

TRADITION INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Phillip Simmons

The following text is an interview summary from a conversation with interviewer Adrienn Mendonca on behalf of the curator on April 2007.

**In general, why do you do what you do?
What underlies the commitment you bring
to your work?**

Phillip: I make a living out of it, it's a service I give to the public and it's something I wanted to do.

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how?

He studies the history of the craft by reading books.

Can you describe your workshop practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

Phillip worked independently for most of his life, self-employed (not for a company.) For some of his pieces, however, he needed help. Two of his apprentices, Silas and Joseph, helped him work on his famous gate at the Smithsonian Institute. In the workshop he would either work with the other men or alone on a piece: it depended on the job. The biggest job they had that took the most people was in Columbia, South Carolina at the state capitol, with another gate. It was his most complicated piece and took the most people to move and handle (a total of four.)

What does "mastery" mean to you?

Phillip: How I define the master. People give me that name on account of my working ability. Some call me the artist blacksmith. Some call me the genius, the word, 'genius blacksmith' ... That all boils down to recognition of my skill.



*Phillip Simmons- Room Divider
Photo by Phillip Simmons
Foundation, Inc.*

**Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there?
How long have you lived in the South?**

Phillip was born on Daniel's Island, where parents and grandparents had their home (the island is located North of Charleston, off of coast, between North Charleston and Charleston.) He came to Charleston to stay with his mother at age eight because of the better schools in the city, filling his childhood with odd jobs shining shoes, selling newspapers, and shoeing horses.

If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it?

He says he calls himself a Southerner since he was born in the South in 1912. His skills would have been the same if he had been born somewhere else.

Phillip: The skill would've been the same thing if I had taken it like I've taken it here. If I'd opened up in the same way I could've seen things the same way in other countries as I do here.

Describe your relationship to community or family? Are there groups of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

Phillip has a daughter and extended family in the Charleston area. He spends a lot of time at his church, and although retired he will still drop by his shop to talk with the tourists.

The shop itself is located in the back yard and has served four generations: Peter Simmons, and his father, Phillip himself and the men who work in it currently. It's not the exact same shop he used to come to as a kid, because they have moved around Charleston several times. The layout of the shop, though, is the same as when he was a kid, and some of the working materials in it are that old. Phillip gave the anvil that his mentor Peter Simmons used to the Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston.

Phillip: It's a part of the history of Charleston, or a part of the history we want to continue to keep, that's why we give it to Avery.

The anvil is about a hundred years old and Avery uses it for an exhibit.

Phillip also does presentations for school groups. The kids always want to know what his favorite piece is that he's done (the answer is the fish and star gate at the Smithsonian Institute.) He thinks it's exciting for small kids to ask him questions about his work.

Phillip: That give me a lift to talk to them

How did you learn your craft?

In 1925 he apprenticed himself to Peter Simmons (unrelated) at age 13. Peter acted as friend, teacher and mentor to Phillip. He became a permanent helper in the shop at age 15. In the beginning he shod horses and fixed farm equipment. Later, at age 21, he went out on his own.

Phillip: Peter Simmons had taught me about metal; everything I knew about metal he taught me. I learned the art on my own, wrought iron fences, just by watching how things were put together.

Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others--the next generation of artists/craftspeople?

Yes, he's trained four apprentices, some of whom still work in his shop. Two of them are Carlton Simmons, his nephew, and Ronnie (Joseph Pringle), his cousin. They also teach occasionally at the School of the Building Arts in Charleston.

How do you decide you're going to make? Where do you get your ideas?

Little children like to ask him this question, and his response is always "The Lord."

Phillip: The fish come from the water, the Lord made the fish. The moon come from the element, the Lord made that. The stars come from the element, he made that, the Lord made that.

How long does it take to complete?

That depends on how big and complicated the job is.

How long have you been working for?

77 years, almost all of his life. He has completed about 500 pieces total.

How has your work evolved?

One of the major motivations for the beginning of his career as an artist was the general switch from horse-drawn carriages to cars. Instead of doing wheelwright and farrier work, he took jobs working on gates, fences, indoor and outdoor furniture, and balconies.

Phillip: You heard about the cars came in and put the horses out of business. I know how to shoe horses but I knew nothing about repairing cars....

During his career Phillip became so renowned that the Smithsonian Institute invited him to work in Washington, DC seven times. The gate he made during his first Smithsonian visit is one of his most famous, titled "Star and Fish Gate." It is now housed at the Smithsonian in the Phillip Simmons Room. Although he has been internationally recognized since his 40's, he says he never dreamed he could attract thousands and thousands of people.

How has being a blacksmith influenced who he is as a person?

Phillip: What blacksmithing taught me through those many years (is) that if you try, you can do it, that's all. That's all. If you try, not blacksmith only but to be plumbers, hairdressers, clothes makers, all of those things, that if you try, you can do it... If I didn't try I would've never had all these things hanging up in here. If I didn't try, I wouldn't been the artist blacksmith. If I didn't try, I wouldn't been a genius. And all those beautiful names they give me, those names wouldn't even come over me if I didn't try.