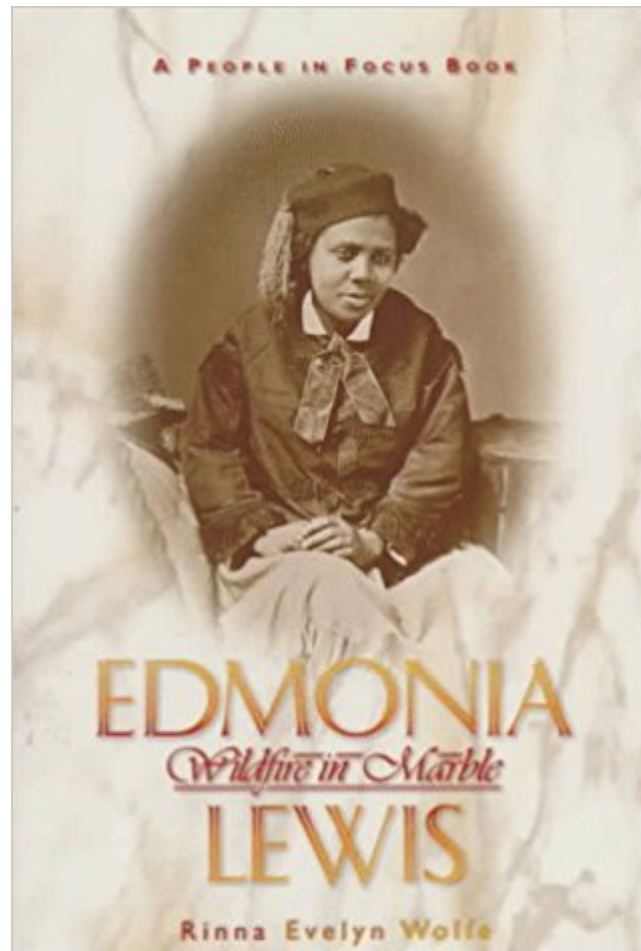




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# Edmonia Lewis: Wildfire In Marble (People In Focus Book)



## Synopsis

Edmonia Lewis endured prejudice throughout her life from those who saw her as a savage native or a poor, uneducated black woman. Undaunted she worked on--and the statues she produced today salute important events in American history. Of two cultures, Chippewa, African American, Edmonia Lewis was orphaned at nine. With her brother paying the tuition she entered Oberlin College in Ohio, to attend preparatory courses (at age 15) where she took courses in Botany, Algebra, Composition, Rhetorical Literature and Bible Study. During this time her talent for drawing emerged. Edmonia Lewis created *The Death of Cleopatra* in 1876 for America's First Centennial celebration. After this 3,015 pound sculpture was stored, it eventually reappeared in a Chicago saloon in 1892. Later, it became the headstone for a race horse named Cleopatra and then weathered several other adventures before it surfaced again in 1996. Today it can be seen at the National Museum of American Art (Smithsonian). Written from over 60 sources and after extensive research, *Edmonia Lewis: Wildfire In Marble* is the first book on Edmonia's life. With faith in her ideals, Edmonia honored former slaves, the cause of freedom, and the nation's courageous men and women who pushed to obtain human rights for everyone. Her statues express her deep gratitude for the gift of life. A woman ahead of her time, Edmonia Lewis was the first African American-Chippewa artist to receive international recognition and support herself through her art. EXCERPT: *Forever Free* was the first statue of an African American family. Again Edmonia's kneeling slave woman is thanking God for her delivery from bondage. The man stands tall. A broken chain is wrapped around his upraised forearm. His other arm comforts the woman. The man's pose is similar to that of a Greek sculpture (Laocoon) in the Vatican Museum. The woman's pose was inspired by an abolitionist emblem entitled "Am I not a woman and a sister?" The couple seem dazed, as though not totally understanding that the Emancipation Proclamation had declared them forever free. Surprisingly, except for the man's thick, curly hair, the couple did not resemble African Americans. A few critics thought their limbs awkward and not well proportioned. This statue indicated changes to come in neoclassical sculpture. Sometimes Edmonia hired stonecutters to help produce her larger figures. She borrowed \$800 to have *Forever Free* figures executed in marble. Then she shipped the statue, along with the bills for materials and shipping costs, to the abolitionist lawyer Samuel E. Sewall in Boston. The statue's unexpected arrival shocked the abolitionists. Although Sewall had not commissioned, or given an order for the work, he paid a customs duty of \$200 to prevent its being auctioned off. In a letter to Maria Weston Chapman, aide to William Lloyd Garrison, on February 5, 1867, Edmonia wrote: "I will not take anything for my labor. Mr. Garrison has given his whole life for my father's people and I think I might give him a few months [of my] work."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Grade 6-10-An excellent documentary of the first American woman of African/Chippewa heritage to achieve international status as a sculptor. Born in 1844 or 1845, Lewis was orphaned at an early age. She was fortunate to have an older brother who encouraged her education and artistic apprenticeship. Although racism prevented her entry into good elementary and high schools, she was accepted into Oberlin College. It was here that her own work began to blossom. Later, like many African-American artists of this period, she went to Europe where she was able to study and hone her talent. Her sculptures, mostly of famous abolitionist and American heroes, were both admired and criticized. A number of black-and-white photographs and reproductions of documents are included, as is information about prominent Americans of the late 19th century who influenced and supported the sculptor. While Wolfe's book is an admirable account of the artist's life and work, the writing suffers from a dry, sometimes tedious recitation of facts. Marie Wright, University Library, Indianapolis, IN Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

An excellent documentary of the first American woman of African/Chippewa heritage to achieve international status as a sculptor. Wolfe's book is an admirable account of the artist's life and work. -- School Library Journal, August 1998 This book weaves together vital history of the times, and distinguished personalities (i.e.: Fredrick Douglass, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and William Lloyd Garrison). ...A valuable addition to the reading list of any serious student of black history, women's

history and the history of art itself. -- Sun-Reporter Lifestyles, Thursday, March 26, 1998 With little assistance... Lewis turned her back on racism and refused to think a woman could not be a sculptor... Recommend this title... to young adults who thrive on biographies of successful women... Her life is a model of persistence. -- Voice of Youth Advocacy, August 1998

The best book on Edmonia and I have turned others on to it too. Great for kids and adults. So few women, native-american, black sculpture role models. This tells an important story lovingly.

Even though this is a children's book, "Wildfire in Marble" is one of the best sources of information about the remarkable 19th century African/Ojibwe sculptor. Edmonia Lewis was an extraordinary woman, who deserves the current revival of interest in her neo-Classical sculpture. Wolfe cobbles together an engaging account of Lewis' life despite very scant information and describes hardships that Lewis faced and overcame. Wolfe across traces some of the journeys Lewis' sculptures made through the last century, especially the rediscovery of her monumental "Death of Cleopatra."

Like Zora Neale Hurston, Edmonia Lewis was a female artist of color whose work and name was unknown for decades. Wolfe's work, like Walker's work for Hurston, tries to change this. Because little is known about Lewis, Wolfe can be commended for what she found. However, the many lacunae in Lewis' life will frustrate some readers. Lewis is known for being African American and Native American. Her picture appears in Katz' book "Black Indians." Even Wolfe's words imply that Lewis was half Chippewa and half Black, early in the book, Wolfe says Lewis' grandfather married a Native woman. It sounds like Lewis was 75% Black and 25% Native. The book leaves me unsure of her precise breakdown. Though educated and showing an early knack for art, Lewis can be seen as an autodidact in sculpting. She did not want to bring attention to her ethnic heritages. However, she made works with African American and Native subjects. She covered classic subjects, but modern viewers may relate with our culture of celebrity, because she also made works of contemporary famous leaders and authors. Wolfe's book never makes a statement about Lewis' sexuality. It doesn't note that she never married or had any partners. However, according to LGBTQ, one can speculate that she was lesbian. She had lesbian artist friends, she worked in a gender-atypical field, and stereotypically, some noted her "mannish" clothing. I am not sure whether Wolfe was squeamish in this matter or didn't want to guess on any subjects where she had no concrete information. In a way, the last chapter is the most important, Wolfe describes racism faced by Black men and sexism by white women in the 19th Century art world. Her point is that, as a woman of

color, Lewis' achievements at the time are doubly shocking and impressive. I found many parallels between her and Frida Kahlo. Both may have been seen as "mannish" and both may have loved women. Both were biracial. Both lived in more than one nation during their lives. Both were women who made artistic works on women. Both had subjects across racial categories. Fridaholics, like myself, may especially love learning about Lewis. This work as written for young readers, perhaps those in junior high. However, at least two sources imply that this is the only booklength work on Lewis. Someone really needs to write a Lewis biography for adults. Perhaps that is where and when sexuality and gender matters may be fleshed out more effectively.

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