Mario A. Robinson

Blessed to have subjects of great character
for my portraits,
I want to tell a story with my art,
not just paint pretty pictures.

As told to Patricia Craft Watson

ANDREW WYETH launched my painting career. Eleven years ago, I hadn't even completed my first painting when I found a book on Wyeth's work at the library. Part of the reference section, the book couldn't be checked out, so I went to the library every day to look at it. The way Wyeth drybrushed his watercolors amazed me and that book provided a context in which to develop the kind of works I paint today. I want to tell stories with my art, and give the characters an area in which to breathe.

I loved Wyeth's work but I was most drawn to his storytelling ability—how he painted portraits and simultaneously wove a tale of his subject's life upon the paper. I wanted to do the same thing with my art, but I didn't want to work in watercolor as Wyeth did. I thought I could achieve a similar result using pastel. Pastelists often do a lot of scumbling or sometimes use a cross-hatching technique, but more do what I'd call freestyling. In contrast, my work hinges on a grid of horizontal and vertical lines created with tiny pieces of pastel. So time-consuming is my technique that my paintings may take as long as four months to complete. It's a little extreme, and maybe I'm crazy, but it works and I'm often asked how I capture the mood of my subjects so well.

To answer that question, another artist said it best: "I'm not a bowl of fruit; I don't know what a tree is feeling." The same is true for me. What I know is human emotion and that's something I can hope to achieve in my paintings. I think people are the most fascinating subject matter on this planet and they're also the most challenging.

Stories of a Small Town

Since I use the same technique for every painting, it may seem that my passion is my technique, but it's really more about the individuals I paint. That's where the extended time to finish comes into play, because I go over and over a painting—trying to capture a certain emotion. Only when I've achieved the right emotion can I let the painting go.

The quiet, contemplative tone in so many of my paintings originates with the subject and is further enhanced by my appreciation and understanding of being reared in a very small town. I grew up in Oklahoma in a town with one stoplight. The highlight of our week was going to watch the high school football game on Friday night. In the South we didn't have many choices. We ritualistically went to church; we did a lot of things that were very down to earth. Being from that town made me appreciate the simplicity of life. That's the story I want to tell in my paintings.

My models are the people I come in contact with down South, and they're very much like me. The woman in *Church Coat* (at left) goes to my church. *Ocean County Schoolhouse* (opposite page, top) is a painting of a childhood friend I grew up with. There aren't many people that I meet by chance that I'd want to paint. My subjects aren't models; they're people I know that have become models for me. Many artists are constantly searching to find the right models, but these folks just kind of fall into my lap. It's a blessing.

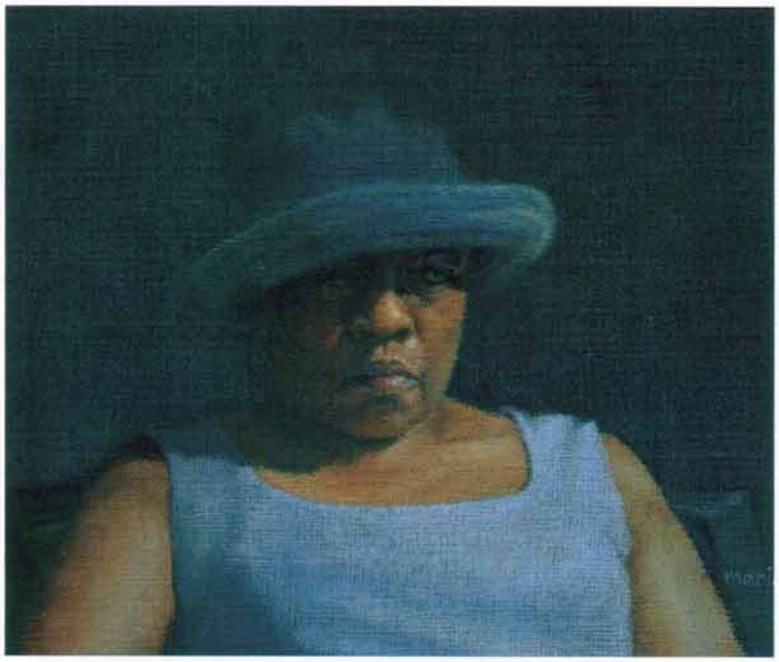
Church Coat **(below; 14x17), and** ***Philip Simmons*** **(previous page; 18x24)**

'Tis a Gift to Be Simple

While I studied at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, instructors often showed us slides of work done by the great masters—like Eakins and Vermeer—which I totally appreciated. But I felt distracted by the busy backgrounds in their works. The feeling I'd gotten so long ago looking at one of Wyeth's paintings of Helga, *Braids* (1979, tempera, 17x21), changed how I looked at paintings forever. *Braids* shows a black background, and Wyeth's model, Helga, is wearing a heavy turtleneck sweater. It was the first painting I'd ever seen that was ethereal. The way Wyeth left so much to the viewer's imagination fascinated me—Helga's eyes seemed finished at first glance, but as I looked closely, they weren't.

I kept coming back to Wyeth because his manipulation of the surface was amazing, and he was courageous enough to pull off a simple painting with so much mystery in it. That example gave me ideas about what I wanted to do with the texture in my own paintings.

I use my backgrounds to create a sense of dimension, not distraction. Instead of looking at a painting that's flat and smooth, viewers of my work often feel as if they're looking through a screen. My meticulous cross-hatching technique creates a soft, intriguing, plaid-like pattern. In fact, many people ask if I paint on canvas because the cross-hatching resembles a woven surface. This attention to the background is important because I don't want to portray an awkward figure standing in the middle of nowhere, and I don't want to distract the viewer with unnecessary objects. For that reason I create a background that weaves the subject and ground together. In addition, what my subjects are wearing plays an important part in the painting, as I often pick up colors and mimic the textures of their clothing in the background.



Ocean County Schoolhouse **(above,14x17)**
Indian Summer **(at left,12x12)**

Somewhere Out There

Another technique I picked up from Wyeth is to show my subjects looking away from me. Some portraits I'd seen in college felt static—as if there were an uncomfortable standoff between the viewer and the subject. I want, in contrast, to give the viewer a sense of reality while showing different facets of my subjects, such as their personality and posture. When we talk to people face to face, we don't stare directly at one another the whole time. We glance away to think or to react to something else. Rarely do we get a chance to observe a person in a natural state, but I try to capture that ease in my paintings.

Many of my subjects appear contemplative; often their eyes are closed. That comes from my being raised in the church. It's the mood of the church—solemn and peaceful. If people are going to live with my art, I'd like to give them a little bit of that peace. In the South we do a lot of just sitting and observing. For that reason, I love seeing someone in profile. It feels like the best form of observation. It's very quiet.

Whether I work from life or from photographs often depends on the subject. Younger subjects seem to be more patient, and can often sit for a few paintings. But sitting still for so long can be more difficult for older people, and they're some of my favorite subjects. I can happily paint from either life or photos; I learned to work equally well from photos because I'm often not going to stay on location long enough to finish a painting. The painting of Philip Simmons (on page 39) is a perfect example. I knew going in I'd work from photographs and pencil sketches because I wouldn't be staying in Charleston, South Carolina, long enough to bring the work to completion. (You can visit www.annlongfineart.com to see many of the pencil sketches I did in preparation to paint this piece.)

The Newest Painting

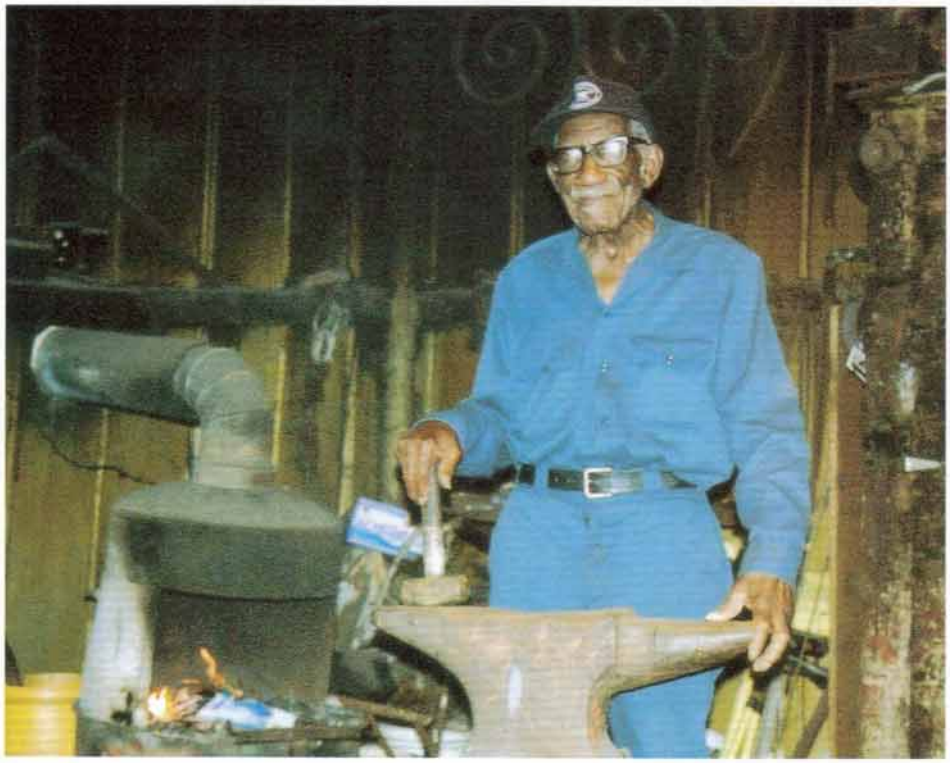
Although I'd rather talk more about technique than reveal the biographies of most of my subjects, I must share the story of my most recent portrait subject, Philip Simmons. At 93 years old, he's one of the most famous metalworkers in America. They call him the "Gatekeeper of Charleston" because his work decorates so many of the wrought-iron gates of the historic homes there. In his lifetime he's met five presidents, and some of his work is in the Smithsonian Institution, yet he lives in a very simple manner. The South Carolina Historical Society recently refurbished his home and has plans to turn it into a historic landmark.

When I was in Charleston to draw him and shoot some photos, there were tour buses coming by his house, which is already a stop on a local tour. I was waiting for him one morning while he was down the street at the diner finishing breakfast. One of the tour guides, going above and beyond the call of duty, went off to find Philip with the hope he'd share his stories with the tourists!

When I began the painting of Philip, I used a piece of plain white, 140-lb. Strathmore watercolor paper. I've tried pastel papers but I rip through them; I'm heavy-handed. I masked off the watercolor paper and laid the drawing down using a lead-holder with a No. 8 or 9H graphite lead. The hard lead acted like a needle, laying grooves in the paper as opposed to just placing lead on the surface. I sprayed fixative, and then when I worked over the paper with pastel, the lines and the grooves served as a guide.

I painted Philip's face and neck first and brought them up to an almost-finished level. I used his blue work shirt symbolically; I wanted to have that color

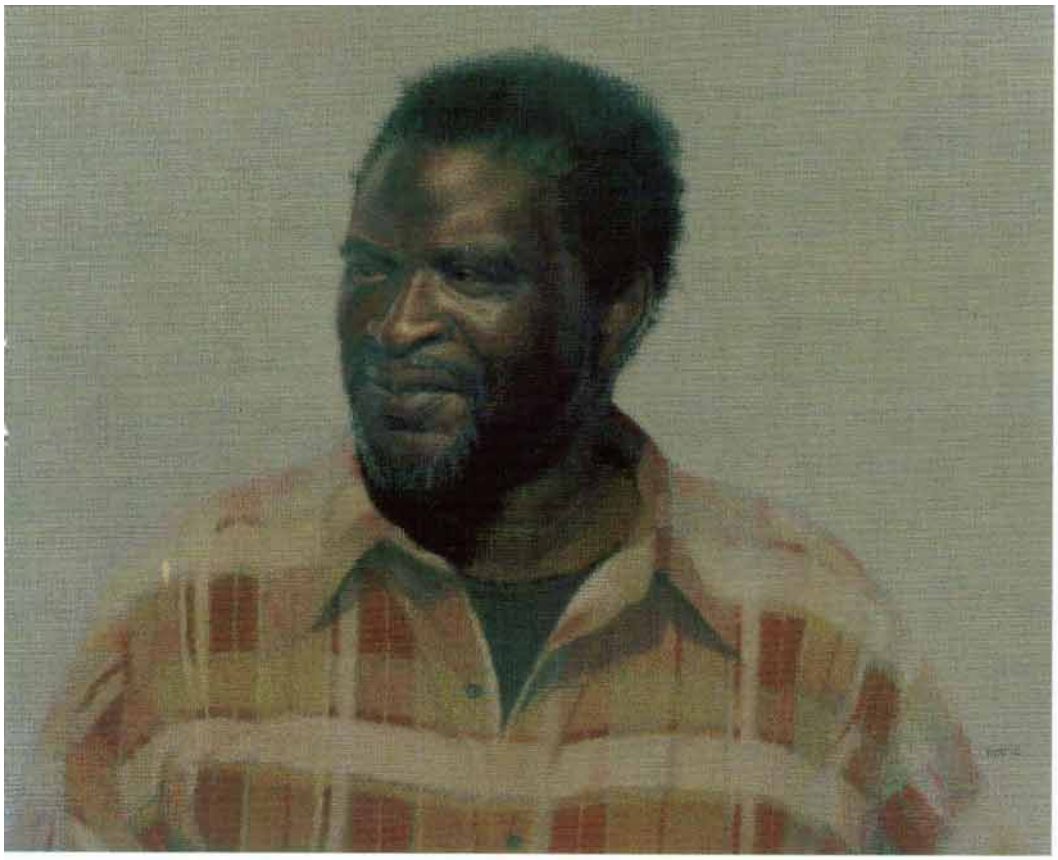
An Artist Becomes a Muse



Mario Robinson snapped this picture of Philip Simmons in the workshop where the renowned blacksmith has created every one of his iron works during his 70-year career.

"When I met Philip Simmons, I was bowled over by the simplicity of this famous blacksmith. He's known as The Gatekeeper of Charleston, South Carolina, because the city, with its many historic homes, serves as the backdrop for his amazing metalwork. He's a historical figure himself, and yet he's so unaffected by it. He's had the same workshop for nearly 70 years, and being in there with him was haunting. It's lit by a single light; there's so much history there. It was refreshing to see a person of that stature and success be so humble. He's quiet and shy, but very strong. He has spiritual force that fed my images," says Robinson.

Born June 9, 1912, Simmons has been a resident of Charleston since 1919. He's worked in ornamental iron since 1938 and has fashioned more than 500 decorative pieces of wrought iron: gates, fences, balconies. His works can be found in the collections of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution and the Atlanta History Center to name a few. To learn more, visit www.philipsimmons.org.



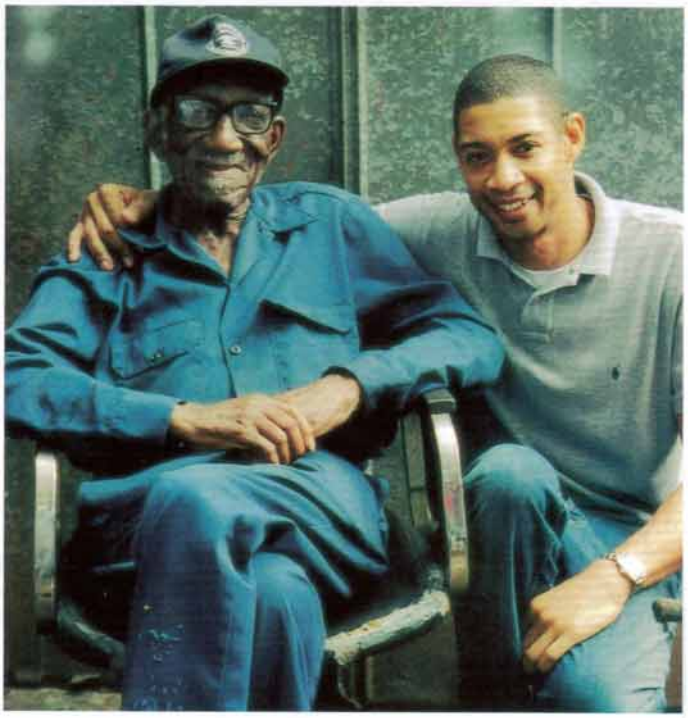
***The Carriage Pusher* (20x22)**

permeate the painting, so I went in underneath with an ultramarine and a Prussian blue over the face. I worked the face up with really soft Sennelier pastels and finished by hitting it with a little bit of purple. Then I unified those areas before I dropped in the details of his facial features. After that I worked on the shirt and laid in the Prussian and ultramarine blues and the browns to unify the face and the shirt. Then I just kept working it up and fixing it, about four times, finally moving to the background where I started laying in the lights. I never unify a background until I'm finished with the figure.

There's No Place Like Home

Without hesitation I can honestly say I feel most at home in the South, but believe it or not I just moved to New York City. It's a long way from Oklahoma and Alabama, and I'd been living in New Jersey, but I decided I wanted to have access to the best art materials and to the convenience of having slides made and mounted in a day instead of a week. I love the city but am not inspired by it. My father still lives in the same town I was born in, and my mother lives in Alabama, so I still feel based in the country. As far as my heart goes, it belongs to the South. I'm feeding the world these images that are nothing like where I live. It's a big juxtaposition.

Mario A. Robinson graduated from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. His works are included in the collections of the Arkansas Arts Center and Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas, and have appeared in several magazines. To see more of his work, visit www.AnnLongFineArt.com.



Philip Simmons (left) and Mario Robinson outside Simmons' workshop in Charleston last October.