

Why Is Lewis's Work Both Neoclassical and Realist?

Core Competency: Critical Thinking

While textbooks often show the work of artists who are exemplary models of a movement, not all artists fit neatly into one style. Such is the case with Edmonia Lewis, an American artist who worked in Italy in the nineteenth century. Her sculpture *Forever Free* (figure 19.38) can be classified as both Neoclassical and Realist.

The title of the work stems from the Emancipation Proclamation, American president Abraham Lincoln's order that set African American slaves free during the Civil War. Lewis carved a white marble sculpture of an African American man and woman, who have just been liberated, reacting to the news of the Proclamation. The male figure raises a wrist with a broken cuff and places his foot on a ball and chain, while the female figure still retains shackles on her ankles. Both gaze upward to a higher source, as if to give thanks for their freedom.

After considering the general characteristics of Neoclassical and Realist works and looking back at examples in Chapter 19 of works from both styles, explain:

- What characteristics make the work Neoclassical?
- What characteristics make the work Realist?

Lewis was a female artist of mixed African American and Native American ancestry. Knowing what you do about the lives of other female and African American artists from this period including Rosa Bonheur (figure 19.23) and Henry Ossawa Tanner (figure 19.22) *and* after considering the general goals described in Chapter 19 of both the Neoclassical and Realist styles, explain:

- Why might Lewis have wanted to draw on the Neoclassical style in her depiction? What message might she have been trying to send in adopting the Neoclassical style?
- Why might Lewis have wanted to draw on the Realist style in her depiction? What message might she have been trying to send in adopting the Realist style?



FIGURE 19.38. Edmonia Lewis. *Forever Free*. 1867. Marble, 3' 5 1/4" × 1' 10" × 1' 5". Howard University Art Gallery, Washington, DC.