

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Julia Woodman***

*The following text is an interview summary from a conversation conducted by Tim Prizer on behalf of the curator on March 24, 2007.*

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**Talk about the process of making the tessellation. From conception to completion, what is your artistic process?**

Julia begins the process with heavy paper like a file folder and cuts and bends it into the shape she would like to make in silver. The next step is to

use copper to perfect the shapes. Once that is complete, she feels confident enough to begin working with

the silver. She creates a sample in silver and solders the pieces together into the desired tessellation shape. She then makes extremely detailed drawings of what she would like the finished piece to look like, whether it's a goblet, a spoon, a slice, or any other object. While doing the drawing, she begins to consider how the piece will be made. This often requires the making of a new tool, which Julia also does herself.

She then begins the construction of the piece. Sometimes the piece works out exactly like she planned, and other times it fails. Most of the time, though, she is able to manipulate the metal in a way that makes it work out really well.

When the tessellation is soldered together, it creates its own texture of what Julia calls "positive and negative space." Negative space refers to air, the space between the tangible portions of the tessellation that give the piece volume without weight.

**How long does this process normally take you?**



*Julia Woodman- Honey Comb Fish Servers  
Photo by Armstrong Studio*

The time this process takes is dependent on a number of things. If she has to make a tool in order to accomplish the tessellation, the process takes a significant longer amount of time.

*Julia: The fish servers [as featured above]...they took me a total of 81 hours to make that, that whole piece from start to finish.*

### **What materials do you use other than silver?**

She uses mostly non-ferrous metals like bronze or brass. Also, a friend provides her with the beads that are a prominent feature of many of her pieces. Her friend designs the beads based on what she thinks would look best with the piece, and she normally has wonderful judgment.

### **Talk a bit about the process of making tools and the equipment that you use.**

Jewelry suppliers have hammers with cross peens, ball peens, round peens, and so on. These tools and other pre-made tools are used in Julia's work whenever she finds them useful. Often, though, the tessellation style she aims to achieve requires a tool that does not exist. In the case of her "honeycomb" tessellation for instance, she has designed a tool that works the silver into the proper shape and form. Each tool consists of two sides with a design that must align when placed together. Once she has designed the tool properly, she places the disk of silver between the ends of the tool and hammers them together with a ball peen hammer. This modifies the silver into the desired shape and form.

Other forms of tessellation allow the use of pre-made tools sold at supplier shops. These work well for certain projects.

She also uses a hydraulic press, a rolling mill and other equipment as well to create the shapes, textures, and forms she desires.

### **Tell me about the differences in the tools you make and the ones you buy for the tessellation.**

A gentleman once made her a plastic tool for facilitating the honeycomb shape. The tool stamped the form out perfectly – *too* perfectly in fact:

*Julia: But the tools that I make, they have their irregularities in them, and the irregularities come out when the honeycomb disks are put together. And the disks that are put together, made from the tool that was manufactured, looks different and more manufactured and has this kind of cold look about it. In comparison to the tool that I made for the disks that were made on the tool that I made, there's a decided difference. It doesn't have the warmth that the handmade tool has. The manufactured tool works really well and takes less*

*time, but the handmade tool takes more time and has more what I call personality and a warmth about it that's really beneficial and adds to the appearance of the piece.*

### **How do you decide what you're going to make?**

Normally people come to her with an idea and place an order for her to create the object that they have in mind. Sometimes, after Julia creates a drawing for the customer based on their request, they decide that it is not what they want and she must create something else for the customer. It is usually dependent on the customer's wants and needs.

When she first started out, she had to create her own body of work. She did so and started selling her work. Once she had established herself, she began working solely on other people's requests for commission. This is what she continues to do today.

### **Generally speaking, what's the shortest and the longest amount of time that it takes you to complete one of your pieces?**

Cups take less time to make than most things while handles for large serving pieces take more. Crosses and memorials for churches – like altar sets, processional crosses, and table crosses – take the most time due to their size and detail. One of the longest it has ever taken Julia to make one piece was when she made a tray for a graduate school final project. A tray is the most difficult thing for a silversmith to make because of its thinness. Getting the tray to lie sturdily and in balance is a real challenge. It took a year and a half of consistent working for Julia to get the tray flat and to where it would not wobble.

The longest it has ever taken was when she made the processional cross for the Cathedral of Saint Philip, which took two years. The piece is large and involves very elaborate tessellation.

### **When do you know that you are finished with a piece?**

When the piece is acceptable to the person who requested that it be made, she can call the piece done. When the piece looks like her rendering of it on paper, she knows that it is done. When the customer is satisfied, she is satisfied.

### **What does it mean to you to create something?**

*Julia: It keeps me young ... With the teaching and [being] with younger people, and they're fascinated with what I do, and I find that very stimulating. And their stimulating me keeps me thinking young. And I love that. I love the young people that I teach. And I find that delightful. And in their way, they inspire me. And I enjoy that. They seem to enjoy my classes. I have people*

*who keep returning to my classes, and it's just a fun time. Also, it's an outlet for me to be with people because I'm very much of a people person, and I find that working in my studio is very confining and very solitary. And sometimes I have to get out of there just to get away [laughs]. It's just to be with more people. I enjoy having people work with me in my studio and will invite people to do that. And a lot of people, a lot of my friends do that ...I enjoy sharing my skills with people that are very interested.*