

Edmondson Park: Metro Arts Public Art Project

Metro Arts has commissioned two internationally-known artists, Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley, to create site-specific public artworks for Edmondson Park. The park, located between 16th and 17th Avenues bordering Charlotte Ave., is being revitalized by the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency's (MDHA) and honors William Edmondson, who was a Nashville sculptor, and the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1937.

Metro Arts has been awarded an Art Works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to support the project. The artwork will be installed spring 2014. The artists will work with Oasis Center (center for at-risk youth) to conduct an artist-in-residence program and student art-making workshops. In addition, Metro Arts has partnered with the Ayers Institute for Teaching Learning and Innovation at Lipscomb University to create interdisciplinary units targeted to middle and high school students incorporating common core standards. This partnership will also result in a teacher training institute.

Background on Edmondson Park

In 2011, The Nashville Civic Design Center conducted a *Design Your Neighborhood* program. The youth explored issues related to design with highly trained professionals and city leaders and were filmed during the process. (A documentary debuted in January 2012.) The teens engaged in an exercise with landscape architect, Kira Appelhans, to redesign Edmondson Park, an underutilized strip of land between Charlotte Pike and the John Henry Hale Homes. The teams of youth paired with a design professional discussed what elements should be included to make it a place where youth would like to hang out, and then they designed plans for revamping the park, including a way to pay homage to its namesake, [William Edmondson](#). Born to freed slaves, Edmondson was a self-taught artist born and raised in Nashville, TN. In 1937 he was the first African-American artist to be given a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

[Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency](#) (MDHA) contracted with [Hawkins Partners](#) to restore Edmondson Park, incorporating design ideas developed by the youth and refined by Ms. Appelhans. Two youth from the Oasis Center were hired to assist Hawkins Partners in gathering additional community input for the park's redesign.

The Inspiration

William Edmondson (1874-1951), the son of freed slaves, was born in rural Davidson County and moved to Nashville by 1890. Working first at the railroad and then as a janitor at the Nashville Woman's Hospital, he lived at 1434 Fourteenth Avenue South surrounded by family and a vibrant community. At the age of 57, Edmondson began working with limestone using a hammer and a railroad spike. "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," he explained.

Edmondson carved for 17 years. He said, "I am just doing the Lord's work. I ain't got much style; God don't want much style, but He gives wisdom and sends you along." Truly Edmondson drew his subjects from his world, both real and imagined. Critters like rabbits and bears, from folktales, Adam and Eve from the Bible, and nurses from the Woman's Hospital joined neighbors on porch swings and preachers with Bibles in a cast of characters that inhabited his yard. Crafted by a skilled hand, Edmondson's sculptures are a testament to one man's ability to transform observation and imagination into objects that continue to inspire us today.

William Edmondson stands among the most important self-taught artists of the past century. As the first African-American to receive a solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art (1937), Edmondson claims a national place in the history of American Art. (Source: *Cheekwood Museum of Art*).

The Artists

Thornton Dial was born in 1928 in Bessemer, Alabama, where he still lives today. He worked as an industrial worker until 1981 and was “discovered” in 1987 by a friend, Lonnie Holley, and art collector William Arnett. His works are largely found objects, both two-dimensional and three-dimensional. Dial is one of the most notable self-taught artists of the last century exhibiting work in major museums across the U.S. Dial continues to create work with the help of his son and artist Richard Dial. Highly collected, Dial’s work is featured in numerous public and private collections such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The *New York Times* has said of his work, “some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced.” In 2012, a major exhibition *Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial* traveled to several museums around the Southeast including the Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

Lonnie Holley is a self-taught artist who was born in 1950 in Birmingham, Alabama. He was inspired to pursue art after carving tombstones for his sister’s two children who died in a house fire. Like Edmondson, Holley believes that his work and materials are divinely inspired. His work includes carved sandstone and found object assemblages. Holley’s sculptures have been displayed in institutions such as The Smithsonian American Museum of Art, The American Folk Art Museum, The High Museum of Art and the White House.

Lonnie has led numerous student groups through art-marking activities and will conduct workshops during his time in Nashville. Themes of his work include recycled materials and found-objects, which will be an important theme of the educational component of this project.

The Gathering

In addition to the two new commissions by Holley and Dial, the Oasis Center will donate an existing piece, “The Gathering” by artist Sherri Warner Hunter to Metro Arts. This piece will be restored and also located in the park.

Project Partners

Oasis Center, located on the edge of Edmondson Park, was founded in 1969 to provide community-based care for youth experiencing alcohol and drug problems. Oasis Center has evolved over the past four decades into one of the nation’s leading youth-serving organizations, offering safety and support to Nashville’s most vulnerable and disconnected youth, while seeking to also teach young people how to transform the conditions that create problems for them in the first place.

Cheekwood Museum of Art and Botanical Gardens owns the largest existing collection of Edmondson’s work. They plan to hold an exhibition of Edmondson’s work alongside Dial’s and Holley’s during the fall of 2014.

Ayers Institute for Teaching & Learning at Lipscomb University will work with Metro Arts to create Common Core curriculum units and teacher professional development programming related to the art and the park history.

Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency is the owner and developer of the park property.