

Lesson Plan: Clay Portraits

Introduction to the Life and Sculptures of Edmonia Lewis

Meets the learning standards for grades 4-5 (can be adapted)

Media Type: air-dry clay ([see recipes](#))

Subject Integration: Fine Arts, English Language Arts and Reading, Social Studies

Description of the Activities/Workshop: Exploring the cultural and historical significance of the artwork produced by this incredible American Sculptor; Using fine motor skills, observation and a critical eye create a self portrait inspired by Lewis' marble sculptures.

Why am I teaching this: *Arts Integration Thread* (to catalyze the learning of content outside of art), *Art Skills Development Thread* (to deepen the development of art making skills)

Materials: writing materials, cardboard, mirror or reference photos, white air-dry clay ([see recipe link](#)) sculpting "tools" (this can be almost anything: toothpicks, plasticware, pencils, straws, or just your bare hands)

TEKS: 110.7 knowledge and skills 1, 2, 3, 7

113.15 knowledge and skills 1, 2, 10, 13, 19, 21, 22

113.16 knowledge and skills 4, 5, 7, 8, 21, 22

117.14/117.17 knowledge and skills 1, 2, 3, 4

Focus Question: How did (Mary) Edmonia Lewis use classical European artistic styles and materials to tell a story that was uniquely her own?

Opening:

1. Share this student video by Erin Nguyen of Lewis's history and career:
<https://youtu.be/BrjOqaOLKqk>

Activity 1:

2. Have learners use their knowledge of Texas and United States history to identify some key events and cultural standards that were taking place during Edmonia Lewis's early life (she was born in 1844). Allow the opportunity for learners to do independent research, as needed, and apply it to their understanding of her experience.
3. Writing prompt: Leaving your home, your country and your family to move across the world in pursuit of your dream is a very big decision. Have learners imagine that they are in Edmonia's position and instruct them make a "Pros" and "Cons" list about the

risks and rewards of making such a move. Would any of the learners have made a different decision? Discuss!

Activity 2:

4. Many sculptors flocked to Italy for the opportunity to carve highly prized white marble and to study under the great stone-carving artisans. Have learners watch these two brief videos about marble quarries and traditional marble carving techniques.
Marble quarry <https://youtu.be/pgRXju0Ggp4>
Carving marble with traditional tools <https://youtu.be/PWUuGDovHEI>
5. Ask learners to consider how Edmonia Lewis was able to create work that stood-out and told her unique story, when so many other sculptors were using the same material, techniques and styles.
6. Ask learners to consider how they would convey their personality and individuality if they were using white marble to make a self-portrait.

Activity 3:

1. We are going to be creating self-portrait “busts” using our homemade, air-dry clay. A bust is a portrait featuring only the upper torso and head. In this case, we are depicting our upper chest, shoulders, neck and head. We are using white clay to resemble the marble sculptures made by Edmonia Lewis.
2. Set up a clean work surface that is free from debris, dust or grit that would get caught in your clay. Use only a small portion of clay at a time, so that the unused portion does not dry out. Keep all unused clay securely wrapped in plastic.
3. Begin to “work” the clay. This process is intended to limber-up the clay and make it more pliable. Kneading the clay and making coils (long skinny ropes) are nice methods for getting a feel for the materials. ***Try not to create air pockets in the clay. Air pockets can lead to cracking later.*



4. Create the general shape of the shoulders and neck of your figure and attach it to your cardboard base by scraping/smearing the bottom edge of your sculpture out onto the cardboard to stabilize it.



5. Form the shape of your torso by mashing and stretching the clay with your hands or sculpting tools. You may need to add more clay in areas that need to protrude or bulge. To attach new clay to your existing form, gently mash it into place and then use your fingers or a smooth tool (like the back of a spoon) to blend the edges together. Remember to have fun!



6. It is a good strategy to sculpt the head of your figure while it is separate from the body. Make a round ball of clay that is proportional to your body (about half as wide as the shoulders.) Look at your reference photos or your reflection often, to make sure you are staying on track.



7. Do not get overwhelmed if your sculpture is not immediately turning out the way you planned. In most cases, these things are repairable.



8. Is a human face perfectly round like a ball? Which features stick out? Add clay and blend the edges to form the brow bones, cheeks, nose, jaw and chin. Keep checking your reflection or reference photos.



9. Add eyes, lips, ears and hair.



10. The neck and shoulders of your sculpture are probably not strong enough to support the head, so you will need to give them a little help: insert a toothpick or some other thin, disposable stick straight down into the neck of your sculpture until it bumps into the cardboard base. Make sure to use a stick that is long enough that it still protrudes from the neck.
11. Gently line up the head and press it down onto the toothpick. Use your blending skills to join the clay from the neck onto the clay of the head/chin.



12. Make any final adjustments and repairs while the clay is still wet. Once it is dry, you can no longer change the shape.
13. Viola! How did you do? Allow the sculpture to dry, undisturbed at room temperature for a couple of days.



14. Once your sculpture is dry you may seal it with a clear coat to prolong its life.



Closing:

Share... Reflect!!! Show artwork and have students discuss concepts of observation and depiction. Ask learners to identify their successes and their difficulties. Do they think sculpting in marble would be easier or harder than sculpting with clay? Why? Does anyone want to become a portrait sculptor?