculpted stories of oppression, pride, and courage. Characterized by an awareness of classical marble sculpture, her work evolved the medium through her passionate depiction of literary stories. Lewis was a courageous pioneer in her own right.

2- Edmonia Lewis was unique in the way she approached sculpting when she was in Italy. She insisted on enlarging her clay and wax models in marble herself, rather than hire native Italian sculptors to do it for her.

3- While in Rome, Lewis continued to express her African-American and Native American heritage. One of her more famous works, “Forever Free”, depicted a powerful image of an African American man and women emerging from the bonds of slavery. Another sculpture Lewis created was called “**The Arrow Maker**”, which showed a Native American father teaching his daughter how to make an arrow.

4- In the Arrow Maker, the father and his daughter are dressed in traditional Native American clothes and the male figure has recognizable Native American facial features. Lewis pushed the limits with the accuracy of her sculptures. She wanted to be as realistic as possible (take a look at the statue on the next page).

5- Lewis made this sculpture after an inspiration by a poem, The Song of Hiawatha, written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The poem tells the story of two star-crossed lovers from different Native American tribes. Edmonia Lewis depicted anti-slavery and anti colonialism. After all, 1855 was a year when the U.S. was aggressively expanding to the west and clearing away any Native Americans who stood in its way.

6- The statue's details show Edmonia Lewis' mastery of sculpting. Remember that the material here is marble, yet it seems like the clothes are made out of sheep skin, the hair feels real, the moccasins look like they are made with leather.

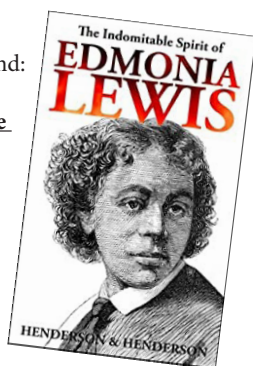
Discussion (10 minutes)

Ask students to discuss Edmonia Lewis's success. Lewis was a surprise arrival on the art scene. As a woman of mixed African and Native American descent who came of age during the Civil War, her odds of making it were slim, at best. Yet she managed to become the world's first professional African-American sculptor, celebrated internationally for her Neoclassical style. Ask the students to discuss how Lewis was a pioneer for social change in the aftermath of the Civil War. She pressed her case for equality from her studio in Rome, Italy, and with annual tours of the United States.

Activity (20 minutes)

Take a pencil and piece of paper, and draw something from your heritage that inspires you. Or print the B&W outline and color it.

To read more about this legend:
The Indomitable Spirit of Edmonia Lewis. A Narrative Biography is available on Amazon. “... she taunted the demons of bigotry as she carved her heritage and appeared with her work alongside the best artists of the days.”



Old Arrow Maker sculpture, 1872, marble, 21.5 in Height x 13 5/8 in Length x 13 3/8 in Width. Not on view. Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Facts about Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907):

1- Mary Edmonia Lewis was born free on July 4, 1844, in Greenbush (now Rensselaer), New York. She was the first woman of Afro-Caribbean (her father) and Native American (her mother) heritage to achieve international

fame and recognition as a sculptor in the fine arts world.

2- Her parents died at a young age and Edmonia was adopted by her aunts. Her Native American name was Wildfire.

3- In an interview she said: “Until I was twelve years old I led this wandering life, fishing and swimming ... and making moccasins. I was then sent to school for three years in [McGrawville], but was declared to be wild,—they could do nothing with me.”

4- In 1859 she studied art at Oberlin -one of the first U.S. higher-learning institutions to admit women and people of color. She was falsely accused of poisoning 2 students and a group of white men dragged and beat her.

5- She moved to Boston and learned sculpting, and had her first solo exhibit in 1864. The success and popularity of her work in Boston allowed Lewis to bear the cost of a trip to Rome in 1866 and studied with the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova. In Rome she enjoyed more social, spiritual, and artistic freedom than what she had in the United States.

6- Her new-found popularity made her studio in Rome a tourist destination. Lewis had many major exhibitions during her rise to fame, including one in Chicago, Illinois, in 1870, and in Rome in 1871.

7) In 2002, the scholar Molefi Kete Asante listed Edmonia Lewis on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans.



