Lewis, Edmonia, in full MARY EDMONIA LEWIS (b. c. 1844, near Albany, N.Y., U.S.--d. after 1909), American sculptor whose neoclassical works on religious and classical themes won contemporary praise and generated renewed interest in the late 20th century.

The daughter of an African-American man and a woman of African and Ojibwa (Chippewa) descent, Lewis was orphaned as a young girl; she then lived with her maternal aunts near Niagara Falls, N.Y. An older brother who made his fortune in the California gold rush paid for her education at a Baptist Abolitionist school in New York and then at Oberlin College in Ohio.

Lewis thrived at Oberlin, excelling particularly at drawing, but left in 1863 after having been accused of poisoning two of her classmates and later of theft. After the first incident, a mob beat her severely before her trial, but lawyer John Mercer Langston won her acquittal. Again with her brother's support, Lewis made her way to Boston, where she received instruction from neoclassical sculptor Edward Brackett. She financed her trip to Europe about 1865 with the sale of portrait medallions and plaster busts of Abolitionists and Union heroes of the American Civil War. After visiting London, Paris, and Florence, she rented a studio near the Piazza Barberini in Rome and associated herself with the flourishing community of women writers and artists there. Lewis mastered working in marble and refused to hire Italian stone carvers to transfer her plaster models to marble, to quell doubts that the work was her own.

Lewis was a sculptor of great technical skill and imagination, who illustrated contemporary as well as classical themes. Inspired by the Emancipation Proclamation, she carved "The Freed Woman and Her Child" (1866) and "Forever Free" (1867). She turned subsequently to Native American themes and created "The Marriage of Hiawatha" (c. 1868) and "The Old Arrow Maker and His Daughter" (1872), both based on the narrative poem The Song of Hiawatha by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, of whom she carved a bust (c. 1869).

Lewis also depicted biblical figures, such as "Hagar" (c. 1868), Sarah's handmaid who bore Abraham's son Ishmael. Her career reached its peak in 1876 when her sculpture "The Death of Cleopatra" was exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Her last major commission came in 1883 for "Adoration of the Magi" for a church in Baltimore, Md. This piece, like the bulk of her work, cannot be located and perhaps did not survive. It was variously reported that Lewis had been last seen in Rome in 1909 or 1911, but the circumstances of her death are uncertain.