



NEW-YORK  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY  
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# Art Activity

Edmonia Lewis

1866-1904, Industry and Empire

# Background Information

Edmonia “Wildfire” Lewis was a Black and Chippewa sculptor who combated racism and sexism in the artworld to create a successful career. She was born in the United States but ultimately moved to Rome, as she found Europe more welcoming to Black artists. Her first works were small portrait medallions of famous American abolitionists, and she later went on to create busts and large scale marble sculptures. Unlike many artists of the time, Edmonia Lewis completed the entire process of making her sculptures by herself, rather than creating a small model and hiring workers to complete the large-scale final product. One of Lewis’ most well-known (and largest) works was *The Death of Cleopatra*. Many of her other sculptures are known for depicting activist themes and referring to Lewis’s Indigenous heritage.

click [HERE](#) for the full resource

Edmonia Lewis

*Henry Rocher, Edmonia Lewis, c. 1870. National Portrait Gallery Collection, Smithsonian Institution.*



# Task

- Students will...read the life story of sculptor Edmonia Lewis and consider the importance of her identity and artistic process when discussing her body of work.
- Students will...then analyze and draw inspiration from examples of her pieces, and create their own portrait medallions to commemorate a woman from the [Industry and Empire](#) unit of Women & the American Story.

# Materials

- Air-dry clay (suggested brands: Sargent Art Sculpt-It and Crayola)
- *Optional sculpting tools (suggested brands: Duran or Richardson)*
- Modeling tools: plastic cutlery, straws, popsicle sticks, paper clips, pen caps, etc.
- Plastic cups for water
- Disposable work surface: paper plates or cardboard
- Paper towels

# Steps

- Invite students to discuss different ways that we commemorate and celebrate people.
  - What are the differences between the ways we commemorate those we know personally and the ways we commemorate historical figures or famous people?
  - How are works of art used for commemoration? What examples can you recall? What can we learn from these works about the people they depict?
- Have students read the life story of Edmonia “Wildfire” Lewis. When they are finished, discuss her life using the following questions.
  - What were some of the major events in Edmonia Lewis’s life?
  - How did her identities shape her experiences and her career?
  - If you were to commemorate Edmonia Lewis’s life with a work of art, what would you create? What would you want people to know about her?
- Next, ask students to redirect the conversation to focus on Edmonia Lewis’s art. Have them discuss the following as a class or in small groups.
  - What kinds of artwork did Edmonia Lewis create throughout her life?
  - What was unique about her process?
  - What inspired her work?

# Steps

- How did she commemorate historical figures through her work? Why do you think she made portrait medallions as a way to honor abolitionists? [You can show students an example of Lewis's medallions [here](#)].
  - Who do you think would purchase these medallions? What would the profits from these medallions have allowed Edmonia to do?
  - Why did she choose to sculpt Cleopatra at the time of her death? Why was this depiction of Cleopatra revolutionary? How did this change her narrative and the way that Cleopatra is remembered?
  - How did Edmonia celebrate the various aspects of her identity in her work? Why was this representation so important in the 19th century art world?
- Inspired by Edmonia Lewis's early work, students will create portrait medallions to commemorate a woman from the [Industry and Empire](#) unit of Women & the American Story. They can choose to create a medallion for Edmonia Lewis herself, or any other woman from that unit that they find to be inspirational or intriguing.
  - When selecting their subject, students should make sure that the life story is accompanied by a photograph of that woman that they can use as a reference. For sculpting portrait medallions, an image of the subject in profile is easiest to work from.

# Steps

- Pass out materials, giving each student a small handful of clay, some sculpting tools, a piece of cardboard to work on, and paper towels. Cups of water can be shared in pairs.
- Have students pull their piece of clay in half into two equal pieces. Students should take their first piece of clay and roll it into a ball. Once it is smooth and round, have them place the clay ball on their piece of cardboard and press down with the palm of their hand to create a flat circular disk about ½” thick.
- Next, students take the second piece of clay and repeat this step to create another circular disk about ½” thick. This disk will serve as their medallion. Have them set the second disk aside under a damp paper towel to keep the clay wet.
- Using their sculpting tools, have students make shallow indentations into the first disk to outline the face of their historical figure. Once they are happy with the rough outline of their face, they can use their modeling tools to carve the shape out of their disk. It does not have to come out perfectly clean; they will sculpt and shape it more in the next steps!

# Steps

- Students can now take their second disk and attach their face to it using the score and slip method. Scoring is creating marks on the surface of clay. This rough texture helps join two pieces of clay. Students then add water to the scored clay to create a slip. This acts as a glue to adhere the two surfaces together.
- Once the face is attached to the clay disk, students scrape the edges of their face to the disk to create a smoother-looking join, but they should make sure that the face is still raised enough from the base to create definition.
- Now students can make any changes or adjustments to the outline of the face by pinching and sculpting, or removing clay where needed.
- Students then add details and create definition in the face.
  - Indent and shape the clay to add contours.
  - Carve into the clay to create details and lines in the face.
  - Sculpt hair, eyes, lips, and ears, and attach using the score and slip method.
  - Include more details about the subject by carving words, designs, or symbols into the medallion.



# Art Vocabulary

- **bust:** A sculpted representation of a person that includes the head, neck, and part of the shoulders.
- **definition:** The degree of distinctness in outline of an object or image.
- **portrait medallion:** A circular or oval portrait of a well-known person, especially one carved in relief.
- **profile:** A human head or face represented or seen in a side view.
- **relief:** Sculpture in which the three-dimensional elements are raised from a flat base.
- **score:** Creating marks on the surface of wet clay to join two pieces of clay together.
- **slip:** A liquid form of clay used to join pieces of clay or fill in a void.

# Historical Vocabulary

- **abolitionists:** People who want to end slavery.
- **anatomy:** The study of the human body.
- **Centennial Exhibition:** International exhibition that marked the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.
- **portrait medallions:** Small circular sculptures with portraits of famous people.

# Reflection Questions



Once students are finished, have them set their portrait medallions aside to dry and reflect on the following:

- What was it like to create a portrait medallion? What was challenging or exciting about this artmaking process?
- What was it like to commemorate a historical figure in this way? What did you have to consider?
- What extra details did you include to convey information about your historical figure?

# Extension

Invite students write an artist statement for their medallion that gives the viewer more information about the subject and explains why and how they chose to commemorate her.

## *The Death of Cleopatra*

*Edmonia Lewis, The Death of Cleopatra, 1876. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Historical Society of Forest Park, Illinois.*



# Share your work!

*We would love to see your artwork!*

Consider sharing your work with the Education Division at the New-York Historical Society. Please send it to:

[wams@nyhistory.org](mailto:wams@nyhistory.org)

Include your grade level and location. You can also send us feedback, questions, and thoughts!