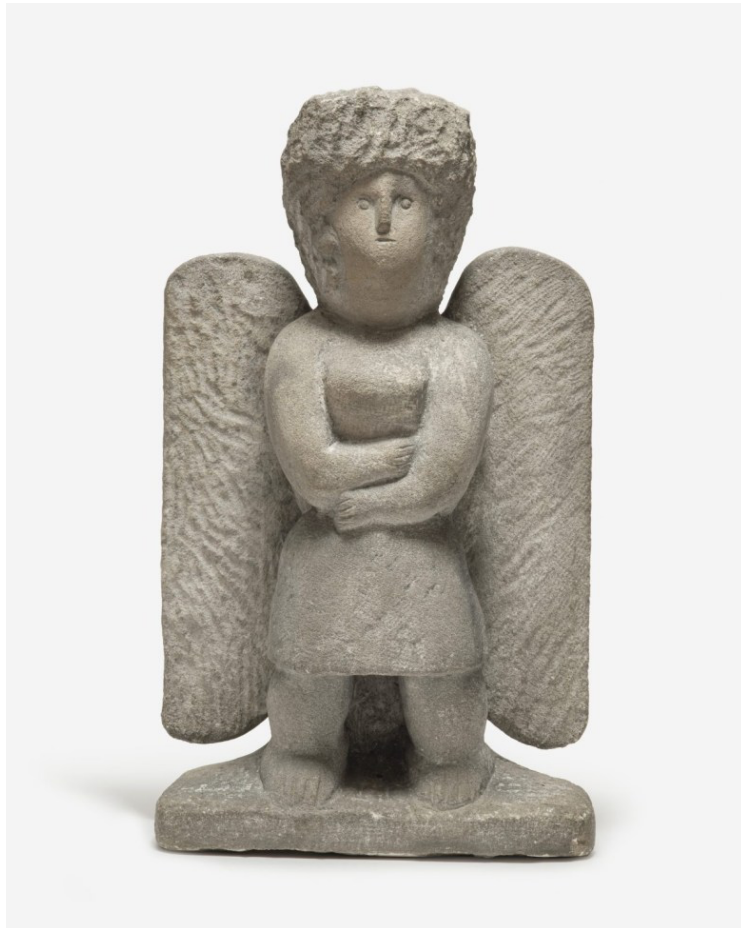


HYPERALLERGIC

William Edmondson's Tombstone Blues

The self-taught artist, who carved gravestones for a living, is finally receiving institutional recognition.

[Isabella Segalovich](#), September 6, 2023



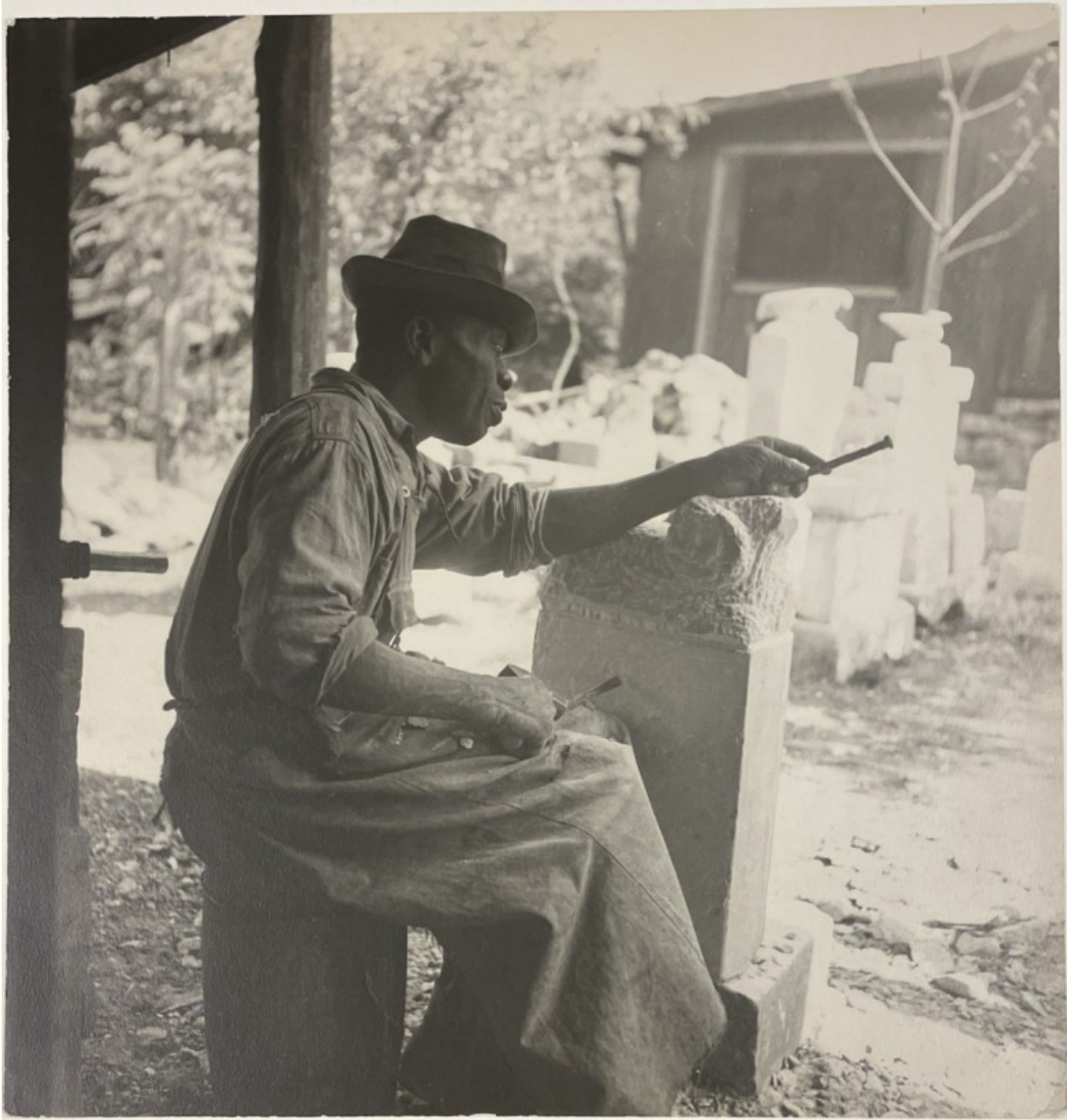
William Edmondson. "Untitled (Angel)" (c. 1940), collection of KAWS (photo Bill Jacobson Studio; all images courtesy the Barnes Foundation unless otherwise noted)

PHILADELPHIA — In October 1937, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York opened *Sculpture by William Edmondson*, the museum's first solo exhibition dedicated to a Black artist. The show may have broken boundaries, but curators and reviewers alike also belittled and exoticized this Southern self-taught stone carver.

In June 2023, almost 86 years later, the Barnes Foundation in

Philadelphia presents *William Edmondson: A Monumental Vision*, featuring more than 60 of the artist's striking sculptures and grave markers. Billed as "the first major East Coast exhibition dedicated to the self-taught artist in decades," it is intended to right past wrongs. At a moment when many museums are reexamining their relationship to artists who have been excluded from the mainstream art world, the Barnes show offers a chance to explore how, and to what extent, large institutions can meet such artists on their own terms rather than those of the art world.

William Edmondson was born near Nashville sometime around 1874 to formerly enslaved parents. Struggling to make ends meet as the assistant to a stone mason during the Great Depression, he said he received a vision from God: "First He told me to make tombstones Then He told me to cut the figures ... He gives me the mind and the hand, I suppose, and then I go ahead and carve these things."



Photograph of William Edmondson by Louise Dahl-Wolfe (© Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents)

He soon filled his small plot of land with angels, animals, and often stunningly commanding and muscular images of women. His tombstones and lawn ornaments blend sweetness and strength, with strikingly smooth curves and delicate, tiny faces that stare at the viewer, sometimes with defiance, sometimes with love.

Eventually, the art world establishment took notice. In 1937, *Harper's Bazaar* photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe created a photo series of Edmondson which in turn inspired MoMA's then-director Alfred Barr to bring the artist's statues to New York City.

As was typical in the 1930s art world, in which self-taught artists were often called "modern primitives," Edmondson was discussed as a simple-minded man whose greatness lay in his supposed ignorance. "He is simple, illiterate, entirely unspoiled, and happy in his work," extolled MoMA's press release.

Contemporary art historian Marin Sullivan, reflecting on the [2021 Edmondson exhibition](#) at the Cheekwood Estates in Nashville, asked what it would mean to show the artist's work on his own terms — as the embodiment of the direct visions he received from God. James Claiborne, one of the curators of the current Barnes exhibit, approached the work with this question in mind. "It really became a charge and a challenge for us to deeply consider [the life of] this man born to formerly enslaved parents, who was in a community adjacent to sharecropping culture."



William Edmondson, "Noah's Ark" (c. 1930) (photo Isabella Segalovich/Hyperallergic)

Claiborne recalled the essay "How It Feels to Be Colored" by anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston: "I feel most colored when I'm thrown against a sharp, white background." "I can't unhear that when I think about Edmondson's reception [at MoMA]," Claiborne told *Hyperallergic*. In place of that white background, the Barnes gallery is filled with soft grays, greens, and pinks. And rather than being sequestered on individual pedestals, the sculptures are clustered together on mounds, evoking the experience of walking through Edmondson's yard strewn with his treasures.

"The Barnes felt like a natural place to do a show of Edmondson," co-curator Nancy Ireson told *Hyperallergic*. "Dr. Barnes collected self-taught artists. He was very passionate about the advancement of African Americans, and yet he didn't buy Edmondson." The museum has long embodied the contradiction between Barnes's divergent vision and the hallowed halls of a respected art institution. "There's this kind of

formality" when you walk through a museum, artist Brendan Fernandes reflected to *Hyperallergic*. The curators invited Fernandes to stage an original performance in the gallery as a part of the exhibition's goal of examining, in their words, the relationship between "Black cultural production and the American museum." Rather than trivializing Edmondson's spirituality as MoMA had done before, Fernandes took it at face value, looking to create art in dialogue with the spirit of the artist through his works. Twice a day on Saturdays, four dancers pose in stances similar to Edmondson's sculptures, caress each other to echo the care emanating from their forms, and chisel the floor with pointed feet to mimic the sound of his tapping hammer. Fernandes's work plays with the push and pull between the formal space of churches and the freedom that Edmondson found in his relationship to a higher power. "I wanted it to feel ephemeral," he said.

This exhibition comes as self-taught and folk artists are receiving a resurgence of attention by major art institutions, from the continuing work at the American Folk Art Museum to the landmark opening of the Kohler Art Preserve. As we venture further into this renewed interest, exhibitions like *William Edmondson: A Monumental Vision* prompt the questions: What will it take to undo the past wrongs committed by the art world's wealthy elite? And how can curators work with historically excluded, stereotyped, and misunderstood artists on their own terms, especially when the artists are long deceased?

For the moment, it may be less important to "get it right" than simply to start asking these questions in the first place, and to let them guide institutions' approaches to Edmondson and others.



Brendan Fernandes, "Returning to Before" at the Barnes Foundation, 2023
Installation view of *William Edmondson: A Monumental Vision*

William



Edmondson: A Monumental Vision continues at the Barnes Foundation (2025 Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through September 10. The exhibition was curated by James Claiborne and Nancy Ireson.