

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject. By Kirsten Pai Buick.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97r040qp>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 35(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Ater, Renée

**Publication Date**

2011

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Mayan literary production to a brief four-page epilogue. Among the new centers stimulating creative writers are *Sna T'z'ibahom* and the women's writing group *Fundación para la Fomenta de la Mujer Maya*, which are centered in San Cristobal de Las Casas. Both groups, sponsored by anthropologist Robert Laughlin and writer Miriam Laughlin, are dedicated to producing and dramatizing works of Mayan writers in Spanish and the Native languages of Tzeltal and Tzotzil. Anthropological linguist Louanna Furbee has developed a Tojolobal writing group in Comitán that tapes and digitalizes literature of a language that is threatened with extinction. Carter Wilson, who has written two novels based on his profound knowledge of Mayan history and culture, brought to my attention the three volumes of Guatemalan Mayan literature collected by Carlos Montemayor and Donald Frischmann (*Words of the True Peoples/Palabras de los Seres Verdaderos*, 2007). We can look forward to future treasuries as this burgeoning creative field finds an audience for their work.

*June Nash*

Professor Emerita, The City University of New York

**Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject.** By Kirsten Pai Buick. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010. 344 pages. \$89.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

The central issue at the heart of Kirsten Pai Buick's *Child of Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* is how we understand the constructs of race and gender as they relate to artistic production. Buick challenges the reader to reconsider the "art-as-self" paradigm, which she argues predominates the art historical discourse. She demands that scholars move away from the idea of race and gender as "problems." Instead, Buick provides a nuanced interpretation of Mary Edmonia Lewis and her art within the context of the late-nineteenth-century United States and Rome, what she calls "culture-as-context" (50). The book takes an unusual format. Each chapter begins with a critique of how art history deals with the black and Indian subject. She takes to task previous scholars who have read Lewis's black and Indian identity too narrowly and defined her artistic production as infused solely by race and gender. The second part of each chapter examines Lewis's career and the themes of her work. Buick considers three dominant ideologies that are essential to understanding Lewis's sculpture: sentimentalism, true womanhood, and the vanishing Indian. Through the employment of such ideologies, Buick argues that Lewis participated in the creation of a national art that was multivocal and diverse.

In chapter 1, Buick highlights the institutionalized processes that helped to shape Lewis. She has not written a typical biography; rather, she explores the concept of “career” as it related to Lewis. By focusing on the idea of career, Buick is able to move away from the limited biographical details that have long informed how we understand Lewis and her sculpture. She writes, “To study the career is to study the effects of culture and institutions on the artist that then reveal to us patterns of intention—that is, the relation between the object and its circumstances” (2). She reads Lewis’s early history at New York Central College and Oberlin College as educations in the ideologies of sentimentalism and true womanhood. Buick relates Lewis’s time in Boston to issues of patronage and abolitionism, with a particular look to the role that Lydia Maria Child had in reshaping the image of Lewis after her problems at Oberlin. Buick argues that Lewis became a producer of race during her time in Rome and became more firmly rooted in her religious faith, Catholicism, which imbued some of her work with Christian meaning. For Lewis, Rome also became the place where she could escape the dual constraints of race and gender.

The remaining three chapters are case studies of work that relate to the black and Indian subject. Chapter 2 examines *Forever Free* (1867) and *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1875); chapter 3 focuses on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) and Lewis’s ideal sculpture related to the poem; and chapter 4 highlights Lewis’s monumental sculpture of Cleopatra (*The Death of Cleopatra*, 1875). Buick’s criticism of art history scholars is tough and to the point. For example, in chapter 2, regarding the “problem” of art history’s black subject, Buick engages Joseph Ketner’s and David Lubin’s writings about landscape painter Robert Scott Duncanson. She sees a parallel between Duncanson and Lewis and how these scholars interpret their work as uncomplicated expressions of their identities. She urges cultural contextualization as the means for understanding the content of Duncanson’s paintings and Lewis’s sculpture rather than “racial tautology” (34). Buick’s careful visual analysis and thematic interpretation of Lewis’s sculpture as they relate to neoclassicism, sentiment, true womanhood, and the vanishing Indian is excellent. She interprets *Forever Free* as a reconstructed image of the African American family after slavery and relates the dynamic between the male and female figures as indebted to the ideology of true womanhood and prevailing attitudes about Victorian patriarchal culture. In both *Forever Free* and *Hagar in the Wilderness*, Buick proposes that Lewis followed the idealization of the female form often seen in nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture.

Chapter 3 outlines the cultural work of Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha*, particularly its “aesthetics of sentiment” and the ways in which Lewis’s sculpture relates to the sentimental vein of the poem (77–78). She views *The Song*

of *Hiawatha* as the nineteenth-century American epic poem, reading it as a prehistory of America that reinforces the trope of the vanishing Indian. She critiques two scholars, Timothy Anglin Burgard and Juanita Holland, for their misinterpretation of Lewis's Indian subject and its relation to *The Song of Hiawatha*. For Buick, Burgard and Holland conflate Lewis's Chippewa heritage with the content of her Indian works. Because they collapse identity with stereotype, they fail to read Lewis as an able interpreter of Longfellow.

Buick places Lewis's Indian subject matter within the context of the Jacksonian era, westward expansion, Eastern and Western attitudes toward Native Americans, and white citizens' belief in the inevitability of Indian racial extinction. She interprets the *Old Indian Arrowmaker and His Daughter* (1872), the *Marriage of Hiawatha* (1866), and the numerous busts of Hiawatha and Minnehaha as visual accompaniments to the verses of *The Song of Hiawatha*. She infers that Lewis consciously employed her Indian identity as "belonging to the past" in order to distance herself from the racial stereotypes of her time. The *Old Indian Arrowmaker and His Daughter* and the *Marriage of Hiawatha* are construed as images that celebrate patriarchy and reinforce sentimental norms regarding proper gender conduct and Victorian marriage. Buick also offers an interesting suggestion that Lewis's Indian work coincides with a flourishing market for Indian tourist art, and that these works act as reminders of Lewis's own childhood, but are not self-portraiture. Her art "reflects her desire to participate in the dominant ideologies whose existence absolutely depends upon the presence of sentimental objects" (131).

Buick's final chapter deals with *The Death of Cleopatra*. She argues that Lewis is the "product of two histories": one that presents Lewis as the exotic, and the other that interprets her as a "wily, subversive feminist" (134). She proposes that these perceptions of the artist culminate in two fundamentally different descriptions of *The Death of Cleopatra* by the art historians Albert Boime and Judith Wilson. Buick provides an extensive critique of Boime's *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (1990) and Wilson's "Hagar's Daughters: Social History, Cultural Heritage, and Afro-U.S. Women's Art" (1996). Through a close examination of their texts, Buick examines why their descriptions of Lewis fail to provide an adequate interpretation of the work and distort the real issues at play in the sculpture. Buick proposes that we must consider the meaning of *The Death of Cleopatra* within the context of nineteenth-century racialist discourse on Egypt and within the frame of "the preexisting formulas for representing feminine death" (198). She argues that *The Death of Cleopatra* represents Lewis's shift from sculpture imbued with the ideologies of true womanhood and sentimentalism. After making her monumental statue of Cleopatra, Lewis turned away from these concerns toward creating art with specific, religious content.

Buick's book is groundbreaking in its reinterpretation of Lewis and her art; it would have been even more impressive had Buick not relied so heavily on quotations from other scholars and articulated her own voice in relation to their writings. Perhaps the most surprising omission is Buick's lack of engagement with Charmaine Nelson's *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007). Buick neither cites Nelson in the text nor lists her in the bibliography. Nelson adeptly discusses Lewis's place in Rome within the context of other women artists working in the city and dedicates a chapter to a reinterpretation of Lewis's *The Death of Cleopatra*. I'm not sure what this omission means, but it is glaring. Martin Berger's *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (2005) is also missing as a reference. Berger's book is an important intervention in American art scholarship; it explores how a white subject position suffuses American art of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; he argues that "whiteness" profoundly affects modes of seeing and internalized beliefs about race during that period. Despite these small shortcomings, *Child of Fire* is a significant book because it reminds us to consider cultural context over simpler readings that merge racial and gender identity with interpretation of an artist's work.

Renée Ater

University of Maryland

**Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples.** By Mark Dowie. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009. 341 pages. \$28.95 cloth.

In this treatise on the state of global biological conservation efforts, the investigative journalism of Mark Dowie gives those interested in conservation and Native people much to think about. *Conservation Refugees* explores the role of conservation groups from northern industrialized countries that assume the right to designate tracts of land belonging to others as "ecological hotspots" and then removing, oftentimes forcibly, the original inhabitants in order to create protected areas. He supports this notion through the American proclivity and policy to designate "wilderness" as in need of separation from humans, also known as the Yosemite Park model. Whatever man touches turns to ruin, and, therefore, humans, especially indigenous people, should not be allowed to utilize the land.

The author describes the origins of the Yosemite Park model as one in which humans are excluded from the ecosystem in order to "save" the beauty, biodiversity, or ecological integrity of the so-called protected area. This