

2-1-2023

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

Tomeka Jackson
Clemson University, tomekaj@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jackson, T. (2023). Book Review: The Sculpture of William Edmondson: Tombstones, Garden Ornaments, and Stonework. *Georgia Library Quarterly*, 60(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol60/iss1/16>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Library Quarterly by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

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

edited by Marin R. Sullivan (Vanderbilt University Press, 2021: ISBN 9780826502360, \$29.95)

When people think of well-known sculptors, Michelangelo, Donatello, and Picasso come to mind, among others. Still, no one would imagine a 50-year-old Black sculptor named William Edmondson from Nashville, Tennessee. He was one of the first Black sculptors to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939. Born in 1874 to enslaved parents in Davidson County, Tennessee, he took odd jobs before becoming a janitor at the Nashville Women's Hospital. After working in the hospital, he retired to pursue his passion for sculpturing. Edmondson's sculptures are inspired by his religious faith and by Nashville's Black working class of nurses and teachers. Throughout the years, his art has lived on in museums, local church cemeteries, and private collections around Tennessee.

The Sculpture of William Edmondson: Tombstones, Garden Ornaments, and Stonework is an examination of Edmondson's work spanning over 20 years, displayed at Cheekwood Estate and Gardens at Fisk University Galleries in Nashville, Tennessee. This exhibition, curated by Chicago-based art historian Marin R. Sullivan, presents historical scholarship and art methodologies that offer an in-depth study into who Edmondson was as an



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

Image courtesy of the publisher

artist. Also, this book provides insight into the Jim Crow era of modern art for Black artists in the United States. Sullivan chronicles Edmondson's career from stone mason apprentice to professional sculptor in the contemporary art world.

With Edmondson being one of the first Black artists during the modern art movement in the 1930s, racism was not far behind. Many White art critics discredited the simplicity and artisanship he put into his pieces. Some critics praised the Museum of Modern Art for their diverse efforts in

allowing Edmondson's work to be featured. Yet even in the art world during the Jim Crow era, Black artists were denied the accolades and achievements of their work compared to their White counterparts.

White art critics during this period often characterized Edmondson's works as "primitive," "unskilled," "enchanted," "simple," and "odd." Other critics boxed him in as a "self-taught folk artist" who persevered against all odds from humble beginnings. Whether praising or insulting him, no one focused on who Edmondson was as an artist, his inspiration, and the narratives within his sculptures.

Each chapter of this book—written by art historians, professors, and academic scholars—thoroughly examines Edmondson's inspiration and techniques behind his work. Living in the Black community of Nashville during the late 18th century, Edmondson was fueled by the culture, art, Black-owned businesses, and spiritual inspiration. He built exquisite statues from the discarded pieces of limestone and railroad spikes around him. With his limited resources and divine call in his art, Edmondson created sculptures of church women, nurses, angels, and biblical animals. Edmondson's art represented a snapshot of the African American working-class experience in Nashville during the Depression.

One of the standout chapters in this book, "Edmondson's Stone Women," examines his admiration for the everyday woman and biblical figures of importance to him. The sculpture *Church Lady* shows a pious woman standing tall and elegantly dressed, holding a bible in one hand and a purse in the other. The sculpture's jagged edges and rectangular shape display the struggle and beauty of Black church women in the community.

His sculptures of nurses are like those of the church ladies, except for the distinct carving of clipboards, nurses' uniforms, and pinned-back hair. The facial expressions of these nurses vary from warmth to fatigue, depicting the emotional toil and strength these women possess while

caring for their patients. Edmondson provides a chair or a block for his nurse sculptures to rest or be admired. The amount of time and care he put into each piece for this collection shows his appreciation for Black nurses.

Further appreciation for Black women is seen from a religious standpoint in his sculptures of angels. Within the same context as the church ladies' collection, Edmondson depicts these spiritual beings in a weighty and rugged form, with kinky, textured hair; rectangular bodices; dense, triangular-shaped wings; and crossed arms holding objects such as purses. There is nothing soft or demure about these angels, as Edmondson describes this piece as "old-time religion angels, earthily realized, right now messengers of God." From his description, we can see that Edmondson wanted his sculptures of women to be fully realized, spiritually divine, mundane, solid, and earthy. Without knowing Edmondson's work, these sculptures could be mistaken for historical relics or artifacts discovered by anthropologists in the field that tell the story of a people's culture or heritage.

This book is recommended for academic and public libraries and those who appreciate fine art sculpting, art preservation, modern American art, and African American history.

*Tomeka Jackson is a library resident at
Clemson University Libraries*