AHAA Symposium 2021
Caitlin Beach
"Edmonia Lewis and the Poetics of Plaster"

Abstract:

In 1864, Edmonia Lewis modeled two small-scale plaster sculptures depicting officers of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, one of the first African American regiments of the American Civil War. The first was a tabletop statuette of one of the unit’s celebrated Black sergeants, William H. Carney, and the second was a bust of the regiment’s white colonel, Robert Gould Shaw. Although well documented in period commentaries and photographs, the sculptures have been less discussed by modern scholars as neither is known to survive today. This paper contends with these lacunae by considering the place of the Carney and Shaw sculptures as works of art mobilized in projects of community engagement and care. Lewis debuted both at Civil War-era relief fairs, where they appeared alongside goods, wares, and other works of art marketed to raise funds for African American soldiers, their families, and formerly enslaved people. Here, their plaster materiality was central to their significance. In the space of the relief fair, the act of making took on associations at once therapeutic and political, working as a praxis through which individual bodies and civic collectives might be forged anew. Aligning with contemporary associations of plaster with touch and handicraft on one hand, and healing and bodily renewal on the other, Lewis’ work probed the palliative possibilities of sculpture in the wake of war.