



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Philip Simmons

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Archives of American Art
750 9th Street, NW
Victor Building, Suite 2200
Washington, D.C. 20001
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/>

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
General.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	1
Scope and Contents.....	2
Biographical / Historical.....	1
Names and Subjects	2
Container Listing	

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Philip Simmons
Identifier:	AAA.simmon01
Date:	2001 April 4-5
Creator:	Simmons, Philip, 1912-2009 (Interviewee) Douglas, Mary F., 1956- (Interviewer) Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Extent:	30 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Philip Simmons, 2001 April 4-5, Transcript Audio: Oral history interview with Philip Simmons, 2001 April 4-5, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Restrictions

For more information on how to access this interview contact Reference Services.

Biographical / Historical

Philip Simmons (1912-2009) was a blacksmith from Charleston, South Carolina. Mary Douglas (1956-) is the curator at the Mint Museum of Craft and Design in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Philip Simmons conducted 2001 April 4-5, by Mary Douglas, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in Simmons' home and workshop, Charleston, South Carolina.

Scope and Contents

Simmons speaks of his childhood and early education; jobs shining shoes and delivering papers at age 8; also at age 8, working as an apprentice to Peter Simmons in his blacksmith shop on Calhoun Street; Philip Simmons's attraction to blacksmithing and the action of the shop; being hired by Peter Simmons at age 13 in the blacksmith's shop where he has worked for 79 years. He also describes his apprenticeship and talks about blacksmithing as an ongoing learning experience; the necessity of adapting skills to an evolving market, from making wagons and horse shoes to ornamental iron work, and equipment for cargo shipments; the affect of the economic boom after World War II; drawing inspiration from nature and "God's creations in Charleston" for design ideas; working with wrought iron, mild steel, brass, and lead; making his own tools; craft as a representation of the past; giving demonstrations at the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. in 1976 and 1977 (through John Vlach's invitation) and a gate he made at the festival that was purchased by the Smithsonian and featured in Southern Living; his 1982 lunch with Ronald Reagan on the occasion of receiving a National Folk Award; meeting other blacksmiths through the Southeastern Regional Blacksmith Conference; the public's understanding and reception of blacksmithing; recognition, awards, and publicity for his work; involvement with craft educational programs at schools, museums, and churches; the function of the Philip Simmons Foundation; blacksmithing in Charleston as a national tourist attraction; the relationship of farming and blacksmithing by slaves to his own blacksmithing; the impact of travel on his work; working with Ira DeKoven; his interest in preserving traditions; corporate versus private commissions; the importance of mechanical drawing skills; preserving old piece, salvage work; his retirement because of arthritis; current interest in sketching and drawing; family life with his wife and three children; and his involvement with the community.

General

Originally recorded on 2 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 4 digital wav files. Duration is 2 hr., 7 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Blacksmithing -- Equipment and supplies
- Blacksmithing -- Study and teaching
- Blacksmithing -- Technique
- Blacksmiths -- South Carolina -- Charleston -- Interviews
- Decorative arts
- Ironworkers -- South Carolina -- Charleston -- Interviews
- Metal-workers -- South Carolina -- Charleston -- Interviews

Types of Materials:

- Interviews
- Sound recordings

Names:

- DeKoven, Ira
- Festival of American Folklife
- Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
- Philip Simmons Foundation, Inc.

Southeastern Blacksmith Association