

## Sidedoor: S11E06 – Finding Cleopatra

**Lizzie Peabody:** A quick note. There's a mention of sexual violence in this episode, so it may not be appropriate for all listeners.

**Lizzie:** This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

**Lizzie:** On a warm spring day in 1988 in a shopping mall outside Chicago, Marilyn Richardson finally found what she was looking for—in an unlikely place.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *It was kind—it was kind of shady, you know, shadowy there in the storage area. So I wanted more pictures and I asked one of the security guards, "Could I possibly go back in and take just a few more pictures just by myself?" So he said, "Sure."*

**Lizzie:** This is Marilyn.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *Shall we all use first names?*

**Lizzie:** *Yes!*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *Fine.*

**Lizzie:** She's an art historian and an independent curator. She's also a sleuth. And on that day in 1988, armed with a disposable camera, she peered into the cramped storeroom of a suburban shopping mall to find a masterpiece that had been missing for a hundred years: a queen carved in marble, the sculpture called, "The Death of Cleopatra." But the sculpture looked less than queenly in its new home.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *It was surrounded by seasonal decorations, you know? So basically Cleopatra with Thanksgiving turkeys ...*

**Lizzie:** *[laughs]*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *... and Frosty the Snowman and Christmas whatever. And so yeah, it was stored away there. Happily, happily, you know? It was indoors.*

**Lizzie:** The sculpture was indoors, but a quick glance hinted that hadn't always been the case. Cleopatra's face was dimpled by acid rain, and her body covered in slapdash coats of latex house paint.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *It's Cleopatra, snake and all! [laughs]*

**Lizzie:** Marilyn looked to the base of the sculpture to confirm what she hoped to find—the name of the sculptor. And there it was: Edmonia Lewis.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *Edmonia Lewis was a woman of African and Native American descent. A woman of color growing up in pre-Civil War America, beginning her career in Civil War America, she was the first Black American to have an international reputation as a sculptor. Period. The first. She was literally something new under the sun.*

**Lizzie:** Edmonia Lewis had a prolific career as a professional artist, but this sculpture, languishing in mall storage, was one of her most ambitious creations. Over a hundred years ago, it disappeared—and it's hard to misplace a 3,000-pound chunk of marble.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *What the heck happened to it? It was one of her master works.*

**Lizzie:** *How do you even start looking for a sculpture that vanished a hundred years ago?*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *Hmm. Now you just keep your eye out.*

**Lizzie:** *[laughs]*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *And put out the word. And the more you dig into Lewis's life, though, you know, you hope for a clue.*

**Lizzie:** Because as successful as Edmonia Lewis was in her day, we don't know that much about her.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *There are no journals. There's no cache of letters. It was a matter of picking up crumbs, you know? Or puzzle pieces or whatever, odds and ends and fitting them together.*

**Lizzie:** And second-hand accounts, let's just say they vary wildly.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *If you find one thing about her, the next thing you find will contradict the first. [laughs]*

**Lizzie:** But this much is certain: Edmonia Lewis built a career as a professional artist, something that's hard enough to do under the best of circumstances and much harder for a woman of color coming of age in the slaveholding days of the United States. So this time on Sidedoor, the story of Edmonia Lewis and the masterpiece that finally came to rest at the Smithsonian. All that after a quick break.

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**Lizzie:** Like many other things about Edmonia Lewis, we don't know much about her early life. She was probably born in 1844, about 20 years before the American Civil War. She was born a free person of color, to an African-American father and a Native-American mother.

**Kirsten Buick:** *We know that she was raised around Niagara Falls, that she was raised by her mother's people after being orphaned.*

**Lizzie:** *And who were her mother's people?*

**Kirsten Buick:** *They were Chippewa or Ojibwe.*

**Lizzie:** This is Kirsten Buick. Her book, *Child of the Fire*, is about Edmonia Lewis's life and work. She's an art history professor at the University of New Mexico—but don't make the mistake of calling her "Professor."

**Kirsten Buick:** *I prefer Kirsten. Only my enemies can call me Professor Buick.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh!*

**Kirsten Buick:** *[laughs]*

**Lizzie:** *How many enemies do you have?*

**Kirsten Buick:** *[laughs] They've all been taken care of.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh! So zero, I guess. All right!*

**Lizzie:** So Kirsten helped fill me in on what we do know about Lewis's childhood. Edmonia and her older brother were orphaned young, but her brother made some money in the gold rush and sent her to Oberlin College in Ohio, one of the few institutions to accept African-American students. Remember, this was a time when 90 percent of African Americans were enslaved. Oberlin was also the first college to co-educate men and women. People were very interested in seeing how this social experiment would turn out—especially the press.

**Kirsten Buick:** *The Cleveland Plain Dealer, the newspaper for the city, they were always watching Oberlin. They always felt that it was an experiment that was bound to fail, whether through the promiscuous mixing of the sexes or through some kind of racial drama. And unfortunately, Edmonia*

*Lewis fulfilled all of those concerns. Catastrophe surrounded her time at Oberlin.*

**Lizzie:** In 1862, in her third year of college and about a year after the Civil War started, Edmonia was accused of a crime.

**Kirsten Buick:** *She was accused of poisoning two of her white female housemates.*

**Lizzie:** At the time, Oberlin had very strict rules against men and women spending time together privately.

**Kirsten Buick:** *Basically, these women were caught going unchaperoned on a sleigh ride with two men, and they blamed Lewis and said that she'd given them wine doctored with Spanish fly, which was a commonly known aphrodisiac in the 19th century.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh!*

**Kirsten Buick:** *The college tried to protect her, but the Cleveland Plain Dealer kept printing these stories about a mysterious, unnamed student who was Black. And suddenly this became about race and it became about sex, and it became about the threat to the virtue of white womanhood. She was kidnapped and beaten and stripped naked and left in a field.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh my God!*

**Kirsten Buick:** *And one of the things we can suspect, but never know is that she was also raped. And so to protect her, they finally allowed the constable to arrest her.*

**Lizzie:** *Wow! So the college, they allowed her to be arrested because she would be safer in prison than she was at Oberlin?*

**Kirsten Buick:** *Yes.*

**Lizzie:** Lewis was brought to trial, and ultimately exonerated. She returned to Oberlin, and we don't know for sure if she studied art there, but we do know that during her senior year, a professor accused her of stealing art supplies. The accusation was never backed up with evidence, but even so, the college refused to allow her to sit for her final exams, so she left.

**Lizzie:** *So, she really was a scapegoat.*

**Kirsten Buick:** *She was a scapegoat, but she was—she was uncowed.*

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**Lizzie:** In 1864, soon after leaving Oberlin, Edmonia went to Boston. There, she began learning the craft of sculpture.

**Kirsten Buick:** *And she went because Boston was an abolitionist stronghold. She took an apprenticeship with Edward Brackett, who was also an abolitionist as well as a sculptor.*

**Lizzie:** And he specialized in marble portrait busts, mostly of well-known abolitionists. From him, Edmonia learned that the best way to get famous was to portray people with faces anyone on the street would recognize.

**Kirsten Buick:** *You make a name for yourself by latching on to those who are famous. And that's what she did.*

**Lizzie:** The well-connected abolitionist network in Boston promoted her marble busts, and her name. Edmonia Lewis started popping up in the national and international press.

**Kirsten Buick:** *And abolitionists took an interest in her as African American. They needed a figurehead to promote their beliefs about African-American ability, and she was in the right place at the right time.*

**Lizzie:** But Edmonia didn't want to be the weapon of a cause, she wanted to be an artist. And in Boston, it seemed she would only ever be recognized with a qualifier attached as, "An African-American artist."

**Lizzie:** *So she really had to leave in order to be seen as American?*

**Kirsten Buick:** *Yes. And in order to be seen as an artist. But once she makes that definitive move to Europe, she can become an American artist rather than a Black artist.*

**Lizzie:** In 1865, around 20 years old, Edmonia set off for Europe's marble mecca—Rome. Italy had some of the finest marble quarries in the world, but it afforded something else, too: escape from the rigid categorization based on race and sex. Outside the US, Edmonia became first and foremost, American. And she wasn't alone.

**Kirsten Buick:** *Rome had already become a place where American women—primarily white, Anglo Saxon, Protestant, gathered in order to become sculptors. And so there was already a community where she could just kind of land.*

**Lizzie:** These women rejected the more delicate art forms considered fitting for a lady, like painting

and poetry, in favor of hammer and chisel. And they were good!

**Kirsten Buick:** *Male artists were threatened by them because, of course, they were splitting off the tourist dollars with their acts of creativity. The women who were there were threatening, not just financially, but because they were acting outside of the limitations of what it meant to be a woman.*

**Lizzie:** This renegade bunch of artists had the gall to live alone, pose nude for one another, and sculpt the male limbs.

**Kirsten Buick:** *It was inappropriate for a woman to sculpt the limbs of a man.*

**Lizzie:** *How do you be a sculptor without sculpting men's limbs? And I assume we're not just talking about the arms and legs.*

**Kirsten Buick:** *Right. You sculpt babies.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh.*

**Kirsten Buick:** *And—or you do architectural ornamentation.*

**Lizzie:** *Boring!*

**Kirsten Buick:** *[laughs]*

**Lizzie:** Forget nudes. Even sculpting a man's legs—with pants on—was scandalous!

**Kirsten Buick:** *But they refused to be limited by that.*

**Lizzie:** Edmonia Lewis established a studio in Rome, where she sculpted a wide variety of subjects: figures from mythology, literature and the Bible. She sculpted subjects popular in the US, like Native Americans, because despite being in Italy, most of her patrons were still American.

**Kirsten Buick:** *If you were an American tourist, you'd buy a guidebook, and in the back, after you visited all the famous sites of Rome, you'd find the addresses of American artists, sculptors and painters. And so part of your trip abroad would be shopping, and you'd go to the studios of your compatriots and you'd buy sculptures and you'd buy paintings.*

**Lizzie:** Edmonia Lewis's studio was a desirable stop for Americans on vacation. Frederick Douglass visited her on his honeymoon. Former President Ulysses S. Grant stopped by as well. She sculpted a bust of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. She was famous.

**Lizzie:** And Kirsten Buick says most sculptors in the 19th century felt they needed to create one large masterwork. And around 1870, Edmonia Lewis began hers, "The Death of Cleopatra." But there's more to Cleopatra than meets the eye—or should I say, the nose? More on that, after the break.

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**Lizzie:** Edmonia Lewis was an African-American and Native-American sculptor who moved to Rome in the mid-19th century. At the time, it was extremely rare to find a woman in that field, and even rarer to find a woman of color. But Edmonia's art was generating buzz, and around 1870, she began her master work: a sculpture that would take over four years to complete, the last pharaoh of Egypt, the Queen Cleopatra. Now Cleopatra is best known in popular history for her love affairs with Julius Caesar and Marc Anthony, but she was a savvy and ruthless politician. As sole ruler of Egypt, she oversaw all aspects of governance, commanded the military, and spoke nine languages fluently. Here's Kirsten Buick again.

**Kirsten Buick:** *She was powerful, talented, but the perception of her is what determines who she is at in any given context. Cleopatra that Shakespeare wrote was the most popular because she cried all the time, and she used tears to persuade. Cleopatra was highly sexualized.*

**Lizzie:** In spite of her brilliance, Cleopatra is often portrayed as an emotional temptress in a golden headdress. In the 1800s, Cleopatra was a popular historical figure to sculpt and paint, but because she died in 30 BC, nobody knows for certain what she looked like. Portraying her in paint or even marble usually meant choosing between two politicized representations of the queen—one with more European features, the other with African features.

**Kirsten Buick:** *Two sculptors before Lewis had already made pieces based on the queen. One was William Wetmore Story, who depicted her as Black African. The other was Thomas Ridgeway Gould, who depicted her as Aryan. And so as a historical figure, she was a lightning rod for a lot of the conversations going on during the day.*

**Lizzie:** Conversations about race. Each side had something to prove.

**Kirsten Buick:** *For abolitionists, Cleopatra was a symbol of what Black Africans could do if left to themselves. For pro-slavery groups, she was Greek and descended from the Ptolemies. That's the only way you could explain her greatness, that she was racially white.*

**Lizzie:** Even though these sculptures were white marble, 19th century viewers read racial clues in facial features—especially, the nose.

**Kirsten Buick:** *Whenever you talk about Cleopatra, you always talk about the nose.*

**Lizzie:** So Edmonia Lewis's decision to sculpt Cleopatra wasn't unusual, but she had a critical choice

to make about how to portray this African queen. So to get more intel on Lewis's Cleopatra, in particular, her nose, I went to the Smithsonian American Art Museum to talk with Curator, Karen Lemmey.

**Karen Lemmey:** *I'm Karen Lemmey, the Lucy S. Reign Curator of Sculpture here at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.*

**Lizzie:** She explained that rather than pick a side in the Cleopatra race debate, Lewis found a smart way around it—through historical research.

**Karen Lemmey:** *Especially in the 19th century, where you have this kind of imagining and reimagining and fantasy of Egypt and Cleopatra, it's important that she offers this anchor back into the historical record. And by sculpting it in Rome, she has the opportunity to do that.*

**Lizzie:** Lewis went to the Vatican to look at Roman coins showing Cleopatra's face in profile.

**Lizzie:** *So she goes the historical route by using these Roman coins concurrent with the time that Cleopatra was alive to say, "I'm gonna choose the most accurate depiction of her from the time that she was alive and thereby avoid taking a stance."*

**Karen Lemmey:** *Yes. What Lewis is doing is she's providing her audiences—and indeed us today—this possibility of what if I present my vision of Cleopatra, but I stay close to what we know about her historically?*

**Lizzie:** Edmonia's vision of Cleopatra set race aside and focused on the person she was. Her six-foot-tall rendering shows the queen on her throne, moments after her death. Her head tilts to the side, and her left arm hangs limp, her other hand still holding the poisonous asp that bit her. And even though the queen is dead, she appears regal, in control. Her expression almost serene.

**Lizzie:** *Do you feel though that Edmonia Lewis's choices about how she depicted Cleopatra had anything to do with who she was?*

**Karen Lemmey:** *Yes! It's as if Lewis wanted to show Cleopatra holding all the cards, claiming her last chapter, writing her history. This is an extraordinary statement, and it's especially extraordinary when you think this is made by a woman sculptor at the end of the 19th century, who herself has completely broken with convention. She is unmarried, she is successful, and she too is so much in control of her career.*

**Lizzie:** After laboring for four years on the sculpture, selling other work to fund the materials, working until she ran out of money, and then doing it again, Edmonia was invited to submit, "The Death of Cleopatra" to the United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. So Cleopatra crossed the Atlantic.



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**Karen Lemmey:** *It's very terrifying for any artist to send a sculpture out into the world because you don't know what's going to happen to it. You don't know what kind of pedestal it'll have. You don't know what kind of company it would keep.*

**Lizzie:** *How did the public receive it?*

**Karen Lemmey:** *The reviews were extraordinary. The people said, "You have to go and see this!" And there was an asterisk next to its listing in the catalog noting that it was for sale.*

**Lizzie:** But in spite of the great press, the sculpture didn't sell at the exhibition. Karen Lemmey says we can't know exactly why, but we do know this.

**Karen Lemmey:** *It not selling would have been devastating, also because of the investment of time and resources and you know, shipping this thing, acquiring the marble. So that is a major financial blow.*

**Lizzie:** Edmonia left Cleopatra in the United States and returned to Europe. There wasn't much left for her in the States. With the Civil War over, the abolitionist network lost interest in her work. Back in Europe, she continued to support herself with her art, and eventually moved to London, where she died around the age of 63. She left her estate—about £60,000—to the Catholic Church. And back in the US, "The Death of Cleopatra" dropped off the map.

**Karen Lemmey:** *It's remarkable that something that was heralded as so important in the 19th century, could so quickly fall into oblivion, really.*

**Lizzie:** Which brings us back to where we last saw Cleopatra, in the storage room of a shopping mall. Marilyn Richardson, who found it there, has pieced together bits of its colorful journey. Here's the quick version.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *For a while it was in a—in a saloon.*

**Lizzie:** *A saloon?*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *Yeah, it was indoors. [laughs] You can tell what my priorities are.*

**Lizzie:** *Uh-huh.*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *Then, it was purchased by a member of the saloon underworld. And he had a*

*favorite horse named Cleopatra, and the horse—the horse died.*

**Lizzie:** So it became a memorial to a horse! Then it stood guard at a golf course, and a torpedo plant, and eventually made its way to a junkyard and finally to the storeroom of a shopping mall with the off-season holiday decorations. And that is where Marilyn Richardson found it.

**Lizzie:** *You were the art historian whistleblower!*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *[laughs] Yeah! Yeah, I like that. But it all ended as splendidly as one could hope.*

**Lizzie:** Thanks to the work of Marilyn Richardson, "The Death of Cleopatra" now keeps better company than plastic poultry, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where Karen and I looked at it together.

**Karen Lemmey:** *We have the largest public collection of work by Edmonia Lewis. And this is, I think, her most important work, and as interest in Lewis rises, and it surely is, it is extraordinary to be able to elevate it back onto its pedestal.*

**Lizzie:** But even as more of Lewis's work emerges, much of her life remains an enigma.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *She succeeded in being an artist of renown. And yet she managed to keep the specifics about her background and her life really hidden. We don't know much about her life as a private person. We know about her as an artist.*

**Lizzie:** And Kirsten Buick says that's fine.

**Kirsten Buick:** *I prefer it that way.*

**Lizzie:** *Why?*

**Kirsten Buick:** *She was complicated and her life was complicated. As art historians we—and as writers, we follow narrative forms that I don't think do justice to our subject. So we try and end on a high note or a low note, and I chose to end elsewhere. She remains unknowable. And that's not a bad thing.*

**Lizzie:** Edmonia remains unknowable, but we have her work. As her name regains recognition, more of her work has surfaced. Each new find restores pieces of her legacy.

**Marilyn Richardson:** *There's a lot more still to discover, so the story is far from over.*

**Lizzie:** You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. This episode is a rerun of one of my favorites from 2019, and we wanted to share it now because the Smithsonian American Art Museum just opened a new exhibition called *The Shape of Power: Stories of Race in American Sculpture*. It features 82 artworks created between 1792 and 2023, including two by Edmonia Lewis. And "The Death of Cleopatra" is part of the museum's permanent collections, so you can see it when you visit, too. You'll also spot work by our friend Augustus Savage, who you might remember from season eight, from the episode "[The Monumental Imagination of Augustus Savage](#)." So if you're in town, head to the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It is the perfect outing for family and loved ones this Thanksgiving.

**Lizzie:** According to the data, the best way to spread the word about podcasts is to tell your friends. So if you like the show, share it! Tweet it! Put a sign up in your front yard about it! But then don't be surprised when people start using your side door. Sharing the show helps new listeners discover us, and as you know ...

**Marilyn Richardson:** *There's a lot more still to discover.*

**Lizzie:** Special thanks to Marilyn Richardson, Kirsten Buick, and Karen Lemmey for their fantastic research and their time. Buick's book, *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* really helped with our research for this episode. Thanks also to Hana Crawford and Perry Geyer.

**Lizzie:** This episode was originally made by me, Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Michelle Harven, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch and Sharon Bryant. Sidedoor's executive producer is Ann Conanan. Producer is James Morrison. Mimi Plato writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

**Lizzie:** If you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship\(@\)prx.org](mailto:sponsorship(@)prx.org). I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

**Lizzie:** *Let me get this straight. So you decide to look for a sculpture that you've never even seen? So you don't really know what it looks like and your approach is just to keep your eye out?*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *[laughs]*

**Lizzie:** *I mean, I keep my eye out for lost socks that I never find. I just—how did you do it?*

**Marilyn Richardson:** *The trail was not just cold, it was frozen! It was an iceberg! There was no trail. [laughs]*

**Lizzie:** *[laughs]*

