



AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL IMPERATIVE: THE CASE OF WILLIAM EDMONDSON, STONE CARVER

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In art history and criticism, African-American artists have been treated more consistently through the lens of their life story than through close, serious attention to their work—disproportionately so, when compared with treatment of white artists. What's more, if art historians and critics have focused perhaps too much on what the lives of black artists represent (either in an effort to maintain a racist status quo or to subvert it), this "conscription" into representational service often spills over into similar expectations for black art. Writers look at art made by black artists to see what it reveals about race, in other words, not what it achieves artistically on its own.

The life and work of William Edmondson is an instructive case study in this problem. His hand-carved stone sculptures came to the attention of the white art world in the 1930s and became nationally famous, specifically through constant retellings of his life story: a biographical narrative that has been told again and again the same way, both during Edmondson's lifetime and in his art historical canonization thereafter.

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