

The Sculpture of William Edmondson: Tombstones, Garden Ornaments and Stonework

Faculty Guide

The Sculpture of William Edmondson is the first museum examination of artist William Edmondson's career in over twenty years. Featuring twelve of his sculptures, photographs by noted photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe, and ephemera, this exhibition draws upon new scholarship to contextualize Edmondson's sculpture.

Pre-Tour

To prepare for a visit to the exhibition, faculty may ask students to consider, explore, and define some key terms.

primitive	celebration
folk	funeral
ritual	identity
repatriation	race
religion	Modernism
canon	

During your Visit

The Sculpture of William Edmondson: Tombstones, Garden Ornaments and Stonework may be explored through one of the following overarching educational themes. Use one or more to focus a conversation in the gallery, and/or to develop student assignments. Below you will find a summary of each theme and related questions to drive dialogue.

Theme 1: Skilled Laborer Turned "Artist"

Edmondson trained as a stonemason's assistant, and began a business making and selling tombstones, garden ornaments, and stonework. White patrons sought to elevate the stature of Edmondson and his work by painting him as an artist pursuing creative self-fulfillment against all odds. His work was defined as primitive, modern primitive, folk, autodidact, and self-taught. He was described as outsider, outlier, artist, and sculptor. Edmondson did not use any of these labels to define his work or himself.

- While examining Edmondson's work, consider the labels "folk" and "primitive." Then consider them as "modernist" and "canon." What is the connotation of each set of labels? How does it change the way you view his work?

- Edmondson was the son of two formerly enslaved people from Tennessee. His work was heralded and seen by many as a triumph for a man with his background. Where do you see this dichotomy throughout the exhibit? Are there any pieces or labels that seem to discuss this in further detail?
- While Jim Crow was thriving in the South, Edmondson became the first African American to have a solo exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. What does this say about the merit of art deemed worthy by the art world? How might race have influenced this? What does this say about how Edmondson was viewed, despite his support from prominent patrons and institutions?
- A contemporary of Edmondson’s was noted sculptor Henry Moore. Compare the legacy of these two artists.

Theme 2: Preserving African American Traditions Through Death Care and Funerals

While examining Edmondson’s work, consider his tombstones. Black owned and operated funeral homes were among the first family businesses established by African Americans after the abolition of slavery. Today, many African American funeral directors maintain burial traditions, distinctive ways of grieving, and homegoing or celebration of life ceremonies to maintain traditions surrounding death that cater to the needs of the Black community. Many of Edmondson’s pieces have circulated through private homes, gardens, galleries, and museums. However, his tombstones have remained in place, serving as powerful metaphors for his life.

- Given the accessibility of the funeral business for Black Americans, what do you think Edmondson’s role was in his community? How might his “discovery” have changed this? Do you think this has anything to do with his reluctance to identify as artist?
- What does this say about the “movement” of Black individuals? Reflect on the importance of community, identity, and power. Think about African traditions and customs, and how they were passed down.
- Edmondson said of his sculptures, “Jesus has planted the seed of carving in me.” Do you see this inspiration throughout the exhibition? What do you see that is familiar? What do you see that is different?

Theme 3: Bereavement as Community

Community is at the heart of African American funerary and burial customs. In times of bereavement, whether on a micro or macro scale, the African American community comes together. This extends to the ongoing effort to protect and preserve Black cemeteries in the U.S. Edmondson frequently provided tombstones to many members of his community, and as such, became widely known and respected in the Black neighborhoods of Nashville.

- Black women have been at the forefront of the conservation of Black graves and gravesites. These women volunteer countless hours looking after the dead and upending American history. Edmondson featured many Black women

throughout body of work. How do these depictions capture womanhood? How do these depictions capture Blackness?

- Where do you see examples of community throughout this exhibition? How is community seen throughout Edmondson's work? Discuss the power of community versus individual. Reflect on Edmondson's power.

Beyond the Exhibition

Faculty may consider the following prompts to extend conversations beyond the exhibition.

1. Read Natasha Trethewey's "Collection Day."
<https://www.masreview.org/sites/default/files/Trethewey.pdf>
Reflect on the story being told in the poem. Notice the references to the themes common throughout Edmondson's work. What can be inferred about the family? What larger issues are at work here? After researching the poet, how are the themes above represented in the poem? Think about the funeral business as it pertains to Black Americans. Think about Trethewey's allusions to music, ritual, food, and religion. Reflect on the Black identity, especially in terms of family and womanhood.
2. In the fall 2022 semester, the McClung had a temporary exhibition, *The Spirit of Día de los Muertos*, which explored the evolution of the Mexican holiday. Día is a celebration that remembers loved ones passed; there are many commonalities between it and the beliefs/customs present in African religions, especially as they pertain to death. Discuss these intersections, especially in terms of Indigeneity and colonization, African religions and Christianity, and race.
3. Ritual is defined as "a way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time" (Cambridge University Press). Although typically defined in connection with religion, rituals can also be understood through a secular lens. Rituals become a part of establishing and understanding the existence of, and the meaning behind, ideas, beliefs, and commitments. Discuss the use of ritual in your everyday life. Think about rituals in terms of social behaviors. How do different groups of people use rituals? What kinds of items are used in rituals? Do items have to be sacred?

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