

VISUAL NARRATIVES AND THE PORTRAIT BUSTS
OF EDMONIA LEWIS

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by
SUSAN CROWE

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B.A., St. Louis University, 1997

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OF EDMONIA LEWIS

Susan Elizabeth Crowe, Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree
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ABSTRACT

This study considers the social and historical significance of the extant portrait busts sculpted by Edmonia Lewis. The Afro-Native American artist is best known for her thematic sculptures such as *Forever Free* (1867), *Hagar* (1875), and *Death of Cleopatra* (1876). The academic attention paid to these works obscures the fact that portrait busts account for over a third of her artistic output. Consequently, Lewis's portrait busts have not received a concentrated analysis. Who were the individuals portrayed? What were their relationships to the artist? Using Lewis's bust of *James Peck Thomas* (1874), her only existing portrait of an African-American patron as a case study, this study explores these two questions in depth. Drawing primarily from unpublished court documents, Thomas's autobiography as well as newspaper articles, this examination opens a unique window into the individual lives of Lewis's subjects, thereby expanding our knowledge of nineteenth-century American visual and cultural history.

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Supervisory Committee

Frances Connelly, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson
Department of Art and Art History

Burton Dunbar, Ph.D.
Department of Art and Art History

Catherine Futter, Ph.D.
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

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Susan Crowe

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Portrait of a Woman, a bust by Edmonia Lewis, sits silently atop a plinth in the St. Louis Art Museum's American Art Gallery (Fig. 1). Truncated just below the breast and measuring 23 inches in height, the marble sculpture rests upon a pedestal approximately six-inches high and eight inches in diameter. The woman's head turns slightly to our left, but the frontal position of her torso arrests the momentum of this motion. Transfixed, she stares vacantly out into the dimly lit cubic space. The stolid expression on her face only intensifies the rigid, inert nature of her pose. Yet, the biomorphic quality of her flesh conveys a faint suppleness, creating a paradoxical relationship with the implacable material from which she is carved.

Lewis's naturalistic portrait eschews idealization. The young woman's wide, triangular forehead slopes down from her uneven hairline and bulges slightly, forming a prominent ridge. Punctuating her brow are irregularly carved eyebrows; her right eyebrow angles upward over the eye while her left eyebrow inclines gently then dramatically slants downward. Almond-shaped eyes, lodged deep within her plump face, draw attention to the petite left eye, which is situated on a lower plane than the right one. In spite of their irregular shapes, the upper and lower eyelids arch delicately around the eyes and come to a point at the outer edges.



Figure 1. Edmonia Lewis, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1873, Marble, 58.4 X41.9 X 28.6 cm, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO.

Separating the eyes is a long, slender nose, which extends a little more than half the length of her face. The upper bridge, situated just beneath the eyebrows, descends at an angle before culminating at the tip into bulbous nostrils. Several inches below this protrusion are narrow lips; the slim undulating upper labium contrasts sharply with the sensuous curve of the full lower lip. Likewise, the curvilinear pattern of the woman's mouth is echoed throughout her compact torso, which is fitted with an exquisitely carved bodice. The square neckline of the scalloped lace trim exaggerates the verticality of her smooth bare neck and accentuates round, petite breasts. These corporeal qualities and the distinct characteristics of the woman's physiognomy hint at more than a passing likeness of an individual. Lewis's attempt to individualize the woman with minute details lends a touch of realism to the sculpture, which overshadows the neoclassical tendencies found in many nineteenth-century portrait busts.

But who is she? The provenance reveals few clues. Thomas Folk, a private art dealer discovered the portrait bust amid the bric-a-brac of a Lambertville, New Jersey antique shop in August 1996.¹ A month later, Folk sold the sculpture to Thurlow Tibbs, a prominent collector of African-American art, who in turn, offered the work to the St. Louis Art Museum. In January 1997, the museum acquired the untitled marble bust signed and dated – E. Lewis Roma 1873. In an effort to identify the portrait, Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris, then an Assistant Curator, contacted Marilyn Richardson, a noted Lewis scholar, for assistance in helping her confirm the woman's identity. Judging from Richardson's letter to Lewis-Harris, Lewis-Harris was under the impression that the bust represented Charlotte Cushman, the renowned American actress.²

When Lewis arrived in Rome in 1866 to pursue her career as a sculptor, she was introduced to Charlotte Cushman by fellow sculptor Harriet Hosmer. Cushman, who had accompanied Hosmer to Rome in 1852 as her chaperone served as a sort of matriarch of a loose coterie of female artists living and working in the city. Pejoratively dubbed a "white, marmorean flock" by writer Henry James, who disapproved of their emancipated lifestyle, this unconventional group of women lived far outside the boundaries of Victorian womanhood.³ In addition to Cushman and Hosmer, other notable members of the "flock" included Anne Whitney, Louis Lander, Emma Stebbins, and Margaret Foley.

According to Romare Bearden in *A History of African American Artists from 1792 to the Present*, Lewis became Cushman's "cause."⁴ "And Cushman set out to attract attention to Lewis as an untaught black artist, the first sculptor of her newly emancipated people."⁵ Cushman presented Lewis to the larger emigrant community and visiting tourists at her frequent evening soirees, directed traffic to Lewis's studio, and even assisted the artist financially with reproducing her sculpture *The Wooing of Hiawatha* (untraced) into marble.⁶ Furthermore, Bearden states that Cushman wrote a letter on Lewis's behalf to the Boston YMCA encouraging them to buy the aforementioned artwork, which they subsequently did in December 1867.⁷

Whether or not Cushman commissioned Lewis to sculpt her portrait as a tangible sign of her support or to advertise the artist's nascent talent is unknown. However, Lewis did display a bust of Cushman in her Roman studio in 1871.⁸ Still, it is unlikely that the *St. Louis Portrait of a Woman* represents Cushman for two reasons. First, the woman's low-cut lacy bodice, with flowers tucked into her bosom, exudes a femininity that is out of character

with Bearden's description of Cushman as a "homely woman who wore masculine clothes."⁹

Second, Cushman's features contrast sharply with the *Woman's* visage. Cushman's jutting jaw line, square chin, and thin downturn mouth evident in photographs in no way resembles the *Woman's* diamond shaped face, high cheekbones and fleshy lower lip.

Ostensibly, Marilyn Richardson reached the same conclusion. In the letter to Lewis-Harris, dated January 23, 1997, Richardson states:

As to the identity of the woman, I cannot say, although I do want to squelch the rumor that this might be a portrait bust of Charlotte Cushman. My hunch is that it is Lady Isobel Cholmondeley - - sometimes written as Cholmley or even Chumly - - a close friend of Lewis'[s], a famous Roman hostess, and herself an amateur sculptor who made a bust of Lewis. Her husband was a banker to members of the British and American expatriate community there, and as was Lewis, the Cholmondeleys were devout Roman Catholics. Lady C. was considered quite a beauty and was famous for entertaining her guest with selections on the harp. She was L's sponsor at her religious confirmation service.¹⁰

What is troubling about Richardson's assertion is her failure to substantiate her statements.

The English-born Lady Isobel Cholmondeley was indeed an amateur sculptor living in Rome contemporaneous with Lewis. Working in bronze and marble, her limited oeuvre consisted primarily of portrait busts. Two of her most well known works are of the English sculptor, John Gibson (n.d) and the Hungarian composer and musician, Franz Liszt (n.d) which were exhibited at exhibitions hosted by the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1864 and 1865.¹¹ Cholmondeley also executed a small bust of Lewis (currently unlocated) which she displayed in her studio in 1870. Mentioned in the article, "The Studios of Rome," published in the London *Art Journal* in March 1870, the bust was described as "showing the mixed races from which [Lewis] descends."¹² According to the writer, "on one side of the

head the hair is woolly, her father having been a [N]egro; on the other, it is of the soft flaccid character which distinguishes the Indian race, from which her mother sprang."¹³ Cholmondeley's playful anthropological portrait seems to suggest that she and Lewis were more than mere associates. According to Anne Whitney, a fellow cohort and sculptor, Lewis "looked upon [Cholmondeley] as her best friend."¹⁴ Nonetheless, the existence of a friendship between the two women does not corroborate Richardson's intimation that *Portrait of a Woman* is in fact Lady Isobel Cholmondeley. Furthermore, Richardson neglects to address how the bust of an English woman, living in Rome, found its way to the United States from Italy. Fully aware of her dubious attribution, Richardson states, "For the moment, though, perhaps this work could be called 'Portrait of a Woman with Bodice.'"¹⁵

It appears the museum's investigation into the *Woman's* identity ceased after Harris-Lewis received Richardson's letter. Four years later, *Portrait of a Woman* was exhibited for the first time under its new title in the museum's exhibition, "People at the Museum," which ran from July 7 to September 9, 2001. After a two-year absence, the anonymous portrait was re-installed in 2003 as part of the permanent collection. Then in July 2007 Janeen Turk, a curatorial assistant, received a curious email from Evangeline Clare, an independent researcher, who proposed her own theory regarding the *Woman's* identity:

I believe this bust to be that of Antoinette Thomas née Rutgers (1837-1896). Antoinette was the daughter of Pelagie and Lewis Rutgers and married James Peck Thomas on February 11, 1868. They were, individually, very wealthy Afro-Americans who engaged Edmonia to model their images during the months of November and December, 1873. Lewis completed both busts in clay and returned to Rome in January, 1874 where the busts were executed in marble. The bust of James Peck Thomas, dated 1873 has recently been acquired by the Allen Memorial Gallery at Oberlin.¹⁶

Intrigued by the suggestion, Turk requested more information, specifically documentation that would underpin Clare's proposed attribution. (To this writer's knowledge, this request has not been met). What if Clare's assertion could be substantiated? What would the revelation reveal? First and foremost, the attribution would alter significantly the work's social and historical narrative. Unlike Lady Isobel Cholmondeley, an English aristocrat, Antoinette Thomas was an aristocrat of a different sort. Born to Pelagie Baptiste, a mulatto ex-slave and Louis Rutgers, the mulatto son of a Dutchman, Antoinette's family belonged to St. Louis's color aristocracy, a clique of well-to-do freed blacks living in the city prior to the Civil War and emancipation.¹⁷ This shift in perspective dramatically changes the interpretation of the sculpture. Instead of viewing the bust through the lens of white privilege, this new vantage point focuses attention on America's colored elite. Considering the portrait from this viewpoint, art historians must now deliberate on how wealthy nineteenth-century African-Americans, comparative to their white counterparts, used portraiture as a means to illuminate their wealth, power, and cultural attainment. Additionally, art historians must also consider what added meaning African-Americans might have ascribed to these status symbols in a society that viewed freed blacks as a threat to the social order.

Although Clare does not mention specific sources in her letter, her proposal that *Portrait of a Woman* represents Antoinette Thomas is just as probable as Richardson's assertion that the bust depicts Lady Isobel Cholmondeley. Yet, unlike Richardson's hunch, Clare's claim, albeit circumstantial, is at least bolstered by significant documentation. For

example, Clare reports that James and Antoinette Thomas "were individually, very wealthy Afro-Americans."¹⁸ This information is noted in Cyprian Clamorgan's 1858 book, *The Colored Aristocracy* edited by Judith Winch in 1999.¹⁹ Antoinette inherited a considerable fortune from her mother Pelagie Rutgers whose estate was estimated at \$60,000 according to the 1860 census.²⁰ And James's putative worth, prior to his marriage to Antoinette in 1868, was about \$15,000.²¹ In Thomas's autobiography *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Peck Thomas* edited by Loren Schweninger's, Schweninger cites numerous sources—property deeds, newspaper articles, and census records—to provide a detailed account of the Thomas's growing wealth, which was based largely on real estate.²² By 1873, the date inscribed on *Woman*, James's fortune was reaching its apex. According to Schweninger, James "oversaw an estate...valued in excess of \$250,000."²³ Clearly, the couple possessed the financial means to commission their portraits by one of the leading sculptors of the day.

Exactly when and where James and Antoinette Thomas met Edmonia Lewis is unknown; however, they were undoubtedly acquainted with the artist by 1873 as reported by Clare. Newspaper articles and court documents confirm this relationship. On November 20th 1873, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* published "Interview with the Famous Colored Sculptress"; the exchange between Lewis and the reporter took place at the Thomas family home located in St. Louis City.²⁴ Court documents reveal that Lewis spent time with the couple during November and December of 1873.²⁵ On December 2, the two parties entered into a contract; James and Antoinette commissioned Lewis to sculpt a statue of *The Virgin Mary at the Cross* for Antoinette's mother's grave.²⁶ According to Lewis's deposition from

the lawsuit she filed against the couple in 1877 for breach of contract, she modeled the *Virgin Mary* in clay "under their own eyes."²⁷

Although Clare does not mention this work in her letter, she asserts that Lewis also created clay busts of James and Antoinette Thomas during her stay.²⁸ This writer has yet to uncover evidence to substantiate Clare's statement; however, Lewis did indeed sculpt a portrait of Mr. Thomas, which is currently in the collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio. According to a freight receipt, Lewis shipped the marble bust of James Peck Thomas, along with a marble pedestal from Rome to Baldwin Brothers & Co. in New York City on May 29, 1875.²⁹ The artwork and support were sent along with four other items, one of which was *The Virgin Mary at the Cross*.³⁰ The fact that the two sculptures were part of the same shipment lends credibility to Clare's declaration that models of the two artworks were completed within the same time span. But did Lewis also sculpt a portrait of Antoinette Thomas? If so, where is it now?

Considering the veracity of many of Claire's pronouncements, it is tempting to conclude that *Woman* is a representation of Antoinette Thomas and the companion to James Peck Thomas's portrait. Both sculptures are comparable in size; *Woman's* dimensions are 58.4 x 41.9 x 28.6 cm, while Thomas's bust measures 58 x 44.5 x 26.5. Furthermore, the works are similarly posed, with their heads turned slightly to the left, so if the sculptures were placed directly opposite one another, say in a hallway or room, they would appear to be looking in the same direction as if jointly acknowledging a visitor. Yet in spite of these similarities, the dates inscribed on the works are inconsistent with Clare's assertion that the works were modeled in clay in 1873 and transferred into marble in 1874. *Woman* is dated

1873, while the date inscribed on Thomas's bust is 1874. Moreover, *Woman* was not included in the shipment with Thomas's portrait. Although this discrepancy appears to refute Clare's argument, it is conceivable that Lewis's visit to the Thomas's home was prearranged in order to deliver *Woman* to Antoinette. When Lewis arrived in the United States in July 1873, she brought many artworks with her--portraits busts of Lincoln, Horace Greeley, as well as thematic sculptures --so it is highly feasible that *Woman* was among the lot.³¹ However, it is just as likely that the portrait was destined for another female patron. The Thomas home was just one stop on Lewis's six-month tour of America; presumably she resided with a number of friends during her trip. Bearden reports that Lewis traveled to New York City and San Francisco before stopping in St. Louis in the winter of 1873.³² Therefore, without conclusive and consequential data, such as photographs, provenance records or personal letters, *Woman's* true identity, lost over time, may never be rediscovered.

Portrait of a Woman is one of twenty-six individual portraits sculpted by Lewis during the course of her career. This number accounts for over a third of her artistic output (approximately sixty sculptures according to Marilyn Richardson).³³ However, these works have not received a concentrated analysis by scholars. Thus, this study focuses attention on the social and historical significance of the portrait busts sculpted by the artist, the first woman of color to achieve national and international recognition as a sculptor. In the past fifteen years, Lewis's life and art have been the subject of approximately ten significant essays.³⁴ Most recently, she served as the catalyst for Charmaine Nelson's book *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* published in 2007. Nevertheless, these publications concentrate primarily on Lewis's

biography and her thematic works such as *Forever Free* (1867) depicting a jubilant black couple celebrating their emancipation, *Hagar* (1875), a work drawn from the biblical story of Hagar in the wilderness, and *Death of Cleopatra* (1876), a life-size portrayal of the defeated Egyptian queen releasing her last breath. The academic interest paid to these works has eclipse the fact that portrait busts of abolitionist, celebrities, and friends make up a substantial portion of Lewis's extensive oeuvre. Who were the individuals portrayed? And what were their relationships to the artists? Using the bust of James Peck Thomas (1874), the only extant portrait of an African-American patron as a case study, I will explore these two questions in-depth. In order to reconstruct the context of his portrait, this study draws foremost from unpublished court documents, Thomas's autobiography, as well as nineteenth-century newspaper articles. In conclusion, this examination of Lewis's portrait busts, with a particular focus on the portrait of James Peck Thomas, opens a unique window into the individual lives of her subjects thereby expanding our knowledge of nineteenth-century American visual and cultural history. Beyond that, this analysis provides a deeper understanding of Lewis's remarkable personal biography.

CHAPTER 2

JAMES PECK THOMAS

Although Lewis's bust of James Peck Thomas is the only known extant portrait of an African American patron, it is not the sole portrait of an African-American sculpted by the artist. Lewis carved the likeness of abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Dr. James McCune Smith, as well as Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, the founder of Wilberforce University in Ohio.¹ Beside a brief note in a few articles, little has been written about these individual works. The majority of writers tend to view Lewis's relationship with her subjects/patrons in terms of black and white; an African-Native American artist sculpting busts of white "champions of liberty" such as Abraham Lincoln and Colonel Robert Gould Shaw primarily for a white clientele. A few scholars like Marilyn Richardson and Charmaine Nelson have managed to expand this paradigm by arguing that African-Americans served as both subjects for and consumers of Lewis's portraits. How many of her patrons were black is unknown, as is, the number of African-Americans represented. However, one can deduce that middle and upper class African-Americans, in addition to purchasing busts of white subjects, would have coveted portraits of themselves as well as representations of their own cultural icon. This desire to be both subject and patron is the reason James Peck Thomas's bust holds such promise for the advancement of a scholarly discourse regarding nineteenth-century African-American patronage (Fig. 2). Unlike the aforementioned works, extensive records exist that provide details about Thomas's relationship with Lewis and his possible motives for commissioning his portrait. In addition to his autobiography, which paints a rare

picture of a former slave who managed to become one of the richest black men in Missouri, court documents reveal that Thomas commissioned a second work from Lewis, an ideal sculpture of the *Virgin Mary*. This new knowledge is profound because it helps to expand a limited discourse, centered almost exclusively on Lewis's white abolitionist patrons, by incorporating into the conversation, previously unknown information about one of her African-American supporters.

James Peck Thomas was born in Tennessee in 1827 to an enslaved mother named Sally. His father, according to Loren Schweninger in *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Peck Thomas*, was Tennessee Supreme Court Justice John Catron, who later served as a United States Supreme Court Justice.² At the time of his birth, Thomas and his mother were the property of Charles Thomas, a Virginia plantation owner; however, when the elder Thomas died, they became the possession of John Martin, a trustee of the estate. When Thomas was about five years old, his mother became aware of Martin's plan to sell him to an out-of-state buyer. Asking a white family friend, Ephraim Foster, a plantation owner and lawyer to intercede, Sally purchased Thomas's freedom for \$400, primarily with funds she had managed to save from her laundry business.³ Nevertheless, Thomas remained enslaved due to the Tennessee law that required freed blacks to leave the state upon emancipation. Consequently, Foster became Thomas's new legal owner.

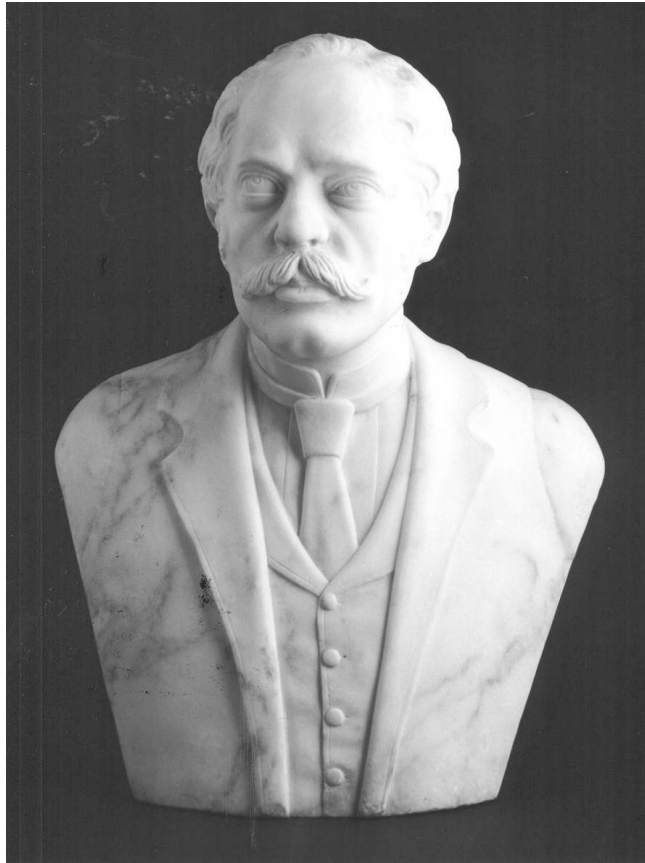


Figure 2 Edmonia Lewis, *James Peck Thomas*, 1874, marble, 55.8 X 45.7 X 25.4 cm. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH.

Despite his enslavement and laws restricting his movements and interactions with other slaves and freed blacks, Thomas enjoyed an enormous amount of personal freedom. Schweninger states, Thomas freely moved about Nashville unmolested and socialized openly with the free and enslaved communities there.⁴ Moreover, "he hired his own time, ran his own business, and earned his own money."⁵ Although Schweninger argues that other slaves were granted similar favors "because of the acquiescence of whites," Thomas's privileged position, in relationship to the overall standing of slaves in Tennessee, was nonetheless the exception rather than the rule.⁶ Unencumbered by the typical limitations of slavery, Thomas was allowed to hone his entrepreneurial skills, first as an assistant in his mother's laundry business and later on as a barber's apprentice in a shop owned by fellow slave and entrepreneur, Frank Parrish.⁷ Barbering was one of the few trades open to blacks and many took full advantage of the opportunity. Schweninger notes, "Of the eight barbers advertising in the city's first business directory, six were Negroes."⁸ While still enslaved, the enterprising Thomas established and managed his own barbershop, which catered to a white professional clientele.⁹

His business and financial success was due in part to his dexterity with a razor and scissors as well as his ability to "know his place" within the southern social order. Through his interactions with well-to-do whites, Thomas mastered the delicate and precarious dance that governed antebellum black/white relationships. His deference to his patrons and his quiet unassuming manner gave him access to privy information enabling him "to learn the ways and peculiarities of the old time gentlemen."¹⁰ Thomas being an ambitious young man absorbed this knowledge, allowing it to shape his own social and economic behaviors.

Even as a slave, Thomas participated in a variety of cultural activities typically enjoyed by middle and upper class whites and freed blacks such as musical and operatic concerts, the theater as well as political rallies. Above all, he managed to quietly increase his personal fortune reported to be "several thousand dollars" without attracting undue attention to himself.¹¹

Thomas's keen ability to negotiate between these two worlds, along with his industriousness, ultimately led to his emancipation. According to Schweninger, Thomas used his "reputation as one of the most enterprising blacks in the city" to convince Ephraim Foster, his owner to grant him his freedom.¹² In his petition to the court, Foster lauded Thomas's impeccable character stating, "James had always maintained an exemplary standing in the community, had conducted himself in a manner to secure the good will of whites, and was a person of great worth 'in his place.'"¹³ Swayed by Foster's glowing testimony, the court emancipated Thomas, who in turn, petitioned for permission to remain in state despite the law that barred this practice. In an unprecedented decision, the court granted Thomas residency in 1851.¹⁴ No longer required to leave the state, Thomas channeled his time and energy into his flourishing barbershop. Although barbering was not a highly profitable profession, many blacks invested their income into the real estate market, yielding handsome returns on their investment.¹⁵ Following suit, Thomas used his barbering proceeds as seed money to purchase his first piece of real estate for \$3000 in the 1850s.¹⁶

Looking to expand his real estate holdings, Thomas began searching for new markets to exploit outside of Tennessee. In the mid-1850s, he journeyed to the Midwest and began buying undeveloped lots in Iowa and Kansas hoping to take advantage of the area's cheap,

available land.¹⁷ However, the racial politics in Kansas proved to be extremely volatile with proslavery advocates and Free-Soilers fighting to control the territory. As a result of the rising racial tension, Thomas left Kansas, where he had hoped to settle and made his way to St. Louis, Missouri in July 1857.¹⁸ Thomas's estimated worth was around \$15,000 dollars by the time he arrived in the city, a sum that attracted the attention of Henry and Cyprian Clamorgan, members of one of St. Louis's pre-eminent colored families. Through his contact with the brothers, Thomas eventually secured a position as a barber at Henry Clamorgan's upscale shop, located on Fourth and Pine in Downtown St. Louis. His burgeoning affluence quickly gained him entry into St. Louis's colored aristocracy, a community of wealthy freed blacks, who resided in the area known as Soulard today, prior to the Civil War. In 1860, approximately 3, 572 freed blacks called Missouri home and about 1,755 lived in St. Louis.¹⁹ How many were members of the colored aristocracy is unknown; however, the members highlighted in Cyprian Clamorgan's 1858 book *The Colored Aristocracy* edited by Judith Winch "[were] an amalgam of long-term residents and newcomers," particularly descendents of slaves and St. Louis's former French colonists such as Cyprian Clamorgan and recent well-to-do emigrants like Thomas.²⁰

Although skin color and profession were noted qualities, "wealth was the most important qualification for 'aristocratic status.'"²¹ Thomas's fortune was modest in comparison to the fellow aristocrats featured in Clamorgan's book, which Clamorgan wrote to advertise the wealth of the colored elite in order gain political concessions to ameliorate the social conditions for freed blacks in the city.²² Despite being emancipated, freed blacks were legally regarded no better than slaves. Many whites feared this population for several

reasons. Markedly, their presence in St. Louis undermined the system of slavery and many whites believed that they "instigated...slaves to break the bonds of servitude."²³ To keep freed blacks in their place, the Missouri State Legislature passed several laws restricting their freedom. They were required to carry manumission papers, forbidden to travel without permission, prohibited from gathering in large groups, and banned from receiving an education. It was illegal for blacks, freed or enslaved to learn to read or write.

Yet despite these obstacles, freed blacks managed to circumvent the laws and flourish financially in St. Louis. Members of the aristocracy such as Antoine Labadie (\$300,000), Mrs. Pelagie Forman (\$100,000), and Mrs. Sarah Hazlett (\$75,000) commanded considerable estates, but none were more prosperous than Pelagie Rutgers, whom Clamorgan claimed was worth half a million dollars, a figure Winch notes was highly exaggerated.²⁴ Rutgers, a former slave, had inherited her wealth from her late husband Louis Rutgers, the mulatto son of a Dutch merchant and landowner. Clamorgan described Rutgers as "an illiterate woman" who "lives in good style," stating "she makes a fine appearance in society, but exposes her ignorance when she attempts to converse."²⁵ Yet his mordant remarks, whether true or not, belied her sagaciousness. When she died in 1867, in addition to leaving money to charity and her adopted children, the bulk of her estate passed to her legitimate daughter, and she stipulated in her will "Antoinette's inheritance would be 'for the sole, separate, & exclusive use, free from the control, and from all liabilities of any future husband.'"²⁶ Clamorgan considered Antoinette the "greatest 'match'" among the aristocracy, no doubt because of her impending inheritance.²⁷ She surely caught the eye of many eligible bachelors of the colored elite including James Thomas, whom she also

fancied. Nevertheless, Pelagie forbade their union. Ostensibly, Thomas's financial success and social standing could not overcome his prior status as a slave, an egregious contradiction on Pelagie's part since she was also a former slave.²⁸ Instead of risking exclusion from her mother's will by openly defying her wishes, Antoinette seems to have bided her time. Pelagie finally died in February 1867 and a year later, after an eleven-year courtship, Antoinette married James Thomas on February 12, 1868.²⁹

Although Antoinette maintained sole control of her inheritance, she surely must have shared, or at least supported, Thomas's entrepreneurial ambitions, because shortly after their marriage, he opened a real estate brokerage firm and began investing heavily in the St. Louis housing market.³⁰ By 1870, Schweningen states, "Thomas was the richest Negro in the entire state...and controlled more than 5 percent of the total property owned by Missouri blacks."³¹ A few years later in 1873, Schweningen reports that Thomas:

Had established a small financial empire. He owned six apartment houses... and other property in various sections of the city, besides valuable stocks and bonds and two business firms. He oversaw an estate, including the old Rutgers property, valued in excess of \$250,000.³²

The Thomas family "lived as well as some of the richest whites," according to Schweningen.³³ Their home on Seventh Street contained all the conspicuous accoutrements that defined their social identity. Schweningen reports:

They decorated its interior with lace curtains, imported Persian carpets, mahogany furniture, and a rosewood piano that Antoinette's father had brought about 1835. They employed a full-time gardener and a domestic servant...their household...also included a school teacher, a French born physician, and several adopted children.³⁴

Although Thomas's august estate represented the most tangible symbol of his financial success, his Grand Tour of Europe consummated his aristocratic metamorphosis.

Once the exclusive privilege of the upper class, the Grand Tour became a rite of passage for the nouveau riche and the burgeoning middle class after the Civil War, thanks in part to advances in steamship technology and America's growing industrial economy. The Grand Tour, which could take upwards of three months to complete, usually began in Liverpool, England. From there, one traveled to London with side trips to the outlying areas. The next stop was France, followed by a visit to Switzerland, and concluding with a jaunt to Italy - first to Florence, and then finally to Rome.

Thomas's voyage followed a similar path. In June 1873, he embarked from New York City on the ship *City of Paris* making his way, first to Liverpool followed by a visit to London.³⁵ In England Thomas visited the Tower of London, a Turkish bath, attended several operas and toured Westminster Abby. In France Thomas noted he "fell in with three gentlemen, one a professor of languages, a Frenchman...one a manufacturer...the third a young English clergyman."³⁶ With his companions, Thomas explored the various cultural attractions of Rouen and Paris, including Versailles, Notre Dame Cathedral, the Champ de Mars, and Napoleon's tomb. Throughout his account, Thomas remarked on the various skin hues of the Europeans he encountered and the ease at which people of all races seemed to interact with one another. Thomas stated, "I saw many people in Paris who could pass for colored in America without trying, but from their general demeanor and bearing had never worn the yoke."³⁷

After spending the Fourth of July in Geneva, Switzerland and dining at the table of the American Minister, Thomas's tour took him to Italy. Where he visited some of Europe's oldest and most renowned architectural sites including the ancient Roman ruins, Milan

Cathedral, and St. Peter's Basilica. He also partook in the art of the Renaissance masters Tintoretto, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo.

The visual arts were major attractions of the tour and visits to museums, galleries, churches, and architectural sites made up a significant part of the trip's itinerary.³⁸ Besides viewing art, purchasing artworks, particularly sculptures from American artists working in Florence and Rome were key elements of the Grand Tour as well.³⁹ Travel books guided potential customers and curious onlookers in their search for fine art souvenirs. According to Charmaine Nelson, "between 1800 and 1868 alone, some seven hundred books of travel were published."⁴⁰ Furthermore she notes, "Such guidebooks often noted the location of artists' studios."⁴¹ To accommodate these cultural tourists, artists produced two types of sculptures: portraits and ideal works according to William Gerdts' essay "Celebrities of the Grand Tour."⁴² Plaster models of busts and thematic works were displayed in artists' studios, where tourists could come and peruse the collection. Patrons ordered copies of exhibited works in marble directly from the artist; and in the case of a commissioned portrait, a patron would make arrangements with the artist to schedule a sitting, so a working model of a bust or statue could be created. Gerdts notes that these transactions usually required a down payment consisting of one-half the total price of the work at the time of the order, with the remaining balance due once the work had been received by the client.⁴³ In all, "the whole process might take six months to a year."⁴⁴

As a member of the colored aristocracy, Thomas would have fully understood the unwritten custom of using art as a means to advertise his cultural achievements and establish his social legacy. But did he visit Edmonia Lewis's Roman studio during his trip and

commission his portrait as suggested by Steven Jones, a specialist in African-American material culture?⁴⁵ Curiously, Thomas neglects to make any mention of Lewis in his autobiography. Complicating the matter is the fact that Lewis was in the United States when Thomas supposedly visited Italy. Although Thomas does not list specific dates for each leg of his trip, this writer constructed a loose timeline that seems to contradict Jones's assertion. Thomas left America for Liverpool in early June 1873.⁴⁶ From there, he traveled to Paris, then to Geneva, Switzerland, where he celebrated the Fourth of July holiday before journeying to Italy. Once in Italy, Thomas visited Turin, followed by a trip to Milan, then Genoa, finally arriving in Rome probably in late July. According to a passenger list published in the *New York Times*, Lewis arrived in New York City on July 6, 1873 and on the 10th gave an interview to the *Daily Graphic*.⁴⁷ It is unlikely that she and Thomas met in Rome. However, Thomas wrote his account twenty years after the fact, meaning that his recollection of time could have been comprised with age. Furthermore, his omission of his patronage of Lewis could stem from his acrimonious relationship with the artist after she filed a lawsuit against him in 1877.⁴⁸

I believe Thomas commissioned his portrait when he and his wife commissioned Lewis to sculpt the aforementioned tomb monument, *The Virgin Mary at the Cross* in December 1873 while Lewis was a guest in their home.⁴⁹ The statue, according to the contract, was to be five feet tall and supported by a three-foot marble pedestal ornamented with flowers. Accompanying the figure was to be a cross wreathed in a crown of thorns and roses.⁵⁰ The statue was to be carved of pure white marble of the first quality, while the pedestal and cross were to be constructed of second quality marble.⁵¹ The price for the

monument was 400-pounds sterling.⁵² Thomas notes that Lewis visited his home in 1873 and that he saw models of the statue in progress.⁵³ Lewis sketched out a drawing of the monument and created clay and plaster models, which she carried back with her to Rome in January 1874.⁵⁴ It is very likely, as Claire states, that Lewis created a clay model of Thomas's bust as well.

Although there is no contract for Thomas's portrait, the existing contract for the *Virgin Mary* statue states that the remaining balance was to be paid once the couple received the artwork. The bust and statue arrived together at Baldwin Bros & Co. in New York City sometime in June 1875, and in the fall the freight company shipped the crates to a St. Louis marble yard owned by Matthew Parks.⁵⁵ However, Thomas and his wife failed to pay Lewis the remaining 100-pounds sterling as stipulated in the contract and apparently ignored her repeated request for payment. Finally after making several attempts to collect the unpaid balance, Lewis filed a lawsuit in 1877 to recover the debt. The protracted court battle that ensued raged on in the St. Louis City Circuit Courts for seven years due to repeated appeals filed by both parties. Thomas and his attorney justified Thomas's breach of contract by accusing Lewis of producing a statue that they claimed was "a mere burlesque upon art."⁵⁶ Although the courts finally ruled in Thomas's favor, neither party emerged from the proceedings victorious. What happened to the statue following the end of the case is unknown. Neither Thomas nor Lewis took possession of the sculpture; therefore, it was probably resold to another buyer by Matthew Parks, which means the statue could be erected upon another tomb in the Calvary Cemetery, where it was originally destined for Pelagie Rutger's gravesite. This writer has yet to rediscover the work. Curiously, during the lawsuit,

Thomas and his attorney never called into question Lewis's workmanship of Thomas's portrait bust, which he accepted despite refusing the statue of the *Virgin Mary*.

During the same year Lewis filed her lawsuit, Thomas and his wife bought a three story Victorian home in Alton, Illinois. Like their home on Seventh Street in St. Louis, this home reflected their established wealth. On the first floor, the rooms were decorated with marble top tables, a piano, a music box, upholstery chairs and sofa, two mirrors, mahogany chairs, lace curtains, an assortment of pictures as well as three family portraits.⁵⁷ Although no description is given, I believe the portraits were busts of James, Antoinette, and their young son Arend, who was born in 1873. The second and third floors were equally furnished with wardrobes, bedside tables, lounge chairs and other accessories with carpets laid through out the various rooms and halls.⁵⁸

Thomas and his family lived a comfortable and idyllic life and by 1890 at the age of sixty-three, he decided to retire and write his autobiography. He sold the luxury barbershop in the Lindell Hotel in Downtown St. Louis, which grossed about \$2000 a month in sales and closed his real estate agency, living instead off his investments and the income he generated from his rental properties.⁵⁹ However, by the end of the decade his \$400,000 financial empire was decimated.⁶⁰ First, he was forced to mortgage some of his property after defaulting on several loans during the Economic Panic of 1893.⁶¹ Then in 1896, he faced another economic catastrophe when a tornado severely damaged several of his apartment buildings and killed twenty-five of his tenants.⁶² Since the properties were inadequately insured, Thomas had to mortgage many of his remaining properties to cover his expenses. By the time Antoinette died in 1897 of Bright's disease, Thomas already

facing financial ruin could not afford to pay the outstanding debt against her estate. In October 1898, the family home in Alton, and almost all of its contents were auctioned off to the highest bidder for mere pennies on the dollar. For example, the \$2000 piano, which Antoinette's father had purchased in the 1830s was valued at \$25.00 by the appraiser, the three marble table tops, \$3.00 a piece and the mahogany chairs, \$4.50 a piece.⁶³ Interestingly, the three family portraits were apparently of no value and given back to the family. After the sale of his home, Thomas moved into one of his remaining apartments and lived off the meager rental income he collected from his other tenants until his death in 1913 from influenza.

When Steven Jones rediscovered Thomas's bust in an undisclosed antique shop in 2002, he was able to identify the portrait by tracing it back to Thomas's daughter, Pelagie Thomas Blair. Blair had exhibited the sculpture in the exhibition "Negro in Art Week" held at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1927. A photo of the portrait was featured prominently in the show's catalogue.⁶⁴ A similar photograph was also published in Alain Locke's seminal book, *The Negro in Art* from 1940.⁶⁵ Both sources clearly attributed the artwork to Blair. When she died in 1939, the bust disappeared leaving a sixty-year gap in the provenance record.

Whatever became of the two remaining portraits remains a mystery. However, Thomas's bust serves as a rare portal into the lives of two nineteenth-century African-Americans, who despite the odds reached amazing personal and professional heights. Their intersecting lives provide new insight into Lewis's life as an artist and Thomas's role as a patron. By extension, their artist/patron relationship increases our knowledge of black

patronage and how the colored aristocracy used art objects such as portrait busts to establish and confirm their social identity and status. It is unlikely that Thomas was the only member of this elite class to commission an artwork. The other members would have surely known about Lewis's reputation and taken notice of her visit to the Thomas's home in 1873.

Considering James's and Antoinette's social standing among this community, Lewis would have probably been a celebrated guest and introduced to their friends and family. Most likely she would have been the recipient of numerous invitations to various social engagements, especially since her visit was reported in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, the city's leading newspaper at the time. The fact that the paper sent a reporter to Thomas's home to interview the artist is a testament to his wealth and social status as well as to Lewis's artistic renown. A closer examination of St. Louis's colored aristocracy is warranted in light of this new research. It is highly plausible that a more in-depth study may uncover information about previously unknown or undocumented artworks sculptured by Lewis.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Lewis's portrait of James Peck Thomas is one of only ten extant busts sculpted by the artist in public collections. The other nine are: *Portrait of a Woman* (1873), St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO; *Anne Q. Waterston* (1866) and *Young Octavian* (1873), Smithsonian Museum of American Art; Washington, D.C.; *Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* (1867), Museum of Afro-American History, Boston, MA; *Dioclesian Lewis* (1868), Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD; *Portrait of a Man* (1869), American Museum of Natural History, New York City, NY; *Abraham Lincoln* (1871), San Jose Library, San Jose, CA; *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (1871), Harvard University, Boston, MA; and *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (1872), National Museum, Liverpool, England. This meager list likely represents only a fraction of the total busts carved by Lewis during the course of her career. How many portraits she sculpted is indeterminate, especially since she produced manifold copies of popular historical figures like John Brown and Charles Sumner. Likewise, some busts are probably lost to the historical record forever, and many more still wait to be discovered. For instance, Steven Jones rediscovered Thomas's bust as well as Dioclesian Lewis's portrait only recently in 2002. Similarly, additional busts presumably exist in private collections and unless they come up for auction, or are included in exhibitions, they will remain unknown to the public. This limited number of extant portraits

poses a challenge to anyone attempting to analyze their social and historical significance to Lewis's career as well as to nineteenth-century art history.

Also undermining the study of Lewis's portraits is the hierarchy imposed on the fine arts. Although busts are considered fine art objects, they have not traditionally been ranked as highly as sculptures representing dramatic narratives drawn from history and literature. Therefore, as works of art, they languish on the lower rungs of the prevailing art historical ladder. Consequently, this bias interferes with our understanding of the relationship of Lewis's portrait busts within her entire *oeuvre*. With the exception of *Colonel Robert Gould Shaw* and *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, little is written about these artworks; almost all of the scholarly attention focuses on Lewis's ideal sculptures. These figurative works which depict historical, allegorical, or religious subjects were crucial to Lewis's artistic repertoire.¹ Exhibited in her studio and at public exhibitions, these show pieces advertised her cultural and intellectual achievements as well as technical virtuosity. However, the attention paid to Lewis's ideal works exposes only half of her story. According to Wayne Craven in his essay, "Images of a Nation in Wood, Marble and Bronze," it was "the portrait bust that kept the sculptor financially solvent and allowed him or her to work on fancy pieces."² Therefore, based on Craven's pronouncement, one can surmise that Lewis's notable sculptures such as *Forever Free* and *Hagar* were probably, at least in part, produced with money earned from the sale of her busts (Fig. 3). By examining this latter body of work and Lewis's mode of production, scholars can obtain a better sense of her professional life as an artist and the struggles she faced as she established her reputation as a sculptor.



Fig. 3 Edmonia Lewis, *Forever Free*, 1867, Marble, 104.8 x 55.9 x 43.2, Howard University, Washington DC.

Lewis's career as a sculptor began shortly after her arrival to Boston, Massachusetts around February or March of 1863.³ Initially, she had planned to study music; however, after she encountered Richard Greenough's bronze statue of *Benjamin Franklin* (1856) during a stroll around the city, she had a change of heart. In an 1873 interview with *The Daily Graphic*, Lewis fondly recounted seeking out her mentor, William Lloyd Garrison, and resolutely declaring her intention to become a sculptor.⁴ Lewis had been introduced to Garrison, who was a radical abolitionist and social reformer, through a letter of introduction she received from the Reverend John Keep, an Ohio abolitionist and Oberlin College trustee, with whom she boarded while a student at the school.⁵ Garrison, best known as the founder and editor of the *Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper, and as the co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, was an indefatigable advocate for the immediate abolition of slavery and an early supporter of civil rights for blacks and women. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Garrison, upon learning of Lewis's determination to pursue this new vocation, assisted her in her endeavor. According to Lewis, Garrison presented her with a letter of introduction to Edmund Brackett, the notable Bostonian sculptor, who became her first influential teacher.⁶ As a result of Garrison's aid, Lewis not only managed to acquire the necessary skills she needed to become a recognized sculptor, but most importantly, she gained wide access to Boston's abolitionist community. Garrison promoted Lewis's portraits at anti-slavery meetings and fellow abolitionists Anne Quincy Waterston, and Lydia Maria Child endorsed her sculptures in articles and poems published in the *Liberator*. For these abolitionists, Lewis's artistic achievements represented the epitome of black potential and they upheld her success to demonstrate to hostile pro-slavery supporters that the "lesser

race" could be civilized.⁷ Hence, this well-heeled socially conscientious group served "as a springboard for [Lewis's] career and as a continuing source of sculptural subject matter and patronage."⁸

Lewis wasted no time in honing her artistic skills. Under Brackett's aegis she rapidly mastered the basic techniques of clay modeling and plaster casting. The artist recalled the celerity of her progress in an 1873 interview with the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*:

He gave me a lump of clay and a little baby's foot. He asked me to work at it...I went to my little room and made a foot out of clay as well as I could. I took it to Mr. Brackett, and every time I did so he broke it up, until three weeks had passed. He then seemed really pleased with my work, and gave me a lady's hand to do. I worked on the lady's hand, and got on nicely. Then I worked on a medallion.⁹

Sometime between the end of 1863 and the beginning of 1864, Lewis produced one of her first professional works of art, a portrait medallion of John Brown, the fiery, white abolitionist who led the ill-fated raid on the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. After his trial and subsequent execution, Brown became a martyr for the anti-slavery cause. Bearden claims that Lewis became aware of the famous abolitionist while a student at Oberlin College in Ohio. He states, "When John Brown was hanged, the chapel bell tolled for an hour and faculty members lead a protest meeting of students, faculty, and townspeople."¹⁰ Edmund Brackett was one of several artists who sculpted commemorative portraits of this radical figure, which abolitionists, both black and white, deemed a cultural hero. However, Nelson suggests that Lewis's preference for Brown as a subject in 1864 was inspired less by reverence and more by monetary motives designed chiefly to "exploit the cultural tastes of the Boston abolitionist art market."¹¹ With Garrison's assistance, Lewis

sold reproductions of the medallion at anti-slavery meetings and through advertisements placed in the

Liberator:

MEDALLION OF JOHN BROWN – The subscriber invites the attention of her friends and the public of a number of medallions of John Brown. Just completed by her, and which may be seen at room no. 89, Studio Building, Tremont Street. M. Edmonia Lewis

Boston, Jan. 29, 1864¹²

Lewis's marketing of her mass-produced medallion of Brown, led to her first commission from Dr. Bowdredge [Bowditch].¹³ Although Lewis states in an 1878 interview with the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* that she sculpted a bust of Dr. Bowditch, it is likely the commission was for a portrait medallion which she mentions in her 1873 *St. Louis Globe Democrat* interview.¹⁴ Lewis claims in the article "Dr. Bowdredge [Bowditch] of Boston gave me an order to make a medallion of his father, who was an old navigator." For the artwork, Lewis received twenty-five dollars.¹⁵

Eager to elevate her reputation and increase her finances, Lewis began experimenting with modeling portrait busts. Her first attempt was a portrait of Voltaire, the distinguished French Enlightenment writer and author of the celebrated novel *Candide*. Based on a similar work by Brackett, Lewis's replica was given a brief mention in Lydia Maria Child's letter published in the February 1864 edition of the *Liberator*.¹⁶ In the article, Child recalled meeting Lewis at a reception and then being invited back to the artist's studio to view the bust. Child wrote, "I was agreeably surprised" by the work and "she has also

made a very clever bust of John Brown. Whether she will prove to have any portion of creative genius time will show; but she seems to possess a native talent."¹⁷

Buoyed by Child's auspicious (albeit patronizing) review, Lewis succeeded her ambitious sculptures of Voltaire and John Brown with a portrait of the martyred Union Civil War Colonel, Robert Gould Shaw. Shaw had died fighting along with his troops during their charge on Fort Wagner, South Carolina in July 1863 and to appeal to the sentiments of abolitionists who believed that Shaw sacrificed himself "for the rescue of his country and the redemption of a race," Lewis seized the opportunity to memorialize the hero.¹⁸ The son of wealthy and prominent Boston abolitionists, Shaw joined the Union Army in 1861. Two years later, after Congress voted to allow blacks to join the military, Shaw took command of the black, Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment. When Shaw and his troops marched out of Boston in route to South Carolina on May 28, 1863, black and white spectators lined the streets to cheer them onward. Present at this monumental event were the city's leading abolitionists: William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, whose two sons were members of the regiment, and Wendell Phillips, all of whom had lobbied Congress and the President on behalf of black men for the opportunity to fight with the Union army. According to Bearden, Lewis was also among the bystanders that day "[watching] from the curb as young Colonel Robert Gould Shaw...led the...regiment out of Boston."¹⁹

While Child lauded Lewis's previous attempts at portraiture, she tried to dissuade the artist from sculpting a bust of Shaw. Apparently fearful that Lewis lacked the adequate skills to accomplish a respectable resemblance of the seraphic martyr, Child deliberately withheld photographs of Shaw from Lewis.²⁰ Undaunted by Child's disapprobation, Lewis

persevered and in the end, Boston's abolitionist community showered her posthumous portrait of the Colonel with praise. In December, 1864 Anne Quincy Waterston, a writer and abolitionist, published this ode to Lewis in the *Liberator*:

She hath wrought well with her unpracticed hands,
The mirror of her thought reflected clear,
This youthful hero-martyr of our land.
With touch harmonious she has moulded here
A 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 his life up 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.²¹

Even Child, who initially expressed trepidation about the project believing the artist "would make a lamentable failure" of the portrait, admitted "the likeness [is] extremely good."²²

Shaw's family was equally pleased and with their permission, Lewis produced 100 plaster reproductions of the bust, which she sold for fifteen dollars each at the Soldier's Relief Fair held in Boston, 1864.²³ Lewis's delicately carved sculpture received critical acclaim from the anti-slavery community and was singled out in the December 1864 and March 1865 editions of the *Liberator*.²⁴ Lewis's noteworthy depiction of Shaw presumably assisted her with establishing her reputation and building her clientele among the abolitionists. Delia Gaze writes in *Dictionary of Woman Artists* "Lewis's first works of 1864-65 [were] portrait

busts of abolitionist leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison, Senator Charles Sumner, and Wendell Phillips."²⁵ In addition to the aforementioned busts, Lewis also sculpted portraits of President Abraham Lincoln, which she displayed in her studio and Dr. Hebbard. The latter work, exhibited at William and Everett's in Boston was considered "a decided success."²⁶

On the advice of fellow sculptors Anne Whitney and Harriet Hosmer, Lewis turned her attention to Italy. Known as the Mecca of the art world, particularly for sculptors, Rome provided countless advantages allowing Lewis to pursue a career in Europe. Nelson states that "Rome offered cheap and skilled manual labor; established European sculptors, who acted as mentors and instructors; a ready artistic cultural, and intellectual community; and access to patronage through the rituals of cultural tourism"²⁷ With the proceeds from portrait medallions and busts, and the salary from a teaching job in Richmond, Virginia, Lewis set sail for Europe intent on expanding her standing as a sculptor. When she departed the United States in August 1865, she carried orders for several portrait bust commissions: Abraham Lincoln; Horace Mann, abolitionist, social reformer, and founding President of Antioch College; Colonel Robert Gould Shaw ordered by his sister, Sarah Shaw; and Dioclesian Lewis, a homeopathic practitioner known for his lectures on preventive medicine and hygiene.²⁸

After traveling through England and France, Lewis arrived first in Florence in 1865 where she met Hiram Powers and Thomas Ball, members of the first wave of American expatriate sculptors to work in Italy. These veteran artists provided Lewis with invaluable instructions in the art of clay modeling and armature construction. Lewis was especially

grateful for the advice she received from Powers, stating in an interview, "Mr. Powers was very kind to me. He showed me how to fix the wires, so as to keep the clay from setting when I modeled."²⁹ These informal lessons Lewis acquired from Powers and Ball were crucial to her artistic development and helped to augment her initial training from Brackett.

After several months in Florence, Lewis finally arrived in Rome in 1866, where she renewed her acquaintance with Harriet Hosmer and became the last member to join the "White Marmorean Flock." Once settled into her studio, formerly occupied by the great neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova, Lewis set to work on her portrait commissions. Cultural correspondents writing from Rome immediately took notice of the "lady of colour"³⁰ In March 1866 Lewis, along with her portrait busts of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and Dioclesian Lewis, became the topic of two major articles: "Negro Sculptress," in the London *Athenaeum* and "Lady Artists in Rome," in the London *Art Journal*.³¹ Both were written by the English art critic Henry Wreford. In the former publication, Wreford cheekily states, "At present she has little to show; she appeals to the patronage and protection of the civilized and the Christian world."³² However, in the *Art Journal*, he praised her bust of Colonel Shaw as "a meritorious work."³³ In addition to promulgating information about her skills, these snippets also helped the artist advertise her artworks to a broader audience.

Seven months later, word of Shaw's and Dioclesian's busts, now carved from marble, made news in the *Christian Recorder*, an African-American newspaper. The paper exhibiting a bit of race pride, expressed admiration for Lewis's bust of Shaw calling it "the most remarkable of her works."³⁴ And in reference to the portrait of Dr. Lewis on display at

Boston's Messrs. Child & Jeneks' gallery, the reporter wrote, "it is not only an accurate likeness... This is the first work of the kind sent from Europe to America from the hands of a colored artist."³⁵ The buzz surrounding Dr. Lewis's bust continued to generate perspicacious publicity for Lewis. In "Art in Boston," published in the January 1868 *Zion Herald*, the paper extolled the work during its exhibition at Childs and Co's stating, "it is a very careful and elegant work, and shows talent and skill in the youthful artist."³⁶

By 1869, Lewis's artistic proficiency reached a new milestone with her portrait of the celebrated American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Both Longfellow and his classic epic poem, "The Song of Hiawatha," published in 1855 became the subject of seven of Lewis's artworks. Besides the bust, Lewis also produced *The Wooing of Hiawatha (untraced)*, *The Departure of Hiawatha and Minnehaha (untraced)*, *Hiawatha (1867)*, *Minnehaha (1867)*, *The Marriage of Hiawatha (1871)*, and *Old Indian Maker and his Daughter (1872)*.³⁷

The ways in which Lewis created and marketed her bust of Longfellow illuminate interesting details about her mode of production. When Longfellow visited Rome in 1869, according to Bearden, Lewis shadowed him and made mental notes of his features as he strolled around the city.³⁸ Apparently, she displayed a model of the bust in her studio, where Longfellow's brother happen to see it. Bearden implies that after Sam Longfellow judged the work "a respectable likeness," the poet himself came to Lewis's atelier and "readily sat for the finishing touches."³⁹ Yet, in spite of their pleasure with the sculpture, neither Longfellow nor his brother paid to have the work reproduced in marble. Instead, a subscription was started by Longfellow's friends to cover the \$700 cost.⁴⁰

Lewis shrewdly forwarded photographs of the bust to key individuals within Longfellow's personal circle of friends in hopes of soliciting their financial support for the project. In July 1869, *The Christian Recorder* wrote:

Professor Child says: 'I have seen the photograph of Miss Lewis's bust of Professor Longfellow, and should consider a copy in marble a very desirable acquisition for Harvard College...a subscription has been started to raise the desired sum. This is headed by some of our well-known citizens prominent in good works.'⁴¹

Described as a "fine specimen of art, as well as a most excellent and truthful likeness of her subject," a copy of the bust in terra-cotta was offered by Lewis to the pastor of any society that raised \$100 toward the cost.⁴² In August, the newspaper championed Lewis's cause once again when it stated:

[It] has aroused such admiration that they are making strong efforts to have it reproduced in marble, and presented to Harvard University. Prof. Child is taking a leading part in this laudable movement. Subscription books are open at Fields, Osgood and Co's, Boston.⁴³

Over the following year, Longfellow's portrait continued to attract attention and receive admirable reviews as indicated by these glowing remarks published in the *London Art Journal* March 1870:

Her bust of Longfellow is the truest and finest likeness of the great poet I have seen. How noble the brow! And how well the hair is managed and thrown back so as to display his grandeur!⁴⁴

Finally, after two years of fundraising, *The Revolution* announced in April 1871 that Longfellow's bust had been ordered by Harvard College to commemorate the poet's service as professor of Modern Languages (1835-1854).⁴⁵

Following the sale of Longfellow's portrait, Lewis channeled her energy into the production of posthumous and contemporary depictions of individuals who had championed the cause of slavery. Between 1872 and 1879, she sculpted busts of Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, Horace Greeley, and General Ulysses Grant. Certain portraits were clearly based on existing orders, such as Abraham Lincoln's bust destined for Mount St. Vincent in Central Park and John Brown, commissioned by the Union League Club as well as a bust of Horace Greeley, the anti-slavery sympathizer and *New York Times* editor for the Lincoln Club.⁴⁶ Additionally, she also had a request for a portrait of the abolitionist Gerrit Smith. And in January 1879, *The Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that "[Lewis] has executed several busts of John Brown and other celebrities for European customers."⁴⁷

In spite of the apparent demand for commissioned commemorative portraits of abolitionists and anti-slavery crusaders, Lewis produced many busts without prior financial commitments. According to William Gerdtz, this process was unconventional. He states in his essay, "Celebrities of the Grand Tour: American Sculptors in Florence and Rome," in *The Lure of Italy* that artists created plaster copies of their sculptures, which they displayed in their studios and would only reproduce a work in marble if they had received a commission for it.⁴⁸ Yet, Bearden remarks that when Lewis arrived in the United States in 1873 she brought with her "nearly a ton in crated marble statues," which she had planned to exhibit and hopefully sell at various venues across the country.⁴⁹ He states that after selling a bust of Lincoln for \$1,100 in New York, Lewis headed to San Francisco for an exhibition at the San Francisco Art Association. In addition to a life-size bust of Lincoln, she exhibited four "fancy pieces": *Hiawatha's Marriage*, *Love Caught in a Trap*, *Asleep*, and *Awake*. In

brief reviews written by the *Daily Evening Bulletin* in August and September 1873, the paper noted that, "the prices will be within the reach of those of modest means."⁵⁰ The average cost of the sculptures was around \$500 each, well below market value. The ideal sculptures were eventually purchased; however, the bust failed to attract a buyer despite being displayed at two additional venues: the San Jose Market and the Catholic Fair. Like Longfellow's portrait, Lincoln's bust was finally sold by subscription to the San Jose Library.⁵¹

Similarly, during her 1878 visit to the United States, Lewis found herself in a similar financial quandary as she eagerly sought out potential customers for her marble bust of General Ulysses Grant. Like her previous un-commissioned portrait of Lincoln, Grant's bust was undoubtedly created to capitalize on the former President's historical legacy. In an interview with the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, Lewis astutely advertised the work by emphasizing the fact that it was taken from life.⁵² When asked by the interviewer if Grant was pleased with the bust, she replied, "Oh, yes!" implicitly implying to the reader that his approbation was indeed an endorsement of her talent.⁵³ Still Lewis's clever sales pitch belied her desperation. As Bearden points out, she was compelled to liquidate her inventory at any cost because "she could not afford to ship anything unsold back to Rome."⁵⁴ For this reason she willingly offered a substantial discount to prospective buyers. "I shall see if the church people don't want to subscribe enough to buy it. It would cost anybody else \$300, but I will let them have it for a good deal less."⁵⁵ The \$300 or less asking price seemed a bargain compared with the \$1,100 price of the Lincoln bust Lewis sold in New York a few years earlier. Whether or not she managed to sell the portrait is uncertain; the sculpture has

yet to be rediscovered. However, these capricious prices had to have an adverse impact on her income and reputation.

It is evident that Lewis spent a considerable amount of time and money marketing her portraits to the American art market, and despite her best efforts, it seems, she barely managed to support herself. Unlike commissioned busts, which offered a measure of financial security through the establishment of a fixed price, non-commissioned portraits were contingent upon consumers' whims. In light of this financial risk, one must ask, why did Lewis participate in this unorthodox practice? In all probability, artistic survival compelled Lewis to produce unsolicited works of art. As Bearden suggests, the creation of ideal sculptures was the artist's ultimate goal and their production helped to increase one's prestige.⁵⁶ But as Nelson mentions, the process of transferring a work into marble was not cheap.⁵⁷ In addition to the price of materials, the relevant expenses associated with carving statuary were numerous. Nelson enumerates living expenses, studio space, as well as freight charges, as just a few of the secondary expenditures sculptors had to consider.⁵⁸

During the period Lewis produced the aforementioned portraits, she also carved several of her most notable ideal sculptures: *Old Indian Maker and his Daughter* (1872), *Hagar* (1875), and *Death of Cleopatra* (1876). As a woman of color, Lewis lacked full access to the social channels that her fellow white artists relied on to cultivate a broad clientele beyond the abolitionist community. And since her base from which to draw her patronage was limited, she did not have the financial means to rely solely on commissioned works as a source of funding for her ideal sculptures. Although Lewis was economically disadvantaged in comparison to her peers, she was cognizant that in order to compete in the

expanding art market spurred on by the economic boom following the end of the Civil War, she too would have to conceptualize and sculpt ideal works.⁵⁹ And "even though Lewis's race-color made her the recipient of some philanthropic, often abolitionist, assistance throughout her career," as Nelson states, "such support seemed spotty or unreliable at times."⁶⁰ Therefore, in order to compete artistically with her cohorts in America and abroad, Lewis had no choice but to produce portrait busts for the open market, hoping that a sufficient demand for these commemorative works, in both Europe and post Civil War America, would generate the income she needed to survive physically and artistically. Without the money Lewis received from the sale of her portrait busts, she would not have been able to produce her ideal works. In turn, without the production of her ideal sculptures, Lewis could not have established a reputation as a serious sculptor and advanced her career. Therefore, no conversation about the artist's oeuvre is complete unless this symbiotic relationship is acknowledged.

APPENDIX

Edmonia Lewis sculpted portrait busts of the following individuals

*This list is comprised from nineteenth-century newspapers, journals, and reputable secondary sources

- 1 President Lincoln
- 2 Dr. Hebbard
- 3 Henry Longfellow
- 4 Charles Sumner
- 5 John Brown
- 6 William Lloyd Garrison
- 7 Robert Gould Shaw
- 8 Voltaire
- 9 President Lincoln
- 10 Horace Greeley
- 11 Gerrit Smith
- 12 Dr. Bowditch
- 13 Dioclesian Lewis
- 14 General Ulysses Grant
- 15 Bishop Foley
- 16 John Brown
- 17 Bishop A.D. Payne
- 18 Harriet Hosmer
- 19 Charlotte Cushman
- 20 Maria Weston Chapman
- 21 Anne Quincy Waterson
- 22 Portrait of a Woman
- 23 James Peck Thomas
- 24 Portrait of a Man
- 25 Frederick Douglas
- 26 James McCune Smith

ENDNOTES

Chapter One – Introduction

1. Letter, Steven Jones to Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris, February 5, 1997, Document Files, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO.
2. Letter, Marilyn Richardson to Jacqueline Lewis-Harris, January 23, 1997, Document Files, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO.
3. White Marmorean Flock is a term coined by Henry James to describe the "strange sisterhood of American lady sculptor" living in Rome in the nineteenth-century. Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and his Friends* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1903), 257.
4. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Art from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 64.
5. *Ibid.*, 64.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. "Visits to the Studios of Rome," *London Art Journal* (June 1871): 163.
9. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Art from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 64.
10. Letter, Marilyn Richardson to Jacqueline Lewis-Harris, January 23, 1997, Document Files, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO. In the letter, Richardson notes that Cholmondeley is spelled multiple ways. For this paper, I have elected to use the above spelling for consistency.
11. Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts Exhibitors 1769 – 1904* (England: Yorkshire S.R. Publisher, 1970), 60.
12. "The Studios of Rome," *London Art Journal* (March 1870): 77.
13. *Ibid.*

14. Anne Whitney to her family, February 21, 1869, Elizabeth Payne's unpublished manuscript, Anne Whitney Papers, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.
15. Letter, Marilyn Richardson to Jacqueline Lewis-Harris, January 23, 1997, Document Files, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO.
16. Email, Evangeline Clare to Carol Kickham, July 11, 2007, Document Files, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO.
17. Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, ed. Judith Winch (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 48-49.
18. Email, Evangeline Clare to Carol Kickham, July 11, 2007, Document Files, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO.
19. Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, ed. Judith Winch (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 48-49 and 59.
20. Ibid., 71.
21. Ibid., 59.
22. James Thomas, *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Peck Thomas*, ed. Loren Schweninger (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984).
23. Ibid., 12.
24. "Interview with the Famous Colored Sculptress," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* November 20, 1873.
25. Lewis's Deposition, Edmonia Lewis v.s. James P. Thomas and Antoinette Thomas, St. Louis Circuit Court Case Files, Missouri State Archives-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO. In the deposition Lewis wrongly states the date as 1872. However in the trial transcript the 1873 is noted as the date Lewis visited with the Thomas family.
26. Ibid., contract.
27. Ibid., Lewis's deposition.
28. Email, Evangeline Clare to Carol Kickham, July 11, 2007, Document Files, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO.

29. Freight Receipt, Edmonia Lewis v.s. James P. Thomas and Antoinette Thomas, St. Louis Circuit Court Case Files, Missouri State Archives-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO.
30. Ibid.
31. "Occasional Notes," New York *Christian Union* July 30, 1873. "Her Works of Art on Exhibition at the Art Rooms," San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin* August 28, 1873.
32. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Art from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 72.
33. Marilyn Richardson, "Edmonia Lewis' The Death of Cleopatra: Myth and Identity," *International Review of African American Art* (1995): 45.
34. See the References for a list of noted writings about Lewis.

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 4.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. Ibid., 3
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Ibid., 4.
10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 6.
12. Ibid., 7.
13. Ibid.
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17. Ibid., 12.
18. Ibid., 10.
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20. Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, ed. Judith Winch (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 12.
21. Ibid., 13.
22. Ibid., 47.
23. Lorenzo Green, *Missouri Black Heritage* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 63.
24. Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*, ed. Judith Winch (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 48-49 and 59.
25. Ibid., 49.
26. Ibid., 72-73.
27. Ibid., 49.
28. Ibid., 73.

29. Ibid.
30. James Thomas, *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Peck Thomas*, ed. Loren Schweningen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 11.
31. Ibid., 12.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 180.
36. Ibid., 184.
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39. Ibid., 67.
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42. William Gerds, "Celebrities of the Grand Tour: The American Sculptors in Florence and Rome," from Theodore Stebbins, *The Lure of Italy* (Boston: Museum of Fine Art and Harry Abrams, Inc., 1992), 70.
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50. Ibid., Contract.
51. Ibid.
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53. Ibid., James Thomas's testimony.
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56. Antoinette Thomas, Records of County Probate Court, Madison County, IL.
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58. James Thomas, *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Peck Thomas*, ed. Loren Schweningen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 14.
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62. Antoinette Thomas, Records of County Probate Court, Madison County, IL.
63. Ibid.

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6. "Edmonia Lewis: Interview with the Famous Colored Sculptress," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* November 20, 1873.

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8. Juanita Holland, "Mary Edmonia Lewis's Minnehaha: Gender, Race, and the 'Indian Maid,'" *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2000), 46.

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VITA

Susan Crowe is a native of St. Louis, Missouri. She grew up primarily in University City, where she resides today with her husband and son. In 1992, she graduated with an Associate of Arts degree from St. Louis Community College at Meramec. She then went on to complete her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology at St. Louis University, where she graduated cum laude. For several years, she planned, organized and directed programs for educational and social service organizations such as New City School, Bridgeway Counseling Services, and Sherwood Forest Camp. However in 2003, she decided to move her career in a new direction. In January 2004, she enrolled in the University of Missouri-St. Louis's Art History program. After earning her Bachelor of Arts in Art History, she enrolled in the Master of Arts in Art History program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Susan graduated in December 2010.

