



The Art of William Edmondson

Cheekwood Museum of Art

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A native of Nashville and the son of former slaves, William Edmondson (1872 - 1951) was the first African American artist to be featured in a solo show at New York's Museum of Modern Art (1937). For this exhibition MoMA director Alfred Barr remarked, "Usually the naïve artist works in the easier medium of painting. Edmondson, however, has chosen to work in limestone, which he attacks with extraordinary courage and directness, to carve out simple, emphatic forms." Robert Bishop, the late director of the Museum of American Folk Art, declared Edmondson to be "one of the outstanding folk carvers--if not the outstanding one--of the twentieth century."

Edmondson's first works were memorial gravestones. Later he created animal, human, and celestial figures. His carvings were inspired by his faith, community, and culture. He told the story of how God spoke to him. "I was out in the driveway with some old pieces of stone when I heard a voice telling me to pick up my tools and start to work on a tombstone. I looked up in the sky and right there in the noon daylight He hung a tombstone out for me to make."

Showcasing Edmondson's sculpture and placing it in the mainstream of American art for the first time, this lavishly illustrated volume accompanies a traveling exhibition organized by the Cheekwood Museum of Art in Nashville. In new interpretations that challenge long-held views about Edmondson's artistic naiveté, the essays emphasize his profound and intimate connection to his community and its traditions. Adding immeasurably to the understanding of Edmondson's art are photographs by Edward Weston, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, and Consuelo Kanaga that show the artist in his community and his workplace.

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