



### **William Edmondson (c. 1870-1951)**

Born in 1874 to former slaves in Davidson County, Tennessee (near Nashville), William Edmondson began his astounding sculptural practice in his fifties. Today he is internationally renowned as one of the greatest stone carvers of the 20th century. When he was sixteen, Edmondson's family moved to Nashville proper, and he worked for the city sewer works and then the Nashville-Chattanooga and St. Louis railroads. Other early jobs included stints as a farmhand and stonemason's assistant and a position as a janitor at Women's Hospital (now Baptist Hospital). At the onset of the Great Depression, Edmondson lost his hospital job, and in the early 1930s experienced a heavenly vision, including a disembodied voice instructing him to "pick up [his] tools and start to work on a tombstone." As he poetically testified: "I looked up in the sky and right there in the noon daylight, He hung a tombstone out for me to make." A devout member of the United Primitive Baptist Church, Edmondson promptly complied with this divine directive, and soon the yard behind his house began to fill with limestone tombstones and sculptures. In 1935, his work came to the attention of Sidney Hirsch, a Vanderbilt professor, and soon after Edmondson's carvings were photographed by Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Edward Weston. In 1937, Edmondson became the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Edmondson regularly referred to his works—originally intended as tombstones for Mount Ararat (today Greenwood West), a local African American cemetery—as "miracles." Potent and elegant distillations of form, his sculptures achieve a charged presence as reminiscent of modernist sculpture as of African American vernacular funerary sculpture. His subjects ranged from the Biblical to the banal, and portraits of Eleanor Roosevelt and Jack Johnson mingled with crucifixions, arks, and angels as well as packs of squirrels, birds, horses, and other "critters." His primary interest seems to have been the figure, human and animal, and his works consistently reflect the most eloquent and efficient means to impart a meditative, reductive grace to the subject. The suppleness and softness evident in the stone belie his unorthodox tools and media: he used a modified railroad spike as a chisel to shape limestone chunks salvaged from demolished city buildings and curbs. As his fame grew, city workers often delivered stone to his home for free. By the late 1940s, illness had forced Edmondson to retire from sculpting. He died in 1951 and was buried in Mount Ararat Cemetery.

<http://foundationstart.org/artists/william-edmondson/>



**Born** around 1870 in the Hillsboro Road section of Nashville to "foreparents [George and Jane] who were Edmondson and Compton slaves," William Edmondson was one of six children reared by his mother after the death of their father.

After many years of working for the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad and the Women's Hospital (Baptist Hospital), Edmondson entered the art world by divine command, according to an article in the Nashville *Tennessean*: "While he lay asleep, God appeared at the head of his bed and talked to him, like a natural man, concerning the talent of cutting stone He was about to bestow. He talked so loud He woke me up. He told me He had something for me." Edmondson was instructed to make chisels and other sculpting tools.

Edmondson, who began his career by working on tombstones, worked exclusively in limestone, usually from demolished city buildings and curbs from rebuilt streets. Wrecking companies often diverted their trucks to Edmondson's backyard to leave piles of stone at lime or no cost. During fifteen years or more of sculpting, his backyard became filled with "miracles" that were not tombstones but preachers, women, doves, turtles, angels, rabbits, horses, and other "critters" and "miracles."

Five years after he began to sculpt in limestone, Edmondson's competence in art was acknowledged by the art world. Sidney Hirsch, Alfred and Elizabeth Starr, and Louise Dahl-Wolfe were instrumental in uncovering Edmondson's gift of sculpting stone. Dahl-Wolfe, a photographer for Harper's Bazaar magazine, brought Edmondson to the attention of Alfred Barr, the director of the Museum of Modern Art. Barr and some of the trustees expressed interest in a type of painting and sculpture they classified as "modern primitive" and which they applied to Edmondson's art. Thus, Edmondson became the first black American to be accorded a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art.

Edmondson soon was widely recognized and honored for his sculpture. In 1938, his sculpture was included in "Three Centuries of Art in the United States." On February 11, 1941, he was honored with a one-man show at the Nashville Art Gallery. In 1951, Edmondson was posthumously honored by the Nashville Artist Guild. Edmondson's pieces were included in other exhibitions: Nashville's Peabody College (1951); New York's Willard Gallery; Cheekwood (Tennessee Botanical Gardens and Fine Arts Center) and Lyzon Galleries in Nashville (1964); City College of New York and the LaJolla Museum of Contemporary Art (1967); Willard Gallery and Newark Museum (1971); and a one-man show at the Monteclair Art Museum in 1975. The June, 1981, opening of the Tennessee State Museum featured an exhibition and illustrated catalogue of Edmondson's sculptures.

Poor health caused Edmondson to cease sculpting in the late 1940s. On February 7, 1951, he died and was buried at Mount Ararat Cemetery in Nashville. In June, 1979, a park at Seventeenth Avenue, North, and Charlotte Avenue was named in honor of Edmondson. On July 8, 1981, a marker of limestone, which came from the old Commerce Union Building, was unveiled. Sculptor Gregory Ridley carved a dove into the block, above the accompanying inscription:

This park is dedicated to the memory of the renowned Nashville sculptor, William Edmondson.

Linda Wynn

<http://ww2.tnstate.edu/library/digital/EDMONDS.HTM>

## MIA Label



**William Edmondson, American 1874-1951**  
**Ram, c. 1938-1942, limestone, 2013.56**

William Edmonson was the first African American artist to be honored with a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1937. Due to its multiple analogies with modernist sculptures by Amedeo Modigliani and Sir Jacob Epstein, the works of self-taught artist from Tennessee were much sought after since his lifetime.

The subject of the ram was most immediately inspired by Southern burial art. It reference the deep religious significance of the ram in many world cultures – such as Abraham’s ram, the ram carried by the Greek god Hermes and Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who is traditionally often shown carrying a ram.