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The Indian maiden visits San Jose: Rediscovering Edmonia Lewis

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**THE INDIAN MAIDEN VISITS SAN JOSE:
REDISCOVERING EDMONIA LEWIS**

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Marla Novo

May 1995

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ABSTRACT

THE INDIAN MAIDEN VISITS SAN JOSE: REDISCOVERING EDMONIA LEWIS

by Marla Novo

This project will examine the nineteenth century American artist, Edmonia Lewis, a sculptor of African American and Native American descent. Part I, *Edmonia Lewis, Nineteenth Century Sculptor*, presents the biography of Lewis. By examining Lewis's life and artistic career, my intent is to explore the multicultural aspects that are apparent in her sculptures, and how her experience is applicable to twentieth century notions of cultural identity. It appears that Lewis made conscious decisions regarding how she wanted to be perceived and what subjects she wanted to produce, taking advantage of the nineteenth century romanticized notion of the Native American, while minimizing her problematic African American heritage.

Part II, *Record Of Art Exhibition*, documents my curatorial project. The exhibition features sculptures by Edmonia Lewis, commemorating a trip the artist made to the Bay Area in 1873. Paintings by a local nineteenth century artist, A. D. M. Cooper, also are exhibited. To accompany the artwork, I wrote wall texts. The goal of the exhibition is to familiarize the viewer with Edmonia Lewis, and examine both thematic and stylistic devices prevalent in Victorian art.

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This project is dedicated to my family, who have always encouraged and helped me.

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE "INDIAN MAIDEN"

Those of us on the cultural margin face a couple of extra challenges to give our lives drama and excitement. First, there is the challenge of getting those of you, there, near the center, in the mainstream, to acknowledge our existence, so we can peaceably obtain resources and get on with our lives in this world we share.

Adrian Piper, 1971¹

In the middle of the nineteenth century many sculptors from Europe and America traveled to Italy. Most took up residence in Rome, a city rich with artistic inspiration. Not only were there Roman and Renaissance masterpieces that were used as models for neoclassical sculptures, but quarries in neighboring Carrara provided excellent marble. Unique to the American group were many female artists whom the writer Henry James dubbed "that strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who at one time settled upon the seven hills in a white marmorean flock."² Female artists at this time were not a rarity, but such a large constituency of sculptors, working in a medium dominated by men, was. Of particular interest was the artist Edmonia Lewis, a woman of African American and Native American descent.

Lewis gained notoriety as an artist and was well-respected, which seems remarkable given Lewis's difficulties as both a woman and a member of a minority race living during the Victorian era. By tracing Lewis's life and artistic career, my intent is to examine the racial stereotypes prevalent in the nineteenth century, explore the multicultural aspect that is apparent in Lewis's sculptures, and determine how her experience is applicable to twentieth century notions of cultural identity. Perhaps Lewis's success was based in part on her willingness to conform to the European tradition of art or her ability to "pass" as one of the "white marmorean flock." It appears that Lewis made conscious decisions regarding how she wanted to be perceived

and what subjects she wanted to produce in order to make her living as an artist. Pursuing an artistic career was no easy task as a woman working in a predominantly male occupation, as an African American only a few years after the abolition of slavery, and as a Native American romanticized as the "noble savage" or childlike "Indian maiden." As a member of multiple minority groups (a "spinster" woman, "sculptress," Negro, and Indian) Edmonia Lewis had more barriers to overcome than her Anglo American contemporaries.

The activities of American women artists in Italy were widely reported in periodicals, travel books, personal correspondence, and novels; for example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, two of the main characters are female artists working in Rome. Harriet Hosmer was the most famous of the American women sculptors, and she discovered that a female artist could live a more liberated existence in Italy. Hosmer wrote from Rome: "What country is mine for women! Here every woman has a chance if she is bold enough to avail herself of it; and I am proud of every woman who is bold enough."³ Of course, a woman could be "bold enough" if she conducted herself in a manner that complied with the established codes of feminine virtue (such as maintaining her celibacy). Edmonia Lewis was one of the "bold" women; the English critic, Henry Wreford described Lewis as "a mere girl, [who] has left her Indian wigwam to show in this great nursery of Art that God, who is no respecter of persons, has not set His mark, at least, on the colored race."⁴ The sculptors were women seriously devoted to the execution and sale of their art, yet they also were curiosities, even "road-side attractions" for travelers abroad. Italy was a haven for many artists, but in the nineteenth century it was still an oddity to find an unmarried woman wearing trousers and other unladylike costumes carving large slabs of stone. In fact, one account note Frederick Douglass and his wife running into the "oddly dressed" Lewis in Rome in 1886.⁵

Before discussing Edmonia Lewis's artistic career, it is necessary to introduce biographical details. Lewis understood the importance of creating

an interesting and romanticizing life history, both to intrigue her admirers and to cover-up anything that would interfere with her mystique and public persona. As a result, there are inconsistencies in Lewis's story, and much biographical material remains cloudy. Recent research indicates that Mary Edmonia Lewis was born on July 14, 1845 in the village of Greenbush, across the Hudson River from Albany, New York. She was born to an African American father and a mother of both Mississauga and African American descent. The Mississauga, a Chippewa band, lived on the Credit River Reserve, which is now the site of the city of Mississauga on Lake Ontario.⁶ Canadian records reveal that an African American, John Mike (a runaway slave) married a Mississauga woman named Catherine, and that one of their daughters married "a colr [sic] man named Lewis."⁷ Racial prejudice caused the Mississauga council to place a ban prohibiting John Mike and his children from living on the reservation and receiving the annual government payment. Ironically there was no objection to whites marrying into the Mississauga community. While the council did not have the authority to enforce its ban, the Mikes could not be members of the band, although they remained in the community. The council continued to ask the family to leave.⁸

Fulfilling her mother's death bed wish "to promise [to] live three years among her people," Lewis was raised by two aunts on a reservation until she was about twelve years old.⁹ Perhaps Lewis's relatives hoped she would marry and remain living among the Canadian Mississauga. The small group, comprised of other Mike relatives (including an older brother), had split off from the main Mississauga band, and lived near Niagara Falls. The Niagara River, the border area between the United States and Canada, was a major crossing point for fugitive slaves.

Lewis enjoyed telling stories of her life as the Indian maiden "Wildfire." Lewis's tendency to romanticize her autobiography is apparent in her description of these years:

My 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 gentlemen's servant, saw her and married her. . . . Mother often left home and wandered with her people, whose habits she could not forget and thus we, her children, were brought up in the same wild swimming. . . and making moccasins.¹⁰

Edmonia Lewis's mother was not a full-blooded Chippewa. However, by the time Lewis made these statements, she had learned to manipulate the truth to gain sympathy from white supporters who thrived on the "wild" exoticism of Indians. Nineteenth century Americans and Europeans viewed the American Indian as a docile, quasi-civilized creature. This differed from the eighteenth century perception of the Native American as a threatening savage. Because they were not as feared in the Victorian Age, as they had earlier, Indians became intriguing to both Anglo Americans and Anglo Europeans.

Lewis continued to identify with and perpetuate the likable exoticism of the Native American. In an 1864 letter to her friend Lydia Maria Child, Lewis stated:

There is nothing so beautiful as the free forest. To catch a fish when you are hungry, cut the boughs of a tree, make a fire to roast it, and eat it in the open air, is the greatest of all luxuries. I would not stay a week pent up in cities, if it were not for my passion for art.¹¹

Lewis's comments should not be taken solely as manipulative tactics, fabricated for the enticement of her friends and patrons. Her life with her maternal relatives had a significant impact on the artist, as some of the themes of her sculptures attest. But Lewis also was a determined individual, and made very conscious decisions in order to realize her career goal.

Although Lewis used her exoticism as a way to distinguish herself from other female sculptors, her sense of difference had its limits; just as Lewis capitalized on her "Indianness," she disassociated herself from her paternal roots, sometimes even denying she was part African American. Growing up on the Canadian border and witnessing fugitive slaves running from their owners, Lewis's parents and Mississauga relatives warned her that the girl's physical features put her at risk of being kidnapped by slave hunters. Lewis was proud to be an Indian because her mother's people had not submitted to slavery. Therefore, it was difficult for the artist to identify with her father's heritage, especially in a time that coincided with the Civil War. Although she produced some sculptures that exemplified the African American's struggle for independence, Lewis expressed her enthusiasm for emancipation in portraits of white abolitionists or in subtle symbolism, rarely making images of blacks celebrating their freedom.¹²

Twentieth century artist Adrian Piper, whose work explores the complexities of race identity and perception, explains the problem when a person of one ethnic group attempts to "pass" for another "acceptable" one:

Cultural racism is damaging and virulent because it hits its victims in particularly vulnerable and private places: their preferences, tastes, modes of self-expression, and self-image. . . . When cultural racism succeeds in making its victims suppress, denigrate, or reject these means of cultural self-affirmation, it makes its victims hate themselves.¹³

An old patriarchal way to describe a woman was not only by her accomplishments, but by the degree of her external beauty. Because Lewis's critics were preoccupied with her physical appearance, descriptions of her features vacillated between the possession of "crisp" hair and dark hands suggesting her black paternity, or comments that her hair was black and

straight like an Indian's and associated her complexion and proud character with her mother's ancestors.¹⁴ The few photographs that exist of Edmonia Lewis show a woman with a dark complexion and arguably non-Anglo features. Although her heritage may have been ambiguous, I am not proposing that Lewis spent her time convincing all whom she met that she was not African American. On the contrary, I believe her ability to "pass" was successful because of what she did not say. Lewis's suppression of her African American heritage may have been a difficult decision for the artist to make, but to this intelligent and talented woman, it was a matter of survival in a climate hostile to anyone who was neither male nor white.

Lewis's brother, Sunrise, was instrumental in helping his sister begin her artistic career. Sunrise had attended a boarding school for Native American boys before moving west to take advantage of the opportunities that grew out of the California Gold Rush. He encouraged Lewis to separate from the Mississauga way of life, and financed her early schooling at a Baptist abolitionist school in McGrawville, a village that was near Albany, New York. Edmonia enjoyed interacting with children her own age, but had difficulties adapting to strange foods, academic drills in spelling and reading, and rules about dress, meals, bedtime, and chapel. Because certain consonants are not part of the Chippewa language, Lewis had speech problems as well. As a result of these new environmental conditions, Lewis rebelled and was considered too wild to remain in the McGrawville school.¹⁵ She returned to the Niagara Gorge to live with her Mississauga relatives, but grew bored with this life. In 1859 when Sunrise suggested she attend Oberlin College in Ohio, Lewis eagerly accepted her brother's financial support.¹⁶

Oberlin College promoted co-education since its founding in 1832, and admitted African Americans after 1835. Yet there remained hostility from neighboring towns because of its abolitionist agenda. The college was, however, a staunch supporter of "Christian perfectionism." Lewis, an orphan and under fifteen years of age, went to live with retired theologian Reverend John Keep who, as a trustee of the college, had cast the vote that secured

admission for women and black students. Lewis was the only African American among the twelve girls living in the Keep household, and was given a second-floor room to herself.⁷ Lewis pursued a liberal arts degree, and may have taken the drawing course, since a pencil on paper drawing signed by Lewis is in the Oberlin College Archives.

Lewis earned a reputation as a happy yet independent and arrogant young woman. Given her persistent speech problems and difficulties with so many foreign rules and regulations, Lewis struggled with her personal and cultural identity. Lewis became a loner of sorts, although she did make friends with the girls with whom she lived. Unfortunately, a close association with two of these students resulted in an event that significantly affected Edmonia Lewis for the rest of her life.

In December of 1861, Lewis spent the winter holidays with the Keep family. January brought Edmonia's two white friends, Maria Miles and Christina Ennes, back to school early in order to keep a sleigh-riding date with two young men.¹⁸ During the ride, the girls became violently ill. Their symptoms (vomiting and severe cramps) were diagnosed as a reaction to cantharides, an aphrodisiac commonly called "Spanish fly." The girls accused Lewis of secretly putting the drug in some mulled wine she had allegedly served them before the ride.

Oberlin was shocked by these accusations. That students were in contact with Spanish fly, a "love drug," astonished the community of the puritanical college. At Oberlin, women could not leave their rooming houses without permission, and male and female students were forbidden to walk together in certain places.¹⁹ Lewis proclaimed her innocence of the crime, and no legal charges were initially brought up against her. However, as Miles and Ennes remained quite ill for three weeks after the incident, resentment towards Lewis grew. African Indian lawyer John Mercer Langston, an Oberlin graduate, was called to defend Lewis in the ensuing trial.

Opposition against Edmonia Lewis continued, and even crossed racial borders. White people in neighboring towns believed Lewis guilty, as they

had always resented Oberlin's abolitionist efforts and admission of blacks and women. Many felt that Oberlin officials were "going to let her get away with it" because she was African American.²⁰ Perhaps more surprising and hurtful to Lewis was the lack of support from other African Americans. In his autobiography, Langston writes that "Many were prejudiced against the accused on account of her color. The major part of the colored people themselves, largely because of her easy and rather unusual social relations to whites, were ready and did pronounce her guilty in advance."²¹

Before the trial, Edmonia Lewis was "severely beaten, with her clothes and jewelry torn from her person and scattered here and there, she was left in a dark, obscure place to die."²² When the two-day trial was over, Lewis was exonerated of all charges due to a lack of evidence since tests on the girls' vomit, urine, and feces had never been performed in order to detect the ingestion of cantharides. A victorious Edmonia Lewis was carried by friends out of the courtroom.²³

It was difficult for Edmonia Lewis to put the case behind her. Because the Keeps had believed her, the embarrassed Maria Miles and Christina Ennes did not return to school. Therefore, assuming that all the girls had once been close, Lewis lost two friends, although their relationship is questionable considering the severity of the accusations and the ensuing trial.²⁴ There is still the mystery of the case: did Lewis actually poison the girls? It seems unlikely that a young student living a cloistered, restricted life in the Keep household would have the opportunity to smuggle cantharides into her room, let alone wine. Curiously, there is no evidence that anyone questioned the young men with whom the poisoned girls went sleigh-riding. Perhaps they were the culprits, as they may have benefited from the affects of the aphrodisiac.

Life at Oberlin after the trial was difficult for Lewis; she was ostracized and nicknamed "Spanish fly." She became a scapegoat, accused of stealing art supplies without any evidence supporting the claim. Marianne F. Dascomb, head of Oberlin's Ladies Department, refused to accept Lewis's registration for

her final term; therefore Lewis could not graduate although she had not technically been expelled.²⁵ At eighteen years of age, Lewis knew that it was time to move on.

These devastating events justifiably had a lasting effect on Lewis. By attending Oberlin, Lewis relinquished her Native American culture to enter an experimental academic environment that encouraged African Americans to interact with their Caucasian classmates. Yet Lewis's white "friends" deceived her, while most of the black community rejected her. It is no wonder that Lewis seemed never to trust anyone completely again. Furthermore, there is no evidence that she ever re-told the story of the incident, perhaps because she feared that her credibility would be doubted. Before leaving Oberlin, Lewis made a pencil drawing for a loyal friend as a marriage present. It is signed, "Edmonia Lewis." Apparently Lewis knew a new chapter in her life was beginning, as she dropped the common name "Mary," by which she was known, for the more distinctive Edmonia.²⁶

With a new name came a new city: Boston. This city was a haven for neoclassical artists and social reformers. Although the details of Edmonia Lewis's move to Boston are unknown, it was a wise decision. Perhaps Mr. Keep suggested the relocation as he was an acquaintance of William Lloyd Garrison, whom Lewis met in late February or early March 1863. He in turn introduced Lewis to the sculptor, Edward Brackett. Brackett created a bust of the abolitionist John Brown, a likeness derived from Brackett's visits to Brown's prison cell before the radical abolitionist's execution. Perhaps Lewis found a convenient and appropriate teacher in Brackett. "I thought the man who made a bust of John Brown must be a friend to my people," she said later.²⁷ Lewis chose to honor her African American ties with portrait busts of white abolitionists such as Garrison, Charles Sumner, and Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. During her Boston years, she also made one small sculpture of a wounded black Civil War soldier, the location of which is presently unknown.²⁸

Ten years later, while visiting San Francisco, Lewis spoke to a reporter from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, reminiscing about her Boston days and the beginnings of her artistic career and training. Lewis's romanticization of her history is apparent:

The Chronicler: How did it happen that you embraced the art of sculpture as a profession?

Miss Lewis: Well, it was a strange selection for a poor girl to make, wasn't it? . . . You see, after I finished what little schooling I had in Ohio, I thought I would go to Boston and learn a little music. I went. Have you ever been in Boston?

The Chronicler: I have lived there.

Miss Lewis: Then you can understand my story. You know how crooked the streets are there. Well, it seemed as if I never went out to go anywhere, but what I went round and round, and finally found myself in School Street, just opposite the statue of Franklin by the City Hall. At that time I knew nothing of art, and did not even know that the big bronze monument was a statue. I had no idea what a statue was. But a certain fascination seemed always to direct my steps to that one spot, and it fascinated me. I went to William Lloyd Garrison and told him I wanted to make something like that man that was standing on stone. He became interested in me and took me to his friend Mr. Bracket, [sic] one of the prominent sculptors of Boston. He simply introduced me and went away, leaving Mr. Bracket [sic] and myself to talk the matter over.²⁹

Horatio Greenough, America's eminent neoclassical sculptor, was the artist of the Benjamin Franklin statue that intrigued Edmonia Lewis. Lewis received a limited artistic education at Oberlin, the norm for a nineteenth century woman. The Victorian female enrolled in mostly drawing or watercolor art classes not to prepare herself for a vocation, but as a means to acquire the skills of a "finished lady." Music and elocution lessons were also encouraged. Yet even given this restricted art education, it remains unlikely that Lewis would call the Greenough work a "stone man." Rather, it appears more to be the intention of writers, including Lewis herself, to characterize her as the naive Indian maiden only able to grunt a few words. Jimmie Durham in "A Central Margin" proposes that in American literature "the 'Indian' is always a silent passive witness to the 'cowboy's' action," and that we have grown accustomed to "the popular and commercial usage of manufactured images of American Indians."³⁰ Thus, Edmonia Lewis is likened to an awestruck child, which is inaccurate when describing this ambitious woman.

Early in her career Lewis was aware of the problems her heritage would bring. Well meaning, but misguided patrons supported her, perhaps to make themselves feel better about the human rights struggle. She became a noble cause, prompting Lewis to state that she did not want her sculptures praised just because "I am a colored girl."³¹ Lewis's bust of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw received wide praise; it even inspired the pious Anna Quincy Waterston's poem, "Edmonia Lewis" written in 1864, although much of the poem is taken more up with valorizing Shaw than with describing Lewis. Waterston equates Lewis's talent as a sculptor to her heritage:

She hath wrought well with her unpracticed 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 up his life 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.³²

While in Boston, Edmonia Lewis was introduced to Lydia Maria Child; the two women became close friends. Child, one of America's foremost women writers and onetime editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, was also a friend of Harriet Hosmer, America's leading female sculptor at that time. Perhaps Child was fascinated with the exotic Edmonia Lewis. Yet she was reluctant to finance Lewis, as the sculptor did not have formal artistic training, and had the double disadvantages of being both black and female. Ultimately, Child aided the artist. It is interesting that even a liberal abolitionist would be uneasy in helping a struggling African American. Of course, with prevalent nineteenth century stereotypical perceptions of African Americans (as lazy and lacking ambition), Child may have thought it risky to finance the sculptor. However, according to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most widely read book of the day, blacks were equipped ideally for a career in the arts since it is "that nicety of eye which characterized their race."³³ Perhaps investing in the artistic career of Edmonia Lewis was not so risky after all.

It was while in Boston that Edmonia Lewis became confident in her talents as a sculptor. With her brother's financial aid, Lewis obtained a small

studio. Over the door she hung a tin sign, "Edmonia Lewis, Artist."³⁴ There is no evidence that Lewis received any training other than the scant help of Edward Brackett. Perhaps Lewis became Brackett's apprentice and executed rudimentary carvings before the master added the finishing marks to a sculptural work. This was a common technique used in neoclassical sculpture, and may have been the manner in which Lewis learned to transpose an image from clay model to marble. It is known that Lewis learned how to make small, clay relief portraits, needing no supporting internal armature, by studying Brackett's bust of Brown.³⁵ In an interview years later, Lewis commented that it was the bust of Colonel Shaw that established her as a significant artist, and propelled her to advance her career with a move to Italy:

The Chronicler: What was the first piece of work which really remunerated you for your time and labor?

Miss Lewis: It was a bust of Colonel Shaw, made during the war. That noble man was leading a regiment of colored soldiers, and I conceived the idea of executing a bust of him. This was in plaster, of course. When I had finished it, I sent for his father to come and see it. The old gentleman was greatly pleased, as were also his friends. They took a hundred copies of the bust and paid me \$15 apiece for them. This gave me a good start, and I began to feel that America had taught me all she knew of my art. I became possessed with the desire to go to Rome, and go to Rome I did. This was eight years ago, and I have made the Eternal City my home ever since.³⁶

Edmonia Lewis's penchant for travel relates to her "Indian maiden" persona. According to nineteenth century stereotypes, Negroes were thought easy to manage as "they are not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-

loving and affectionate."³⁷ Indians, however were perceived as wild roamers, never staying in one place. Lewis liked this latter image, and perpetuated it when explaining her numerous travels: "Well. . . I love to travel," she said. "I have Indian blood in me, you know, and I love the grand scenery of the mountains. Why, do you know I almost envied the freedom of the Indians which I saw on the plains!"³⁸ Romanticism aside, Edmonia Lewis's re-location to Italy was a shrewd and practical move.

The resourceful Lewis realized that a move to Europe would enhance her career, would put distance between her problematic African American ethnicity, and allow her to play upon her acceptable exotic persona as the Indian maiden. Piper writes that "Sometimes what we observe hurts so much we want to disappear, disembodify, disinherit ourselves from our blackness. Our experiences in this society manifest themselves in neuroses, demoralization, anger, and in art."³⁹ The African American Edmonia Lewis "disappeared," and Lewis the Indian maiden emerged as an expatriate artist.

The lure of Italy was not a new fascination for nineteenth century America; rather, a sense of communion between the two countries may have begun with the Italian explorer Columbus, known as the discoverer of the New World. This affiliation with Italy was enhanced during the nineteenth century where American magazines and newspapers devoted many articles to Italian literature, art, customs, and society. Music lovers enjoyed countless Italian operas, and several major art collections of Italian Renaissance painting were housed in the United States. Due to the easing of travel restrictions, nineteenth century Americans were able to journey to Italy more frequently.⁴⁰

An American tourist in Italy found it difficult to ignore the rich artistic traditions of the country. "It is impossible to live in Italy long," wrote the Reverend John A. Clark, "without becoming at least a profound amateur in the fine arts."⁴¹ With the abundance of ancient architectural remains, painting galleries, and statues in every piazza, inspiration was everywhere for a young artist. Unlike the American government, the Italian parliament honored art

and did not underestimate its cultural value; the touring of galleries and churches was considered a valuable and free art education for Italy's citizens and visitors. Italians considered art the primary influence on their personalities and refinement of manners.⁴²

American artists' migration to Italy began when the painters Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley traveled to Rome in the eighteenth century. Horatio Greenough's departure for Europe in 1825 started the expatriate American school of sculpture, with most of its members taking advantage of the artistic scene predominantly in Florence, called the "Boston of Italy," and Rome. Unlike painting, the medium of sculpture was not considered a "high art" in America, and sculptors were seen more as artisans than artists, a status that continued well into the nineteenth century.⁴³ Sculptural production in the United States was limited to three major categories, tombstones, weathervanes, and ship figureheads.⁴⁴ William Rush, often regarded as the first American sculptor, perpetuated the idea of sculpture as secondary decoration because of his production of ship ornamentation.

European influence can be traced to the arrival of the French sculptor Jean Antoine Houdon to Virginia in 1785 to make a life mask of George Washington. Houdon's visit, followed by that of Giuseppe Ceracchi, who was brought to the United States to work on the Capitol, prompted young American sculptors to travel to Italy.

Although Antonio Canova, Napoleon's sculptor and one of the most famous artists working in the neoclassical style, died before the first generation of Americans arrived, Bertel Thorwaldsen took over as the leading sculptor in Europe. Americans related to Thorwaldsen's "closer to home" interpretations of classical ideals rather than Canova's mannered and overly sensual creations.⁴⁵ American sculptors were encouraged by their patrons to travel to Italy, with the promise of fame and fortune. In fact, it is documented that a poetic John Quincy Adams commanded a young Hiram Powers:

Artist! may fortune smile upon they hand!

Go forth, and rival Greece's art sublime;
Return, and bid the statesmen of this land.
Live in thy marble through all after-time!⁴⁶

American sculptors voyaged to Italy for artistic inspiration and for the support and guidance of a mentor. Italy also had magnificent marble quarries located in Carrara and Serravezza, and it was inexpensive to hire knowledgeable laborers. These talented craftsmen would be responsible for hauling the large blocks of marble to the artist's studio where the sculptor had made a plaster or clay model of the finished works. The workmen would then use a machine that would "rough out," or transpose the proportions of a work from the plaster model to the marble.⁴⁷ This practice of using skilled workers was a traditional method and is in no way a testimony to the capability or lack of skill of the artist who would take sole credit for the work after putting the finishing touches on it. The workmen were considered talented men, but the artist was the genius behind the masterpiece.

Because craftsmen were employed and themes from antiquity were used, originality and neoclassical sculpture may be considered opposing forces in both method and subject matter. Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* comments on this very theme when one of the novel's characters reflects that ". . . except for portrait busts, sculpture has no longer a right to claim any place among living arts."

It has wrought itself out, and come fairly to an end.
There is never a new group now-a-days; never, even, so
much as a new attitude. Greenough (I take my examples
among men of merit) imagined nothing new; nor
Crawford either, except in the tailoring-line. There are
not--as you will own--more than half-a-dozen positively
original statues or groups in the world, and these few are
of immemorial antiquity. A person familiar with the
Vatican, the Uffizi gallery, the Naples gallery, and the

Louvre, will at once refer any modern production to its antique prototype--which, moreover, had begun to get out of fashion, even in old Roman days. . . . sculptors are, of necessity, the greatest plagiarists in the world.⁴⁸

But what of the women sculptors, the members of the "white marmorean flock"? Women sculptors, although sparingly documented at times, were known since the classical Greek and ancient Egyptian eras. Narrowing the field to American female sculptors, Patience Wright, an eighteenth century artist working in bread dough and wax, is often considered the first professional American sculptor, rivaling William Rush.

Although still restricted by societal dynamics, the female population in the nineteenth century enjoyed more representation in the work force than in previous eras. The art world was no exception, as the number of women still-life and miniature painters increased. In Rome in the nineteenth century a significant number of female sculptors formed a movement, known as "the white marmorean flock." One woman, not even a sculptor, was the leader of the group.

Charlotte Cushman, an American actress, became the primary promoter of female expatriate sculptors. Born in Boston in 1816, Cushman became the most successful of American actresses, and eventually moved to England to establish herself as an eminent Shakespearean thespian. Cushman met the young sculptor Harriet Hosmer in Boston, and the two struck up an immediate friendship.⁴⁹

Because of a persistent throat ailment, Charlotte Cushman retired early from the stage; she re-located to Rome in 1852. Although she maintained her flat in London, Cushman spent most of her time in the Eternal City where she purchased a large villa and settled in with her companion, the sculptor Emma Stebbins. Harriet Hosmer, whom Cushman called "Hattie," accepted the actress's invitation to live rent-free with her. Once befriended by Cushman, Edmonia Lewis found herself in a very different environment

dominated by Harriet Hosmer. Hosmer was the most famous of the American female sculptors, and Cushman took a particular interest in her, forming a friendship that spanned many years. The sculptor maintained a highly visible studio next to the well-known artist, John Gibson, who was Hosmer's teacher. She exhibited her sculpture in London, Edinburgh, Dublin, and Paris; her whimsical "conceit," *Puck* (1856), was purchased by the Prince of Wales for his rooms at Oxford. Eventually over thirty replicas were made of this statue.⁵⁰

Harriet Hosmer's *Zenobia in Chains* (1859) is her most famous work, and won her praise in New York and Boston. The subject is the Queen of Palmyra, captured by the Romans, and forced to walk the streets of the city in chains. The feminist theme of the proud woman still strong even in defeat was an appropriate choice for the independent Hosmer, who often wore men's clothes and rode her horse around Rome. Edmonia Lewis was familiar with Hosmer's work, particularly *Zenobia in Chains*, and it may have inspired her to create a statue of a strong woman, such as Lewis's *Cleopatra*.

In early 1865, Edmonia Lewis met Harriet Hosmer in Boston. Hosmer praised Lewis's bust of Colonel Shaw, and urged Lewis to move to Rome. Another sculptor, Anne Whitney, also encouraged Lewis, although she was not so much enticed by Lewis's talent as she was with the romantic abolitionist dream of helping an underprivileged black artist.⁵¹ In order to finance her trip, Lewis sold plaster copies of the Shaw sculpture and of her medallion portrait of John Brown. She sailed for Europe in the summer of 1865.

Lewis settled in Rome in a studio near the other women sculptors; she said that her studio had once been used by the great Canova.⁵² In *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne describes it:

. . .the sculpture-rooms within had formerly been occupied by the illustrious artist Canova. The studio of a sculptor is generally but a rough and dreary-looking

place. . . Bare floors of brick or plank, and plastered walls; an old chair or two, or perhaps only a block of marble (containing, however, the possibility of ideal grace within it) to sit down upon; some hastily scrawled sketches of nude figures on the white-wash of the wall. . . Next, there are a few very roughly modelled little figures in clay or plaster, exhibiting the second stage of the Idea as it advances towards a marble immortality. . . In the plaster-cast, from this clay-model, the beauty of the statue strangely disappears, to shine forth again, with pure, white radiance, in the precious marble of Carrara.⁵³

Cushman immediately befriended Lewis, and she "lost no time in bringing attention to this 'poor little soul, who has more than anybody else to fight.'"⁵⁴

Cushman organized a thriving salon, and Saturday nights at Charlotte Cushman's became an enjoyable artistic center in which the members of the white marmorean flock were the main attraction. Edmonia Lewis in particular was an exotic topic of conversation at these soirées. The female sculptors (which included Lewis, Hosmer, Whitney, Stebbins, Margaret Foley, and Louisa Lander) formed a close sisterhood, although Lewis remained somewhat of an outsider, perhaps due to her mixed ethnicity (all the other women were Anglo Americans, and while they may have been a liberal minded group, racial prejudices remained prevalent). These women experienced an alternative lifestyle working in non-traditional careers, choosing not to marry, and wearing men's clothes most of the time. This deviation from the typical Victorian female, in attire as well as in profession, enabled the sculptors to concentrate on their artistic careers without having to worry about marriage and child rearing responsibilities. Cushman urged the women to form intimate relationships with one another, and pledge an informal vow of chastity.⁵⁵ Perhaps a female wearing masculine clothing and carving large slabs of marble would not have been the most favorable choice for a male suitor. The "American girl was an example of the freedom of life

which it is possible for a female artist to enjoy at Rome," writes Hawthorne.⁵⁶

In her studio, Lewis worked slowly since she rarely hired carvers, perhaps for economic reasons, but probably to ensure the authenticity of the sculptures and her creditability as an artist. For the same reason, Lewis did not ask for instruction or criticism from her "marmorean sisters." There is no evidence that Lewis worked for a prolonged time with any master once she left Brackett's studio, although in an interview she numbered the famous sculptor, Hiram Powers among her dearest friends.⁵⁷

In 1867, Lewis made her only surviving sculpture executed in Rome with an obvious African American theme. In *Forever Free*, a standing man raises his arm with the broken manacles of slavery visible, and his foot firmly planted on his cast-off ball and chain. A kneeling woman, perhaps a symbol of gratitude, perhaps an image of servitude, raises her hands in a prayer-like gesture. The figures' poses are rigid and Lewis had difficulty with rendering the human anatomy; this was due to her limited training since she did not have access to nude models. Lewis admitted to creating these sculptures as a tribute to ". . . my poor father's people, how I could do them good in my small way."⁵⁸ The male figure's semi-nude form may have been a scandalous image for a woman to carve, although it was overlooked since that artist and subject were minorities, and therefore not "proper" Victorian citizens. Edmonia Lewis fashioned herself after a "wild" Indian maiden, and an African American male was considered something less than a refined nineteenth century gentleman.

Between 1868 and 1870, Edmonia Lewis made at least two statues of the biblical character, *Hagar in the Desert*. Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant was given to Abraham as a concubine, bearing him a son. After many childless years, Sarah bore him a son, and since Hagar was no longer needed as a maternal surrogate, she was sent home to her parents. Neoclassical romanticism is apparent in both the subtle eroticism of the bare-breasted young woman, as well as in her piety. Hagar's features are generalized, but to the nineteenth century audience who knew the Old Testament story,

Egyptians were associated with the African continent. Thus the sculpture could be considered a testament to the African American woman and her position in an Anglo society, expressing Lewis's "strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered."⁵⁹ The broken and over-turned water jug at Hagar's feet was a popular nineteenth century reference to lost virginity, and may be read by a contemporary audience as a symbol of Lewis's loss of innocence in a world far removed from her described idyllic childhood.

Lewis repeated the association of her African roots through Egyptian subject in a five-foot tall sculpture, *The Death of Cleopatra* (1876). The white marble sculpture depicting Cleopatra at the moment the snake's venom takes effect was first exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial in 1876. Again a strong non-Anglo woman is represented and was praised at the Centennial for its realistic albeit melodramatic portrayal of death. For many years this sculpture was presumed lost or destroyed but has recently resurfaced in the United States under odd circumstances.⁶⁰

While in Rome, Edmonia Lewis created several sculptures with Native American subjects. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, sculptors were interested in depicting the Native American as a savage that must be conquered. In Horatio Greenough's *The Rescue* (1838-51), the "red man" is represented as a threat to the white settler. The American Indian, partially nude, is dominated by the white man looming over him. His inferior status is subtly reinforced by Greenough who reduced the scale of the Native American. As the Christianizing of Native Americans continued, the "red threat" was transformed into the noble savage.

Images of nude females, clothed only in romantic myths, were a source of titillation among American Victorians. In Hiram Powers's *The Last of the Tribe* (1873), a young bare-breasted woman in a beaded skirt runs with her head turned back, perhaps attempting to escape from the advancement of the white civilization.

The European fascination with the Native American has its origins in the early explorations of the New Land. The Indian became the prominent iconographical type to define America.⁶¹ Even heroic figures represented in classical sculpture were thought to possess qualities found in the noble Native American; it is documented that on an occasion when Benjamin West was placed before the cabinet in which the Apollo stood, spectators were amused by his claim, "How like a Mohawk warrior!"⁶²

The mystique of the noble Indian gained momentum with Diderot's theory that the best society of people was situated between the savage and the civil. Herder's call for cultural pluralism further enhanced the fascination with the "noble savage."⁶³ Edmonia Lewis was the perfect embodiment of this blend: the exotic Indian maiden making a name for herself in the big city.

Edmonia Lewis capitalized on this more favorable interpretation of Native Americans, without succumbing to the neoclassical themes of the "noble savage," and especially that of the exotic, erotic nude. In two busts, *Minnehaha* and *Hiawatha* (c. 1866), Lewis depicts the Romeo and Juliet of different tribes in tranquil although static poses. Longfellow visited Lewis's studio, and inspired by his epic poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*, she carved several sculptures based on this romantic theme. Obviously Lewis had an affiliation with the Native American lovers, and, like Minnehaha, Lewis left the tribe in which she was raised for another culture. Lewis also sculpted a bust of the poet in 1871. Her neoclassical interpretation depicts Longfellow resembling an ancient scholar in a full beard and long, wavy locks of hair.

In one sculptural group, *Old Indian Arrow Maker and His Daughter* (1872), Lewis depicts the "Indian maiden" in an original manner. Engaged in the resourceful activity of making moccasins, the woman is fully clothed. The contrast between the coarse texture of the two figures' garments and the soft modeling of their legs and arms not only shows Lewis's technical development, but it is a deviation from the usual over-all smoothness of neoclassical sculpture. While the woman's features look ideally Anglicized, her father's face has wrinkles around the eyes, so there was some attempt by

the artist to suggest his age and/or venerability. Given Lewis acquaintance with and admiration for Longfellow, Lewis probably based the sculpture on a scene from his poem:

At the doorway of his wigwam
Sat the ancient Arrow-maker,
In the land of the Dacotahs,
Making arrow-heads of jasper,
Arrow-heads of chalcedony,
At his side, in all her beauty,
Sat the lovely Minnehaha,
Sat his daughter, Laughing Water,
Plaiting mats of flags and rushes;
Of the past the old man's thoughts were,
And the maiden's of the future.⁶⁴

Throughout her life, as much as it is documented, Edmonia Lewis made several trips back to the United States. Her own principal promoter, Lewis kept in touch with American patrons and never waited for commissions; in fact, she would produce sculptures, and then notify her friends which works they should purchase. Lewis was able to sell her work for large sums; many people visited her studio and were fascinated by the contrast of her brown hands and the white marble on which she worked. Racial prejudices are obvious in an article written about Lewis in *The Revolution*, a newspaper printed during Lewis's lifetime:

Edmonia Lewis is below the medium height; her complexion and features betray her African origin; her hair is more of the Indian type, black, straight, and abundant. She wears a red cap in her studio, which is very picturesque and effective; her face is a bright, intelligent and expressive one. Her manners are child-like, simple, and most winning and pleasing. She has the

proud spirit of her Indian ancestor, and if she has more of the African in her personal appearance, she has more of the Indian in her character. She is one of the most interesting of our American women artists here, and we are glad to know that she is fast winning fame and fortune.⁶⁵

Apparently her diligent work paid off: according to a newspaper article in the New Orleans *Picayune* of January 7, 1873, "Edmonia Lewis had snared two \$50,000 commissions."⁶⁶ Also in September of that same year, Lewis traveled to San Francisco, and exhibited her work at the Pine Street Exhibition Hall of the San Francisco Art Association. As early as 1867, the artist had sent photographic reproductions of her *Wooing and Wedding of Hiawatha* to the newspaper office of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Lewis chose to visit the San Francisco area, as an interview in the *Chronicle* reveals because she believed that "Here, they are more liberal, and as I want to dispose of some of my works, I thought it best to come West."⁶⁷

Lewis's choice to journey to the west coast is noteworthy because she was one of the first artists to visit California. Perhaps Lewis wanted to visit her brother, Sunrise, although there is no evidence that she saw him, nor is there proof that he was living in the state at the time.

At the exhibit on Pine Street, Lewis displayed five statues: *Hiawatha's Marriage*, *Asleep*, *Love in a Trap*, *Awake*, and the bust of *Abraham Lincoln*. She sold only two of the sculptures in San Francisco, *Hiawatha's Marriage* and *Love in a Trap*. After the first few days of the exhibit, a *Chronicle* entry stated that "Miss Edmonia Lewis, the colored sculptress, is among the first on the grounds. She is busily engaged in arranging her statuary left unsold after the exhibition in the rooms of the Art Association in San Francisco."⁶⁸ Lewis must have been eager to sell the remaining sculptures, as she probably could not afford nor did she want to ship them back to Rome.

Lewis took the three remaining statues, *Asleep*, *Awake*, and the Lincoln bust to the City Market Hall in San Jose, where the exhibit attracted over sixteen hundred visitors in a week's time.⁶⁹ Maintaining her "Indian maiden" persona, Lewis displayed her work in booths resembling wigwams.⁷⁰ *Asleep* and *Awake* sold to a local suffragette, Sarah Knox-Goodrich. The Lincoln bust took longer to sell, but an article in the *San Jose Mercury* reveals that "perhaps her most meritorious work is the bust of President Lincoln, and for the purchase of which we understand negotiations are being made, for the presentation to our Library."⁷¹ The sculptures were not exhibited for many years until they were found in the basement of the San Jose Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library in 1968. They are now on display in the children's books area in.⁷²

The following year, 1874, Edmonia Lewis produced a statue of *Hygieia*, the daughter of the Greek god of medicine, commissioned by Dr. Harriot K. Hunt for her grave in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge (Hunt died the next year). Although badly damaged by air pollution, the sculpture is a subtle deviation from the neoclassical style with a feminine grace that is not overly dramatic.

After Lewis's trip to Illinois for the Chicago 1878 Exposition, documentation on the artist is rare. With the move from neoclassical sculpture to the impressionism of Rodin, artists like Lewis were out-dated and virtually forgotten. In February 1909, an American Catholic magazine reported that although "advanced in years, she is still with us."⁷³ At the present, no exact date nor location of Lewis's death has been found. It seems plausible that she would have remained in Italy. No death certificate has been found, although it is possible that documentation exists written in Italian in a remote repository. Lewis may have left Rome in the summer months when malaria infested the country (called "Roman fever," or literally "bad air") and never returned. Perhaps she traveled to the coast, or maybe journeyed back to the United States. Lewis never married nor had children.

The life and art career of Edmonia Lewis are extraordinary but not without many obstacles. Although Lewis excelled at her craft, as her precise copy of Michelangelo's *Moses* proves, the artist was hindered by prejudiced people who demanded to watch her carve the large slabs of marble. Only then would they accept the authenticity of the work. Whether her success was because she was, to her Anglo patrons, an exotic curiosity or because she was a shrewd business woman who romanticized her heritage, Edmonia Lewis was able to succeed in a culture removed from her young life on the much loved reservation, and in a profession that is often hostile to anyone neither male nor Anglo.

Playing the role of the "Indian maiden" was successful for Edmonia Lewis, due in part to the nineteenth century fascination with the Native American. Lewis's celebration of her Indian heritage was not solely a tactic to gain art patrons and marginal social acceptance; her early childhood spent with her mother's family on a reservation continued to have a significant impact on her life. Yet it was easier to associate with an ethnicity that intrigued both Americans and Europeans, while minimizing her problematic African American heritage.

The life and career of Edmonia Lewis are evidence that our twentieth century notion of a multicultural artist was a reality in the nineteenth century. Lewis's association with the favorable exotic Native American persona was largely determined by the dominant racial group (Anglo Americans and Anglo Europeans), and may not have reflected her personal identification. Did Edmonia Lewis hate her African American ethnicity, or was it the prevalent negative attitude towards the race that made Lewis proud of her Native American heritage? I believe the latter idea is the case, just as it may be today. According to Peter Marris, a problem with emphasizing cultural identity is the concern that by "defining the distinctiveness of one's own group, they tend to become moral categories, classing others as inferior."⁷⁴ Lucy Lippard writes that when "disparate groups are thrust together and treated by outsiders as though they were 'all the same,' they may draw

together defensively and/or emphasize their uniqueness to exploit disparities, replacing geographical distance with social distance."⁷⁵

Edmonia Lewis's experience with race relations pose questions relevant to our twentieth century ideas of identity: how much of it is determined by oneself or one's surroundings? In our attempt at a multicultural society, do we continue to pick and choose what heritage is the most advantageous? How do we, as individuals, identity ourselves? For Edmonia Lewis, it was through the celebration of her Native American ethnicity and disassociation from her African American heritage that enabled the artist to gain success as a neoclassical sculptor.

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EXHIBITION PRESS RELEASE
Written by Marla Novo

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

*The Indian Maiden Visits San Jose:
Rediscovering Edmonia Lewis*

March 14 - 24, 1995

"Miss Edmonia Lewis (From Rome, Italy), Will Exhibit at City Market Hall, Three of her
Most Beautiful Pieces of Sculpture in Marble. . ."
(advertisement, *San Jose Daily Mercury*, September 27, 1873)

The San Jose State University Art Galleries are pleased to present *The Indian Maiden Visits San Jose: Rediscovering Edmonia Lewis*. This exhibit will focus on the nineteenth century American artist, Edmonia Lewis. Lewis lived an incredible life, and this exhibit will remind its viewers of her history, and how it intersected with our local one, over one hundred years ago. It may provoke its viewers to examine her career in terms of our twentieth century view of multiculturalism, as well as questioning the idea of identity: how much of it is determined by oneself and how much by one's surroundings? Marla Novo, a S.J.S.U. graduate student in Art History, and recipient of the 1993-1994 Violet Speddy and Catherine Urban graduate scholarship (Art History), is the curator.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a large group of sculptors from Europe and American traveled to Italy. Most of them took up residence in Rome, a city rich with artistic inspiration. Unique to the American group were many female artists whom the writer Henry James dubbed "that strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who at one time settled upon the seven hills in a white marmorean flock." Female artists at this time were not a complete rarity, but such a large constituency of sculptors, a medium dominated by men, was. Even more interesting was one artist named Edmonia Lewis, who was a woman of African American and Native American descent.

Lewis gained a substantial amount of notoriety as an artist, which seems remarkable given Lewis's difficulties being a woman and a minority living in the Victorian era. Edmonia Lewis made conscious decisions on how she wanted to be perceived and what subjects she wanted to produce in order to make her living as an artist. Pursuing an artistic career must have been no easy task for a female working in a predominantly male occupation, as an African American only a few years after the abolishment of slavery, and a native American romanticized as the "noble savage" or childlike "Indian maiden."

Although she spent much of her life in Italy, Edmonia Lewis made several trips to the U.S. in order to sell her sculpture. In September of 1873, Lewis visited San Francisco and then traveled to San Jose. She sold three statues in San Jose, and they will be displayed in this exhibition. These sculptures are now owned by the Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library. Also in the show, on loan from the San Jose Historical Museum, are paintings depicting Native American in the "noble savage" image by local nineteenth century artist, A. D. M. Cooper.

EXHIBITION DATES: March 14 - 24, 1995

OPENING RECEPTION: Tuesday, March 14, 1995, 6:00-8:00pm
GALLERY ONE, School of Art and Design

GALLERY HOURS: Tuesday-Friday, 11:00-4:00pm
Tues. evenings, 6:00-8:00pm and by appointment

INFORMATION: Theta Belcher, Acting Director (408) 924-4327 or Marla Novo, Curator (408) 924-4330

PARKING INFORMATION: (408) 924-6556

LOCATION: S.J.S.U. School of Art and Design,
GALLERY ONE, Ninth Street Between
San Fernando and San Carlos

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

H. Rocher
Edmonia Lewis
albumen silver prints, c. 1870
carte-de-visite
Fogg Art Museum,
Harvard University

Edmonia Lewis
Asleep
marble, 1871
On loan from the
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Public Library

Edmonia Lewis
Awake
marble, 1872
On loan from the
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Public Library

Edmonia Lewis
Abraham Lincoln
marble, c. 1872
On loan from the
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Public Library

Unknown Artist
Psyche
marble, c. 19th - 20th Century

On loan from the
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Public Library

A. D. M. Cooper
Title Unknown
oil on board, 1913
On loan from the
San Jose Historical Museum

A. D. M. Cooper
Indian Encampment
oil on canvas, n.d.
On loan from the
San Jose Historical Museum

A. D. M. Cooper
Title Unknown
oil on canvas, n.d.
On loan from the
San Jose Historical Museum

Woman's Everyday Dress
c. 1870 reproduction
On loan from the
San Jose Historical Museum

Advertisement
San Francisco Chronicle
September 3, 1873
Reprinted with permission

Advertisement
San Jose Daily Mercury
September 27, 1873
Reprinted with permission

Slide Projection: Other Works By
Edmonia Lewis
San Jose State University,
School of Art and Design Slide Collection

*The Indian Maiden Visits San Jose:
Rediscovering Edmonia Lewis*

In 1845 in a small town near Albany, New York, the American neoclassical sculptor, Edmonia Lewis was born to an African American father, and a mother of both African American and Native American descent. Because of her gender and mixed heritage, few opportunities were available to Lewis, yet she was able to carve out a successful career as an artist, and was quite famous during her lifetime. How was she able to do this?

With the financial support of an older brother, Edmonia Lewis enrolled in Oberlin College in Ohio, a school devoted to the integration of Anglo and African American students. After a short stay at Oberlin, Lewis moved on to Boston in order to pursue her career as a sculptor. With minimal artistic training, Lewis made a modest living in Boston, her patrons being mostly white abolitionists and social reformers. Because she knew her African American heritage was problematic in a country recently divided by the Civil War, Lewis chose to honor her ethnicity with portrait busts of white abolitionists, such as colonel Robert Gould Shaw and suffragette, Anna Quincy Waterston. Although the sculpture *Forever Free* (1867-68) depicts a man breaking his manacles of slavery, Lewis made few works of African Americans celebrating their freedom.

While Edmonia Lewis's African American heritage was a hindrance to her artistic career and acceptance in society, her native American ethnicity was an advantage. In the nineteenth century, the American Indian was considered an exotic creature, popularized in numerous books, such as James Fenmore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohichans*. The mystique of the noble Indian gained momentum with Diderot's theory that the best society of people were situated between the savage and the civil. Herder's call for cultural pluralism further enhanced the fascination with the "noble savage." Edmonia Lewis was the perfect embodiment of this blend: the exotic "Indian maiden" making a name for herself in the big city.

Edmonia Lewis capitalized on this more favorable and romantic interpretation of Native Americans. She moved to Rome, a city rich with artistic inspiration, where a large constituency of American sculptors took up residence. Unique to the group were many female artists whom the writer Henry James dubbed "that strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who at one time settled upon the seven hills in a white marmorean flock." Lewis spent much of her life in Italy capitalizing on her exoticism, producing several sculptures with Native American themes. *Old Indian Arrow Maker and His Daughter* is one such depiction, as is the busts of *Hiawatha* and *Minnehaha*, based on characters in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*.

Edmonia Lewis gained a substantial amount of notoriety as an artist and was well-respected, which seems remarkable given Lewis's difficulties being a woman and a minority living in the Victorian era. Throughout her lifetime, Edmonia Lewis made several trips back to the United States. In September 1873, Lewis traveled to the Bay Area, first to San Francisco and then to San Jose in order to sell her sculpture. The three statues sold in San Jose are now owned by the Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library, are included in this exhibit. They are the only Lewis works located in the western United States. Also on display are romanticized paintings of Native Americans by local nineteenth century artist, A. D. M. Cooper, on loan from the San Jose Historical Museum. The prevalence of these images allowed Lewis to perpetuate her "Indian maiden" persona, enabling her to pursue a successful career in a profession that is often hostile to anyone not male or non Anglo.

Although her identification as an "Indian maiden" was successful for Edmonia Lewis, due in part to the nineteenth century fascination with the Native American, Lewis's celebration of her Indian heritage was not solely a tactic to gain art patrons and marginal societal acceptance. Her early childhood was spent with her mother's family on a reservation, and continued to have a significant impact on her adult life. Yet it was easier to associate with an ethnicity that intrigued both Americans and Europeans, while down-playing

her problematic African American heritage. To nineteenth century Americans and Europeans, Indians symbolized a noble people, while African Americans were considered an enslaved or defeated race. Contemporary artist, Adrian Piper explains that "Sometimes what we observe hurts so much we want to disappear, disembody, disinherit ourselves from our blackness. Our experiences in this society manifest themselves in neuroses, demoralization, anger, and in art."

The life and career of Edmonia Lewis pose questions relevant to our twentieth century ideas of identity: how much of it is determined by oneself and how much by one's surroundings? In our attempt at a multicultural society, do we continue to pick and choose which heritage are the most advantageous? How do we, as individuals, identify ourselves?

Thank you to the members of my Project Committee: Andy Ostheimer, Dr. Jan Thompson, and Dr. Marilyn Wyman, as well as the Gallery Office Staff in the School of Art and Design. I extend my gratitude to Alan Decker from the San Jose Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library, and Leslie Masunaga and Sarah Nunes from the San Jose Historical Museum, and Dr. Timothy Anglin Burgard from the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.

And as always, thank you to my family.

Marla Novo

March, 1995

Henry James quotation: *William Wetmore Story and his Friends* in William H. Gerdts, Jr.'s catalogue introduction, *The White, Marmorean Flock: Nineteenth Century American Women Sculptors*, Vassar College Art Gallery (New York: Merchants Press, 1972).

Adrian Piper quotation: Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 43.

Installation detail. Exhibition Title Wall.
Courtesy of San Jose State University
School of Art and Design Gallery Office.

Installation detail. Photographs of Edmonia Lewis.
Courtesy of San Jose State University
School of Art and Design Gallery Office.

What is Neoclassical Sculpture?

The neoclassical style refers to the art movement beginning in the eighteenth century, when painters chose to render themes borrowed from antiquity. By the time art historian Johann Winckelman wrote his 1755 essay, *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works*, already art patrons had been collecting classical sculpture. Archeological excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum increased the interest in the classical ideal; Greek sculptures like the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Laocoön* group became examples for artists to emulate.

Neoclassicism in sculpture gained momentum in the nineteenth century when numerous sculptors began making monumental works depicting gods and goddesses from ancient mythology, and romantic allegories. Artists also created portraits of contemporary patrons in classical guise, such as Antonio Canova's *Pauline Borghese as Venus*. Biblical themes were widely used as well. Occasionally the neoclassical style was unsuccessful and almost comical, such as Horatio Greenough's *George Washington*, but the movement was very popular and kept many sculptors busy with commissions. In fact, it was considered mandatory for Americans traveling through Europe on "The Grand Tour" to visit the various artists' studios.

Neoclassical art was no longer fashionable by the end of the nineteenth century with the shift towards the innovative impressionism of Rodin. As a result, many neoclassical sculptors had difficulty garnering commissions and were virtually forgotten, as was the case with Edmonia Lewis. In recent years, neoclassical sculpture is considered to be embarrassingly out-dated with its depiction of saccharine themes. Yet this is a limited view of a tremendously popular movement that spanned more than a century.

The female nude, considered the ultimate ideal of beauty, was a constant theme of neoclassical sculpture. Perhaps its popularity coincided with the prudish yet perverse Victorian Age. American artists had a more

difficult time with the subject matter; the sculptors had to have a thematic excuse for depicting the female nude. As a result, Christian or moral ideals were represented, or literary reference were made.

This sculpture, by an unknown artist, is an example of the neoclassical preoccupation with the female nude. It depicts a woman kneeling in a shallow pool with a small water vessel is overturned near her foot. The soft modeling of the marble alludes to the subtle eroticism of the sculpture. The figure, especially the face, is generalized, which is a common trait found in neoclassical art. Also typical of this style is the small head and the elongated torso. The mood is tranquil, contemplative. The sculpture is entitled *Psyche*; she is the mythological wife of Cupid who is ordered by her mother-in-law, Venus, to perform a series of tasks, including obtaining water from a cascade.

Although she worked in the neoclassical style, Edmonia Lewis did not embrace all the themes; there is no evidence that she produced any sculptures of the female nude.

Installation detail. *Psyche*.
Courtesy of San Jose State University
School of Art and Design Gallery Office.

Edmonia Lewis in the Bay Area

The arrival of Edmonia Lewis to the Bay Area was documented in several newspapers, including the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Jose Daily Mercury*. In fact, Lewis was interviewed by the *Chronicle*. When asked why she chose to visit California, the artist explained that "Here, they are more liberal, and as I want to dispose of some of my works, I thought it best to come West." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, August 26, 1873) Another entry states that "Miss Edmonia Lewis, the colored sculptress, is among the first on the grounds. She is busily engaged in arranging her statuary left unsold after the exhibition in the rooms of the Art Association in San Francisco." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 30, 1873)

The *San Jose Daily Mercury* advertised Edmonia Lewis's exhibit at the City Market Hall. For fifty cents admission (twenty-five cents for children) to the week-long Fair, patrons could view the three sculptures and, if interested, submit a bid for their purchase.

Asleep and Awake

Upon visiting San Jose in 1873, Edmonia Lewis sold two sculptures, *Asleep* and *Awake* to local suffragette, Sarah Knox-Goodrich. Mrs. Knox-Goodrich was a well-respected pioneer woman whose motto, *equal rights and justice to all*, made her an appropriate patron of Lewis.

These sculptures were commonly called "conceits" or "fancy pieces," and often depicted sentimental works in the form of children. This type of statue was in great demand; particularly successful was Harriet Hosmer's whimsical *Puck*, from which thirty replicas were made.

Lewis carved *Asleep* in 1871 and *Awake* in 1872; along with *Cupid Caught*, which was sold in San Francisco, they appear to be the only sculptures she made in this genre. The trivial subject matter is atypical for Lewis's usual themes based on her ethnicity. Perhaps in traveling to California, Edmonia Lewis chose to exhibit sculpture with popular appeal in order to make them easier to sell.

Abraham Lincoln

In addition to *Asleep* and *Awake*, Edmonia Lewis brought a bust of *Abraham Lincoln* to San Jose. Portrait busts were a common device used by neoclassical sculptors, and political as well as literary figures were often rendered. Two other female artists, Sarah Fisher Ames and Vinnie Ream Hoxie carved busts of Lincoln. The relation between Edmonia Lewis and Lincoln is appropriate, given Lewis's penchant for celebrating her African American heritage through portrait busts of white abolitionists.

The bust of *Abraham Lincoln* proved to be more difficult to sell than the conceits *Asleep* and *Awake*. This must have concerned Lewis, since she probably did not have the money nor the desire to ship the unsold sculpture back to Rome. Fortunately, the Friends of the San Jose Library purchased it by subscription.

Installation detail. *Awake, Asleep, and Abraham Lincoln*.
Courtesy of San Jose State University
School of Art and Design Gallery Office.

Woman's Everyday Dress, circa 1870

A lady strolling through the San Jose Fair in 1873, may have worn a dress similar to this one. The average Victorian woman remained restricted by societal demands of what it meant to be female. This included her appearance, and long dresses, complete with a petticoat and bustle, were the norm.

As an artist living in Rome, Edmonia Lewis enjoyed more freedom than American women in the Victorian period. Lewis often wore bohemian costumes in black with a cape and beret. Lewis lived in Italy with other women sculptors, including Harriet Hosmer, who wore men's clothes and rode her horse around the city. The American actress, Charlotte Cushman, promoted the female sculptors, including Lewis, and her Roman villa became their artistic center where they formed a close sisterhood. These women experienced an alternative lifestyle working in non traditional careers, choosing not to marry, and wearing men's clothes much of the time. Cushman urged the women to form intimate relationships with one and another, and pledge an informal vow of chastity.

A. D. M. Cooper

A popular Victorian theme found in both the literary and visual arts was the romanticization of the Native American. An example is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (a favorite of Edmonia Lewis), the epic poem detailing the romance of the Indian lovers, Hiawatha and Minnehaha. Countless artists depicted the Native American as the "noble savage."

The San Jose artist, A. D. M. Cooper perpetuated this nineteenth and early twentieth century trend in his numerous paintings of Indians in stoic poses, or in romantic scenes of Native Americans in nature. Astley David Montague Cooper was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1856. After attending Washington University, Cooper moved first to San Francisco, and then to San Jose. In San Jose, Cooper lived and worked in an Egyptian styled house and studio, and built a reputation as a painter of western themes, including American Indians. The American artist, George Catlin, famous for his romanticized paintings of Native Americans, was a family friend of Cooper, and undoubtedly influenced the San Jose artist.

Cooper was something of a local celebrity, yet due to alcoholism, his career was curtailed. Towards the end of his life, Cooper painted canvasses of semi-nude females. He gave the paintings to the bars he frequented in order to pay off his drinking debts. Cooper died in San Jose in 1924.

Installation detail. Woman's Dress, Cooper paintings.
Courtesy of San Jose State University
School of Art and Design Gallery Office.

Installation detail. Woman's Dress, Cooper paintings, Slide projection.
Courtesy of San Jose State University
School of Art and Design Gallery Office.

Endnotes

1. Adrian Piper, "Ways of Averting One's Gaze," 1987 in Lucy R. Lippard's *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 7.
2. Henry James in *William Wetmore Story and his Friends* in William H. Gerdts, Jr.'s catalogue introduction, *The White, Marmorean Flock: Nineteenth Century American Women Sculptors*, Vassar College Art Gallery (New York: Merchants Press, 1972).
3. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 100.
4. Wreford quoted in Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in Nineteenth-century America*, (Washington, DC.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 85.
5. Frederick Douglass's comment is documented in Mary E. Philips, *Reminiscences of William Wetmore Story*, 1897, and stated in Eleanor M. Tufts, "Edmonia Lewis, Afro-Indian Neo-Classicalist," *Art in America*, (July/August, 1974), 72.
6. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 54.
7. National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Record Group 10, vol. 1868, file 660, cited in Bearden and Henderson, 55.
8. Bearden and Henderson, 55.
9. Bearden and Henderson, 55. Quotation cited as "How Edmonia Lewis Became an Artist", unsigned six-page pamphlet given to Harvard Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Charles Sumner, November 1, 1870.

10. From an interview with Lewis printed in the *Lorain County News*, cited in Tufts, 71.

11. Edmonia Lewis, quoted in "Letter From L. Maria Child," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Feb. 27, 1864, cited in Regenia A. Perry's biographical information in the exhibition catalogue, *Free Within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* (Washington DC.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution in association with Pomegranate Artbooks, San Francisco, 1992), 135.

12. Hartigan, 88.

13. Piper, "Ways of Averting One's Gaze," in Lippard, 7.

14. Hartigan, 88. Descriptions of Lewis's physical appearance depended on the biases of the critic and the audience.

15. Hartigan, 87.

16. Bearden and Henderson, 56.

17. Bearden and Henderson, 56.

18. The girls' names are given in William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Flight for Black Freedom, 1829-65* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 302. Langston's autobiography does not mention the names of Miles and Ennes or Lewis.

19. Bearden and Henderson, 57.

20. Geoffrey Blodgett, "John Mercer Langston and the Case of Edmonia Lewis: Oberlin, 1862," *Journal of Negro History* 53 (July 1968), 203.

21. John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol or The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1894), 177. In the chapter entitled, "A Rare and Interesting Case Which Tested His Powers," Langston recounts the events in the third person and without ever mentioning Lewis by her name. It is inferred however, that all would know who he was talking about, as it was a well-known trial.

22. Langston, 176.

23. Langston, 177.

24. Langston, 172. The lawyer describes the girls' close friendship: "They met each other daily, exchanged visits regularly and frequently several times each day, and held conversations in free and frank manner upon every conceivable subject of interest to them, confiding to each other even the most important, special and sacred affairs."

25. Bearden and Henderson, 60. Apparently no one at Oberlin challenged Dascomb's decision.

26. Bearden and Henderson, 61.

27. Lydia Maria Child in a letter, *Liberator* (February 19, 1864), 31.

28. Hartigan, 88.

29. *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 26, 1873.

30. Jimmie Durham, "A Central Margin" in *The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, (New York: Fleetwood Litho, 1990), 164.

31. Hartigan, 88.

32. Hartigan, 89.
33. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1981), 430.
34. Monroe A. Majors, *Noted Negro Women* (Chicago: Donohue and Henneberry, 1893), 28.
35. Henderson and Bearden, 60.
36. *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 26, 1873.
37. Stowe, 164.
38. *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 26, 1873.
39. see exchange between Piper and Barbara Barr in *Women Artists News* (June 1987), p. 6, in Lippard, 43.
40. Paul R. Baker, *The Fortunate Pilgrims: Americans in Italy 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 1.
41. John A. Clark, *Glimpses of the Old World* (Philadelphia, 1840), I, 302 cited in Baker, 123.
42. Baker, 124.
43. William H. Gerdts, *American Neo-Classic Sculpture: The Marble Resurrection* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 11.
44. Gerdts, 11.
45. Gerdts, 16.

46. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Dream of Arcadia: American Writers and Artists in Italy 1760-1915* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1958), 42.

47. Arthur Beale, "A Technical View of Nineteenth-Century Sculpture", from Jeanne L. Wasserman ed., *Metamorphoses in Nineteenth-Century Sculpture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), 49.

48. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 124.

49. Joseph Leach, *Bright Particular Star: The Life and Times of Charlotte Cushman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 241.

50. Brooks, 108.

51. Bearden and Henderson, 62.

52. Bearden and Henderson, 64.

53. Hawthorne, 114-115.

54. Leach, 335.

55. For a fascinating look at nineteenth century female relationships, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Smith-Rosenberg reports that although male homosexuality was taboo (Oscar Wilde went to jail for it), lesbianism was not considered perverse, but rather a by-product of female-to-female relationships. Furthermore, homosexuality was thought to be rare in American women, but existed exclusively among its poor and marginal population. Viennese neurologist Krafft-Ebing classified lesbians in four

categories based on varying degrees of sexual, physiological, and social characteristics.

56. Hawthorne, 54.

57. *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 26, 1873. In this newspaper article, Lewis commented that she knew Powers. See Bearden and Henderson, 63; the authors state that before settling in Rome in 1865, Lewis visited Powers in Florence, where he gave her tools and showed her how to assemble armatures and model clay.

58. Hartigan, 93.

59. Hartigan, 94.

60. Lois E. Newbitt, "Cleopatra at the Mall," *Art News*, 87 (October 1988), 134-135. Newbitt reports that the statue *Cleopatra* has had a curious history: it marked the gravestone of a horse named Cleopatra at a racetrack in Forest Park, Illinois, and was then banished to a storage area when a shopping mall was built on the track site. This information may be considered evidence to what happens to works of art that are executed in an obsolete style, and by an artist historically not considered a "master."

61. The personification of America in Fra Andrea Pozzo's seventeenth century fresco, *The Glorification of St. Ignatius*, which was a popular nineteenth century tourist attraction, is a large female figure wearing a red Indian headdress.

62. Brooks, 2.

63. See the discussion in Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 183.

64. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha*, (New York: Cupples and Leon Company, 1910), 93-94.

65. *The Revolution* quoted in Eleanor M. Tufts, "Edmonia Lewis: Afro-Indian Neo-Classical," *Art in America*, 62 (July/August 1974), 72.

66. Tufts, 72.

67. *San Francisco Chronicle*, August, 26, 1873.

68. *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 30, 1873.

69. Philip M. Montesano's "The Mystery of the San Jose Statues," *Urban West* (March-April 1968), 26.

70. "Santa Clara Valley Fair," *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin* (October 2, 1873); "The Fair at San Jose," *San Francisco Daily Morning Call* (October 2, 1873).

71. *San Jose Daily Mercury*, September 27, 1873.

72. Philip Montesano is credited with discovering the three Lewis statues in the Library basement. Alan Decker, the Library's current Business Office Supervisor, informed me that there was a fourth crated sculpture believed to be the work of Lewis. The sculpture, a female nude, is not stylistically compatible with Lewis's oeuvre. Furthermore, the inventory of Edmonia Lewis works as documented by The National Inventory of American Painting and Sculpture does not have a completely nude sculpture listed (Lewis's *Cleopatra* is a partially clothed female). The crate in which the statue is housed has the name of a former registrar at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Robert Harmon. Through a correspondence with Mr. Harmon, I have ascertained that the sculpture does not belong to that institution; Mr. Harmon did not recognize the work (he theorizes that he may have lent his name and shipping information to a colleague at another

institution, and thus never saw the sculpture). Due to the laws of accession, the statue is now the property of the San Jose Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library. At the time of my investigation with the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Mr. Decker contacted retired library employees. One person recalls seeing the statue displayed during the 1940s; it has been identified as *Psyche*, a common neoclassical theme. The statue is missing three fingers on the right hand. This elderly library worker remembers that one of the fingers was given to another employee upon his retirement. In an attempt to complete the work's identification, I have sent photographs of the sculpture to the National Inventory, a "needle in the haystack" method.

73. *The Rosary*, February 1909, as cited in Henderson and Bearden, 76.

74. Peter Marris, *Loss and Change* (Garden City: Anchor Doubleday, 1975), 74.

75. Lippard, 153.

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