

## JUNETEENTH LESSON

# EMANCIPATION THROUGH THE ART OF META WARRICK FULLER

On June 19th, 1865, Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas and informed the town's residents that all enslaved persons were free. Although President Abraham Lincoln declared freedom for enslaved Black Americans with the Emancipation Proclamation in January of 1863, and Congress officially abolished slavery with the 13th Amendment in January 1865, neither were immediately effective in ending slavery. The enslaved people in Galveston Bay were the last in the country to learn of their freedom. June 19th, or Juneteenth is therefore celebrated as the true end of slavery. It is an important opportunity to recognize the history, culture, and achievements of Black Americans.

Meta Warrick Fuller was commissioned to make commemorative sculpture for the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1913. Fuller created a thoughtful reflection on the idea of Emancipation, and the challenges, empowerment, progress, and emotions that came with the end of slavery.



Meta Warrick Fuller *Emancipation*. 1913; bronze cast, 1999. The National Center of Afro-American Artists and the Museum of African American History, Boston. Located in Harriet Tubman Park, Boston. Photo: Danforth Art Museum.



*"HUMANITY WEEPING OVER HER SUDDENLY FREED CHILDREN, WHO, BENEATH THE GNARLED FINGERS OF FATE, STEP FORTH INTO THE WORLD, UNAFRAID."*  
- META WARRICK FULLER<sup>1</sup>

Read the quote above and look at the statue *Emancipation* by Meta Warrick Fuller. What do you see? Who is depicted? What do you feel when looking at the artwork?

**Think and Reflect:** What do you know about Emancipation and Juneteenth? How is Juneteenth a reflection of challenges and achievements faced during Emancipation?

**Allegorical Figures:** In the sculpture, Meta Warrick Fuller chose to represent Emancipation through allegory, meaning a kind of story that demonstrates a theme or idea, rather than literal message. She showed Emancipation through the figures of Fate, Humanity, and Freed Children. Why do you think she decided to make an allegory with these figures?

**Humanity Weeping:** Weeping, and crying, can come from many different emotions. Weeping is associated with sadness, but also joy, stress, gratefulness, anger, and other strong feelings. Which emotions do you think are prompting Humanity's weeping? What other ways could those emotions have been expressed? Why do you think Fuller chose to show Humanity weeping?

**Freed Children Unafraid:** Now, look at the faces of the two youths. How would you describe their expressions? What do you think is running through their minds as they face their freedom?

**Gnarled Fate:** Fate is normally defined as a future or power beyond people's control, that will happen no matter what. Why would "fate," represented as a giant tree-like hand, be gnarled, or twisted? What did Meta Warrick Fuller know about what happened for freed Black Americans after Emancipation?



Maquette for Spirit of Emancipation by Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877–1968), 1913. Plaster.

It took a lot of careful planning to create *Emancipation*. The final work in downtown Boston was not Meta Warrick Fuller's first attempt! The Danforth Art Museum has one of her maquettes, or small practice models, of the artwork.<sup>4</sup>

Look at the maquette and compare it to the final. What are the important elements that stayed from the practice model to the final? What details did Fuller add in the final?

*"WE SEE; WE FEEL; WE ARE IMPRESSED; WE ARE EDIFIED: WE ARE FILLED WITH ENTHUSIASM; OUR GLAD SOULS OVERFLOW"*  
-FREEMAN HENRY MORRIS MURRAY<sup>2</sup>

### Freedom, In time

Meta Warrick Fuller's representation of Emancipation reflects an imagined moment of time. What do you think the figures were doing before this presented moment? How are the figures interacting, or not interacting? What do you think they will do next?

Meta Warrick Fuller's statue was made to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>3</sup> Her representation of the moment of Emancipation therefore reflects the complicated joys and challenges of freedom. She celebrates freedom through the two "unafraid" youth figures, but shows with the other allegorical figures that it is not an easy journey. She had a bigger historical understanding that freedom was not immediate for all enslaved peoples and that equal civil rights were not achieved for all Black Americans 50 years later.

Reflecting on the challenges of the past does not mean that accomplishments should not be celebrated. One Black scholar, Freeman Henry Morris Murray, felt enormous pride looking at Meta Warrick Fuller's sculpture. He said, "We see; we feel; we are impressed; we are edified: we are filled with enthusiasm; our glad souls overflow."

In what other ways does Meta Warrick Fuller's artwork celebrate freedom, empowerment, and progress? How is her artwork relevant for people today?

Juneteenth is a time for both celebration and reflection. Take a moment to think about some significant accomplishments and challenges for freedom and equality from the past, present, and future. How will you celebrate change? What will you do to create positive change?

Accomplishments to Celebrate

Challenges that need Change

Things that happened from the past 50 years:

Things that are happening in my time:

Things for the future:

Need more about Juneteenth or Meta Warrick Fuller?

Review the "Educator Companion Guide" for vocabulary, instructional support, and suggested resources.