



Artist Profile

Philip Simmons

Blacksmithing is an ancient art form with its beginnings before recorded history. Although blacksmithing began as a very necessary occupation by individuals on the Appalachian frontier to make tools to allow for Western expansion in the United States, a renaissance of the metal craft has taken place. The blacksmith has moved from a mere toolmaker to a skilled artisan making functional and aesthetically pleasing pieces of art. Modern technology developed in the industrial revolution, led to the end of the blacksmith as a household toolmaker and allowed the blacksmith to branch into skilled art forms, as well as producing fully functional tools.

Philip Simmons, the most celebrated of South Carolina ironworkers, was born on Daniel Island on June 9, 1912. A Charleston resident since 1919, he attended local schools but received his most important education from a local blacksmith, Peter Simmons, who ran a busy shop at the foot of Calhoun Street. There, Philip Simmons acquired the values and refined the talents that would sustain him throughout his long metalworking career.

Moving into the specialized fields of ornamental iron in 1938, Simmons fashioned more than five hundred decorative pieces of ornamental wrought iron: gates, fences, balconies, and window grills. The city of Charleston from end to end is truly decorated by his hand.

In 1982, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded him its National Heritage Fellowship, the highest honor that the United States can bestow on a traditional artist. This recognition was followed by a similar award by the South Carolina state legislature for "lifetime achievement" and commissions for public sculptures by the South Carolina State Museum and the city of Charleston. Simmons was inducted into the South Carolina Hall of Fame in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina on January 31, 1994. The "Order of the Palmetto," the highest award given in the state, was presented to him by Governor David Beasley in 1998. In May of 2001, Philip Simmons received the Elizabeth O'Neill Verner Governor's Award for "Lifetime Achievement in the Arts."

Pieces of his work have been acquired as well by the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution; the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico; the Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina; the Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; and the Daniel Island Company, Daniel Island, South Carolina. (Vlach)



In 1989, the vestry and congregation of his church (St. John's Reformed Episcopal Church, 91 Anson Street in downtown Charleston), dedicated the grounds to develop a commemorative landscaped garden as a tribute to his exceptional mastery of wrought iron and in recognition of his inspirational character and self assurance.