

RESCUING A QUEEN

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ARS GRATIA ARTIS, it's written on the scroll over the MGM lion in the movies and it means "art for the sake of art." Do artists create just for the sake of beauty? Or is art stronger, part of the blood and bone of real life? At the National Museum of American Art you will find a piece of art with real life in it, a four thousand pound block of white marble that binds together the lives of two lost women: Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, and black sculptor Edmonia Lewis. Cleopatra was found. Edmonia is still a mystery.

Between 51 and 30 BC, Cleopatra¹ ruled Egypt with a nasty boy who was her co-ruler, little brother, and (according to Egyptian ceremonial custom) her husband, Ptolemy XII. It was a stormy time to be a ruler. The Roman Empire dominated the classic world² around the Mediterranean, which it called *Mare Nostrum* – "our sea." Egypt was no longer a great military power but nothing could dim its golden power: wheat! Egypt's fertile Nile Valley was the bread basket of that world, and vital to Rome.

Julius Caesar came to the Nile at the head of a mighty legion in 45 BC, pursuing Pompey, his rival for the control of Rome.³ In Egypt's seaport capital, Alexandria, he met the young queen. Cleopatra, at 21, saw in this intelligent, plain-spoken general of 56 years her chance to make Egypt more than Rome's grocery store.

She did not look like Elizabeth Taylor in the movie version.⁴ The coins bearing her profile show a long-nosed, rather severe-looking woman. She was not even Egyptian, but Greek. Contemporary reports agree that she was physically plain, but she was the smartest, wittiest woman of her time. Her humor and intelligence won Caesar's interest, not her beauty. She bore Caesar a son, Caesarion. Under Caesar's protection, she banished Ptolemy (you know how little brothers are: he was always trying to have her assassinated).

But Caesar returned to Rome, and to his Roman wife, and to the deadly politics of the Roman Senate. A group of senators objected to Caesar's control of the Empire. On the fifteenth of March, in the year 44 BC, they surrounded Caesar in the hall outside the Forum and stabbed him to death.⁵ Cleopatra needed a new protector.

She found him in Caesar's young friend, the soldier who gave Caesar's funeral oration, Marc Antony. After Caesar's death, Antony joined Caesar's nephew and heir, Octavian, to defeat the senatorial assassins and control the Empire. The two young men made a pact: Octavian would rule Rome and Gaul; Antony was given Asia and Egypt. To bind the alliance between them, Antony married Octavian's sister, Octavia. But at his Asian headquarters in Alexandria Marc Antony fell for the Queen of the Nile. The love story between Antony and Cleopatra may be the most famous and the saddest in all of history.

This brings us across the centuries to Edmonia Lewis. We do not know when she was born – perhaps 1843 or 1845 – or where. We know her father was African-American and her mother was a Chippewa Indian. We know that both parents died when she was young and her mother’s tribe probably raised her. An older brother paid for her education at Oberlin College in Ohio, where she took her only classes in art. In her photograph, we see a young, black, strikingly beautiful woman who was powerfully talented. After graduating, she moved east and won fame in Boston, Massachusetts,⁶ for her sculpture. The art world was perplexed: a few women had made their mark in painting, but sculpture was dominated by men because of the physical strength it required.

In 1865, the last year of the Civil War, Edmonia left the United States for Rome, where she felt a black woman could enjoy greater artistic respect and freedom. Over the next twenty years she produced perhaps sixty major sculptures and built an international reputation. We know what a fine artist she became from the work that has been found, but much of it has disappeared.

She was invited to display three major sculptures at the Centennial Exhibit in Philadelphia in 1876. The largest work was *The Death of Cleopatra*, chiseled out of brilliant white marble and polished until the queen’s skin glowed as it must have two thousand years ago on the Nile. Why did Edmonia choose to sculpt this enigmatic queen? Did she feel close to Cleopatra’s frustration as a brilliant, talented woman in a man’s world? Certainly, the story around her death makes a dramatic subject.

In Egypt with Marc Antony, Cleopatra (clearly the brains of the operation) persuaded him that the wealth of her Egypt and the strength of his military abilities could make them rulers of the world. Octavian, however, was furious at Antony for two-timing his sister. That “ruling the world” part worried him too. He accused Antony of betraying Rome for Cleopatra and launched a war fleet against Alexandria. At the sea-battle of Actium in 31 BC, Octavian’s fleet defeated Antony fleet. Antony escaped to Alexandria in a fast galley with Octavian close on his heels. When Caesar’s nephew entered the city at the head of his legions, Marc Antony killed himself in the traditional manner of Roman generals, by falling on his own sword.

Cleopatra may have been heartbroken or she may have been merely frustrated. She had succeeded in winning great Caesar and in beguiling his young friend Antony. She tried to vamp Octavian but he just wasn’t interested. Rather than return to Rome as Octavian’s captive, to be displayed like a strange beast, she killed herself. Many famous queens were skillful with poisons⁷ and Cleopatra knew how deadly the desert asp could be. She held an asp to her chest, near her heart, and died quickly.

Edmonia Lewis shows us Cleopatra at the moment of her death, seated upon her throne, the asp still clutched in her hand, calm and regal to the end.

The dramatic statue was so popular that it was also exhibited at the Chicago Interstate Exposition in 1878. Afterward, Edmonia returned to Rome. The statue of Cleopatra was bought by the owner of the Harlem Race Track in Forest Hills near Chicago, where it was

to remain forever as a grave monument to his favorite racehorse, also named Cleopatra. But the race track became a golf course and, during World War II, and later a munitions factory. In 1972, the United States Postal Service built a bulk mail depot on the land and hauled the statue to the corner of an equipment storage yard.

A Chicago scoutmaster discovered Cleopatra and made her a project for his scouts. They moved the two ton statue, cleaned it up and – with the best of intentions – painted her in bright colors.

All over America there are wonderful pieces of sculpture hidden between buildings, behind road signs, or neglected on back streets. They suffer the attacks of frost, acid rain, vandals and age. Many cities and towns don't realize that any statue exposed to the weather needs help to survive. Some may know *how* to preserve the heritage of their outdoor art but simply don't have money in their budgets to save it.

The marble Cleopatra suffered more cruelly than the queen. Vandals had knocked away her nose and toes, a hand, her asp and the Egyptian cobra head-dress. Abandoned, unoiled, unpolished, the weather destroyed the lustrous surfaces of Cleopatra's skin and the soft folds of her robes. The entire surface was eaten away and acquired what is called a "sugar" texture instead of a polish. Perhaps the most difficult and persistent insult was the Boy Scout paint!

The Historical Society of Forest Park finally recognized the statue as an important work of art and bought it. They gave it to the National Museum of Art. There, the sculpture curator, George Gurney, located a single photo of the statue in its original condition to serve as a model for a \$30,000 conservation project.

It will never be possible to restore her original polish, but you may see Cleopatra today in a special room at the National Museum of Art, one of the Smithsonian museums, six blocks north of the Mall in Washington. All her missing parts have been replaced, and only a faded trace of blue remains from the deep Boy Scout paint stains. She is, once again, a beauty. She shares her room with two smaller works by Edmonia Lewis, and commands a new army. Perhaps you can be a part of the army. Edmonia Lewis's creation is a symbol for a Smithsonian program to save other works of art called *SOS! Save Outdoor Sculpture!*

Thousands of volunteers across America are organizing to care for neglected artwork. You can help by searching your hometown. Is there an outdoor sculpture that needs saving? Is there a monument to some special resident from your local history? A sculpted fountain or watering trough? A monument to the Civil War or World War I? A sculpture to commemorate pioneers or some special event? There are treasures everywhere, some as small as pumpkins, some as big as houses, and SOS! hasn't found all of them, yet. It's possible that your school or church or youth group can help identify and even care for your local art. Contact SOS! at the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 202/786-2384.

Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, was found and restored to us. But what of Edmonia Lewis? She is still a mystery. She returned to Rome and faded from sight. When she died

and where she is buried is unknown. Perhaps someday the lost works of Edmonia Lewis will be found, and the mystery of this talented African-American sculptor will be solved.

[1628 words]

MARGINALIA

- 1 — She wasn't the first Cleopatra, only the most famous. There were six before her, so she was Cleo VII.
- 2 — A relatively small world, reaching only Britain in the West, Germany in the North, a bit of India in the East. and the northern coast of Africa. The Americas were unknown and the far more developed empire of China was only a rumor.
- 3 — The Roman Civil Wars, 49 - 45 BC, were fought over who should rule, the Senate or a dictator, like Pompey or (later) Caesar.
- 4 — *Cleopatra*, 1963, is the kind of "epic" film that gives historians heartburn. In 1934 Claudette Colbert played a more intelligent Cleopatra. The wittiest film is probably the 1945 *Caesar and Cleopatra*, with Claude Rains and Vivien (*Gone With the Wind*) Leigh, from George Bernard Shaw's play.
- 5 — This is the big scene in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, written in 1599.
- 6 — She almost undoubtedly knew young Bostonian Colonel Robert Shaw, commander of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry regiment made up of black soldiers, portrayed in the 1989 film *Glory*.
- 7 — Octavian's wife, Lydia, was infamous for her murders by poison. Queen Isabella of Spain, Columbus's *patrona*, dispatched a husband and several other fellows in the same way. One of them was probably her own brother. Of all women poisoners, however, Isabella's contemporary, Lucretia Borgia (1480-1519), has the grisliest reputation as a really deadly cook.