



William Edmondson, *Angel*, 1937-39. Stone, 18 ½ x 13 ½ in., Collection of Bob Roth

Grades: 4–7

Subjects: English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts

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Lesson Overview

Students will look at a sculpture by outsider artist William Edmondson. They will consider Edmondson's biography and learn to identify the key characteristics of his style and technique. Finally, students will discuss the importance of Edmondson's achievement as an outsider artist and his recognition by the mainstream art world.

Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Angel*. See how much students can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get students started before sharing with the whole class.
 - Pair Share: Students turn to a partner and take turns making observations about the sculpture. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will begin to look more deeply and notice things that their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion:
 - What do you see? What can you find out about the work?
 - What do you think this sculpture is made of? What techniques did the artist use?
 - William Edmondson had no formal artistic training, so he used the materials and methods most readily available to him. Having worked on the railroad for much of his life, he began carving limestone blocks with a railroad spike instead of a chisel.

- Edmondson's sculpture is glyptic, which means he uses a carving technique with relatively few protruding or plastic elements. For instance, look at *Angel*: the form is closed and blocky, and the overall shape evokes the original shape of the limestone block. The figure crosses its arms over its body, and the skirt is a geometric plane. There are very few voids (a term used to describe open spaces in sculpture). All of these features have the effect of making even this small sculpture look monumental and extremely solid.
 - How would you describe this figure? Is it naturalistic/realistic?
 - What are some of the ideas we associate with angels? What about limestone?
 - Edmondson's sculpture is highly stylized. He simplifies his figures and reduces their bodies to a series of geometric shapes. Instead of polishing, burnishing, or modeling the limestone so that it imitates the textures of flesh, clothing, etc., Edmondson leaves the surfaces coarse. Further, he does not paint or color his sculptures. They evoke the limestone block and lay bare the coarse texture, weight, and hardness of the stone. There is a dynamic interplay between the form and the content (or the medium and the subject matter).
 - By making explicit the mass of the stone, Edmondson throws the nature of the angel into starker relief. Whereas limestone is heavy, obdurate, and silent, angels are generally thought of as airy and ethereal—heavenly beings associated with light and music. This tension relates to the duality at the center of the Christian vision: between the mortal body and the immortal soul. In Edmondson's sculpture, the material is at once opposed to the angel it represents and the medium through which the angel assumes form and first becomes available to the senses. In other words, we can see it, touch it, and start to think about its emotional and spiritual significance when it appears to us carved in stone.
 - How is this work different from traditional religious artwork? (For instance, compare it to a Renaissance or Baroque sculpture from LUMA— images available at http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collections_martindarcy.html).
 - Edmondson was a self-taught or outsider artist, which means that he received no formal artistic training and was not necessarily familiar with the conventional ways of depicting religious subject matter in Western art. In addition to sacred figures, Edmondson also carved animals, architectural objects like birdbaths and tombstones, and vibrant scenes from his community. Setting friends and family alongside the spiritual and divine, Edmondson treats his faith as an extension of his daily life and uses art to explore both.
- 4. Artist's Biography:** Now let's learn about William Edmondson's life to help us understand what makes his art unique.
- Edmondson was born in 1874 in Tennessee to a family of ex-slaves. He lived in Nashville, where he worked on the railroad and then as a hospital orderly at a women's hospital. His time at the hospital later served as the basis for several of his figures and motifs. For instance, his *Seated Nude* figure was his artistic triumph over a sharp-tongued co-worker: explaining the sculpture to some visitors, he reportedly said, "That's Miss Wooten. I put her on the pot."



William Edmondson, *Seated Figure*. Stone, 29 x 12 x 12 in. Photograph courtesy of www.artnet.com

- With the onset of the Depression in 1929, Edmondson lost his job and began to carve tombstones for the two African American cemeteries in Nashville, Mt. Ararat and Greenwood. Edmondson didn't begin making art until he was around sixty years old, shortly after he retired. He claims to have received divine inspiration, saying "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 day light He hung a tombstone out for me to make." From that point forward, Edmondson began carving in limestone with a modified railroad spike as a chisel. He converted his backyard into a studio and displayed his finished works in the open air.



Portraits of Edmondson by Louise Dahl-Wolfe

- The turning point in Edmondson's career came when he met photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe through a mutual acquaintance. Dahl-Wolfe worked for *Harper's Bazaar*, and she decided to take a series of pictures of Edmondson, his backyard studio, and his work. Her photographs brought Edmondson to the attention of Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. Barr was impressed with what he saw, and in 1937, he gave Edmondson the first ever solo exhibition of an African American artist's work at MoMA. Edmondson was admired for his innovative blend of folk imagery and abstraction and for his ability to integrate the base into the overall design of each sculpture.



Portrait of Edmondson by the renowned photographer Edward Weston

Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts

3 – Writing

4 – Listening and Speaking

5 – Researching

Social Science

16 – History

18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts

25 – Language of the Arts

26 – Creating and Performing

27 – Arts and Civilization