



Lewis, Mary Edmonia (1844-1907)

by Carla Williams

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Mary Edmonia Lewis.

American sculptor Mary Edmonia Lewis lived most of her life in Rome, where she was a member of a lesbian circle of American expatriates and artists.

Many of the details of her life remain elusive. The only daughter of an Ojibwa (Chippewa) Indian mother and an African-American father, Lewis was born in upstate New York, probably on July 4 or July 14, 1844.

Soon orphaned, she was raised by the Mississauga band of her mother's tribe. By her own sometimes exaggerated recollection, she was a spirited, inquisitive child.

Financed by her brother Samuel, a barber turned prospector in California, Lewis became one of the first African-American female students in the Young Ladies Preparatory Department at Oberlin College in Ohio. There she studied drawing, demonstrating a clear talent as a teenager. Signing her first drawing simply "Edmonia Lewis," she caused her proper name "Mary" to fall out of use.

Her years at Oberlin were marred by a bizarre incident in which Lewis was accused of poisoning her two white housemates with an aphrodisiac. Although charges against her were eventually dismissed, she was taken by a lynch mob and badly beaten.

Some historians see in this incident the first signs of Lewis's presumed homosexuality; they believe that the women, who were out on dates with male companions when the poison took effect, had been targeted because of romantic jealousy.

Forced to leave Oberlin in 1863, Lewis went to Boston to study with the sculptor Edward A. Brackett, who became her mentor and guided her artistic development. In Boston, she also met and befriended lesbian sculptors Anne Whitney (1821-1915) and Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908).

Aside from the scant tutelage she received from Brackett, Lewis was self-taught as a sculptor. She started as a copyist, but her designs grew more innovative and original with each work. Her earliest works were clay and plaster portraits of well-known abolitionists. Eventually Lewis worked in a Neoclassical style, deriving much of her later subject matter from historical sources.

Lewis decided that she needed to be in a place where she would be nurtured as an artist, so she set sail for Rome in 1865, where she apparently lived for the rest of her life. Lewis's studio near the Spanish Steps was a popular destination for tourists and a gathering place for other expatriate artists and intellectuals, many of them women.

While there has never been any explicit "proof" of Lewis' homosexuality, her inclusion in a lesbian circle in Rome has contributed to the speculation. Henry James famously dubbed this group, which included Emma Stebbins (1815-1882), Whitney, and Hosmer, (along with Margaret Foley [1820-1877]), "that strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who at one time settled upon the seven hills [of Rome] in a white,

marmorean flock."

Lewis's decision to enter into a "male" profession also added to the assumptions about her sexual preferences. Moreover, she never married, had no known male companions, and no children. Furthermore, Lewis wore so-called "mannish" attire, somewhat evident in the only known photographic portraits of her, made on a visit to Chicago.

Lewis's monumental masterpiece, *The Death of Cleopatra*, was exhibited at the Centennial Exposition in 1876 in Philadelphia and in Chicago in 1878 and then, unsold, was placed into storage. From there it disappeared: its remarkable rediscovery paralleled the rediscovery of the artist herself in the late twentieth century.

Not long after Lewis stored the two-ton marble, it turned up on display in a Chicago saloon and eventually ended up at a racetrack as a grave marker for a racehorse named Cleopatra. When the racetrack became a postal service facility in the 1970s, the sculpture was put into a Cicero, Illinois storage yard, where it languished, exposed to the elements, until a fire inspector enlisted his son's Boy Scout troop to "restore" it with cleaning solutions and paint.

Alerted by a newspaper article, the Historical Society of Forest Park, Illinois claimed the sculpture and put out inquiries that caught the attention of Lewis biographer Marilyn Richardson. The sculpture was finally turned over to and restored by the Smithsonian Institution. The rediscovery of *The Death of Cleopatra* is all the more important because precious few of Lewis's works survive.

True to character, Lewis's death was as enigmatic as her life--to date no record of it has been found.

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