

WILDFIRE, MISS CLAMPITT, AND THE WONDER GIRL FROM

By David Wieggers

In the middle of the 19th century, women were not generally a force in American sculpture. Art, and especially sculpture, were a male-centric occupation. Three women sculpted images of Abraham Lincoln in the 1860s and 1870s, and each has an interesting story. Two of these women sculptors, Vinnie Ream (Hoxie) and Sarah Fisher Ames, would produce images of Lincoln that would be displayed in the United States Capitol building. A third, Edmonia Lewis, broke many barriers of race and gender to become a well-known sculptor. Each of these women has a unique story and, other than Ream, they have not had their stories widely told.

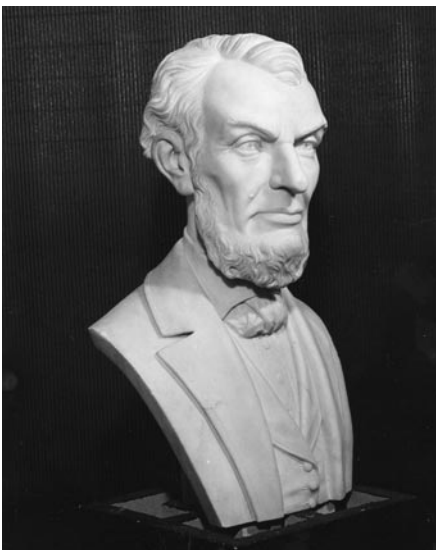
Edmonia Lewis

Edmonia Lewis is said to have been born in upstate New York about 1844, though details of her birth and early life are sketchy. Her father was a Black man, reportedly from Haiti. Her mother was of Native American ancestry. Lewis was orphaned before she was 10 years old and lived with her aunts. During this time in her life, she went by her Native American name, Wildfire. Her older half-brother Samuel (or Sunshine) left New York and went off to the California gold fields. Samuel accumulated enough wealth pay for his half-sister Edmonia to attend pre-college courses.



Edmonia Lewis

In 1859, Lewis started to attend Oberlin College in Ohio, where she studied art. Her career at Oberlin was difficult and controversial, as she was subject to racism and discrimination. While at Oberlin she was accused of poisoning two of her classmates. Before her trial, Lewis was accosted by unknown assailants and nearly beaten to death. When she went to trial her lawyer got the charges dismissed. A year later, she was accused of stealing art supplies and was acquitted of this charge. Lewis left Oberlin a semester short of graduating.



Edmonia Lewis Lincoln bust at the San Jose Public Library

Lewis, like several other female American sculptors, eventually made her way to Rome. She later said, "I was practically driven to Rome in order to obtain the opportunities for art culture, and to find a social atmosphere where I was not constantly reminded of my color. The land of liberty had no room for a colored sculptor." It was in Rome around 1870 where she sculpted her bust of Abraham Lincoln. It was purchased in 1873 and put on display at the San Jose Public Library in California.

Later in life, Lewis moved to Paris and then to London. She died in London in 1907. She never married and had no known children.

Sarah Fisher Clampitt Ames

Sarah Fisher Clampitt was born in Delaware in 1817 and studied art in Boston. Like Lewis and several other female American sculptors, she went to Rome to study art. Clampitt married painter Joseph Alexander Ames and accompanied him to Rome in 1845, where he painted a portrait of Pope Pius IX.

During the Civil War, Ames served as a nurse in Washington, D.C., and was in charge of the



Sarah Fisher Clampitt Ames

temporary hospital in the U.S. Capitol. It is not known how she came to know Lincoln, but she may have met him when she was in the capital during the war. John Hay, one of Lincoln's private secretaries, noted in his diary that she went to Alexander

Gardner's studio on November 8, 1863, with Lincoln, Hay, and Lincoln's other secretary, John G. Nicolay. During the session, Gardner took "a great many pictures" of Lincoln, including the famous head-on portrait of him. Hay noted in his diary that the pictures of the president were "some of the best I have seen." Harold Holzer speculates that Lincoln was photographed in order to aid in Ames's work. She used the pictures as she created a small plaster bust of Lincoln sometime between November 1863 and November 1865.



Lincoln bust by Sarah Fisher Ames in the US Senate

The U.S. Senate commissioned Ames to produce a life-size marble bust of Lincoln. This marble bust was the first of Lincoln to reside permanently in the Capitol. In 1868 the Joint

THE WEST: EARLY WOMEN SCULPTORS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Committee on the Library purchased this bust of Lincoln from Sarah Fisher Ames for \$2,000. The bust sits in the Senate wing of the Capitol, and copies can be seen in several museums.

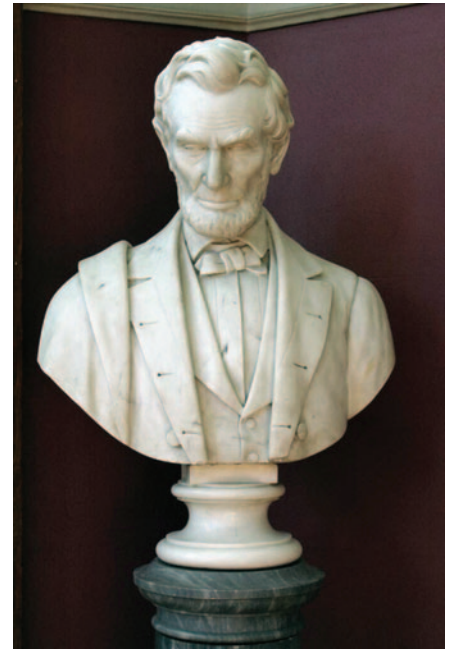
Vinnie Ream Hoxie

The statue of Lincoln in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol was controversial, as was its 18-year-old sculptor, Vinnie Ream. Lavinia Ellen “Vinnie” Ream was born near Madison, Wisc., in 1847. Her family moved to Washington, D.C., at the beginning of the Civil War. It was in Washington that she became a student of the sculptor Clark Mills, who is best known to Lincoln students today for the “life mask” he made of the president in February 1865. Some have speculated that Mills made the life mask to aid Ream’s work, although this has never been proven.



Vinnie Ream

It has been widely reported that Ream was given unusual access to Lincoln. She claimed later in life that she spent 30 minutes a day with Lincoln over a period of five months, but there does not appear to be any evidence that she had this much time with him. From these supposed sessions, Ream produced a bust of Lincoln that is now at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. Based on this bust and her considerable connections in the government, Ream was awarded a commission to produce a large full-size Carrara marble statue of Lincoln.



Ream bust at Cornell University

Ream was the youngest person and first woman to receive a commission for a statue from the U.S. government. Before and during the debate over the award of the commission, she became the center of controversy because of her age, gender, character, and alleged lack of ability and

experience as an artist. She was mercilessly examined by politicians and the press and accused of using her “feminine wiles” to win the Senate commission. Ream was quite a self-promoter who used the media and photography to become well known. One writer termed her “The Wonder Girl from the West.”

Ream first produced a plaster model of her proposed statue of Lincoln and, once it was approved, she took her model to Europe where she finished the final marble statue that is now in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Ream returned from Europe with the finished statue, and it was unveiled in the Rotunda on January 25, 1871.

Ream married Richard Hoxie in 1878 and ceased her work because her husband felt that a woman of the Victorian age should not work. She died in Washington, D.C., in 1914, and both she and her husband are buried in Arlington National Cemetery.



Lincoln by Vinnie Ream in the US Capitol Rotunda



Detail of Ream’s statue in US Capitol

David B. Wieggers has been a member of The Lincoln Forum since 2006 and is a member of the Forum’s Board of Advisors. 