

LANDSCAPE BODY DWELLING

Charles Simonds at Dumbarton Oaks



Site Report Charles Simonds In Situ in the
Dumbarton Oaks Museum
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When Robert Woods Bliss, one of the founders of Dumbarton Oaks, began collecting Pre-Columbian art in earnest in the 1930s, the art of the ancient Americas was only rarely on display in art museums and exhibitions. At that time, stone sculptures, ceramics, textiles, and other objects created before the arrival of the first Europeans in Latin America were more commonly shown in natural history museums, where such works were viewed in the context of anthropological exhibits. But Bliss sought to create a collection that emphasized the aesthetic aspects of Pre-Columbian art, and to show it at the world's leading art—rather than anthropology—museums before creating a permanent gallery for the collection at Dumbarton Oaks. Bliss focused on objects of rare materials and high craftsmanship, generally avoiding ceramics unless they were of particular interest iconographically.

The Robert Woods Bliss Collection of Pre-Columbian Art was installed in its permanent home in 1963, in a wing off the preexisting Byzantine galleries (left). The wing, designed by Philip Johnson, was conceived as a small garden pavilion. The unusual building features eight interconnected circular galleries, with floor-to-ceiling glass walls, arranged in a square around an open courtyard with a fountain. Surmounted by domes reminiscent of those Johnson knew of from Istanbul, the building is known for its low-key but luxurious use of materials, from teak floors to bronze soffits, that echoed the discernment evident in the collection itself. Johnson designed the building to be as transparent as possible; he wanted the “garden to march right up to museum displays and become part of them.”¹ This sense of transparency is heightened by the use of Plexiglas cases and stands to display the Pre-Columbian Collection. The objects seem to hover in space, untethered by either mounts or extensive labels, or by the architecture, which seems to melt away.

In 2009, a series of striking intrusions—both architectural and material—appeared in the Johnson pavilion at Dumbarton Oaks. Charles Simonds's interventions in the museum



galleries produced startling juxtapositions, but in a subtle way also filled voids. Although the amount of supporting text providing a background for understanding Pre-Columbian cultures has increased in the galleries in recent years, the installation at Dumbarton Oaks has long been considered to be an extreme example of the display of “decontextualized” works of art, the minimalist setting and presentation far from the detailed explanatory texts and dioramas of anthropology museums. Simonds’s interventions in the Johnson pavilion, particularly works such as *Rock Flower* (1986, top left) and *Wilted Towers* (1984), provoked in the viewer a sense of absent contexts, both Pre-Columbian and modern.

Indeed, unwary visitors even mistook *Rock Flower* and *Wilted Towers* for models of Pre-Columbian architecture, never mind the fact that Simonds’s imaginary buildings were closer in spirit to the Native American architecture of the southwest United States than to the ornate splendor of Maya palaces and temples, the likely original contexts of many of the Pre-Columbian sculptures surrounding *Rock Flower* in the Johnson pavilion. Viewers would peer into the structures and search for explanatory texts nearby, but then return to Simonds’s works again and contemplate them in a new way, once they were assured that their purposes were not strictly didactic.

Mistaking the contemporary for ancient is understandable, as numerous architectural models are known from the Pre-Columbian Americas. Some of the most complex were made by the Moche, a culture that flourished on the North Coast of Peru in the first eight centuries of the Common Era. Unfired clay models were included in burials at San José de Moro² (bottom left), and ceramic vessels with elaborate miniature temples can be found in many museum collections. These too presumably came from burials, though the majority of such vessels lack known find sites. Rarely populated, many of these vessels are also simple musical instruments or whistles, indicating the ritual nature of these representations and suggesting the possibility that such architecture was considered animate.³ Curiously, works such as *Rock Flower*, with its barklike walls, and the detumescent *Wilted Towers* speak of an organic, animate architecture as well, but in terms more biological than spiritual.



Rock Flower, with its biomorphic palisade implying limited access to a small ritual space, seems to echo aspects of Pre-Columbian architecture, particularly Maya, Chimu, and Inca buildings designed for the observance of certain solar and celestial phenomena. Simonds’s miniature architectural installations are often referred to as dwellings for a mythical population, yet the striking aspect of *Rock Flower*, *Pyramid*, and *Y* (in 2009, the latter two works were on display in the Byzantine galleries, facing page) is the very lack of domestic, seemingly inhabitable spaces. A limited access to interiors and an emphasis on solid forms

over enclosed spaces speak of concerns about defense or a celebration of ritual rather than the mundane matters of cooking and sleeping. It is architecture as symbol rather than as shelter. In *Wilted Towers*, for example, Simonds appears to be overturning, quite explicitly, our expectation of, and deep desire for, architecture that provides stable and enduring shelter. Its apparent organic flaccidity and untrustworthiness invokes the ineluctable transience of its erstwhile but vanished inhabitants.

The presence of Simonds's architecture in the Dumbarton Oaks Museum also provoked considerations of epistemology, calling to mind the profound differences in knowledge about the ancient American past between Bliss's time and our own. When Bliss made his first purchases of Pre-Columbian objects in 1912-14, little was known about the complex societies of the ancient Americas. The Aztecs and the Incas were the best known of the Pre-Columbian cultures, as they were the dominant empires in North and South America at the time of the Spanish conquest. But little was known about the thousands of years of history that preceded these two late societies. Simonds's works, as acts of reconstructing an imagined past, remind us of the extraordinary growth of Americanist archaeology in the twentieth century. In this day of mass tourism to archaeological sites in the Yucatan Peninsula and elsewhere, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of the inaccessibility of most Pre-Columbian sites to individuals outside of Latin America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Knowledge of the actual architecture of these sites was available only through a small number of books; some books, such as John Lloyd Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (1841), were widely disseminated, but most were of more limited circulation.⁴ Our understanding of ancient American society—and the broader context of the Pre-Columbian Collection—has increased dramatically with the number and scale of archaeological projects from the 1930s to the present day.

Simonds's art offers tantalizing glimpses into the residues of a hitherto unknown yet seemingly knowable civilization, and in doing so stimulates our cognizance of the almost magical sense of continuing discovery that is a significant characteristic of contemporary Pre-Columbian archaeology. The early works of Simonds parallel the dramatic rise in archaeological knowledge, particularly about Latin America in the late 1960s and 1970s. These discoveries became part of a broader public dialogue and were ultimately refracted in contemporary art. Simonds's colleague and friend Robert Smithson was also responding to such currents, albeit it in different forms. Smithson's essay "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" and installation *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)* of 1969 were, in part, oblique responses to Stephens.⁵



The presence of *Rock Flower* and *Wilted Towers* in the Pre-Columbian galleries did more than remind us of epistemology, however, and Simonds's sculptures became sites for reflection on broader concerns of duration, both the lifecycles of individuals and the fates of entire cultures. Simonds's work in the context of the Dumbarton Oaks Museum makes present the idea of ancient lost civilizations. *Rock Flower* and, to a greater extent, *Wilted Towers*—both strikingly depopulated—force us to step back and reflect on the once-thriving cities where the objects in the Pre-Columbian Collection were created, used, feared, and treasured. Many, but not all, Pre-Columbian cities were gradually or abruptly abandoned at some point in the past, and these sites are now quiet reminders of the rise and fall of civilizations. We prefer our ruins empty, and in this sense the absence of figures in Simonds's architecture, and the nonspecific nature of the architecture, allow an opportunity for unimpeded reflection and imagination.

Wilted Towers, with its deflated, fallen brick structures, speaks to the melancholic aspect of archaeology and its chronicling of the ceaseless march of time. A memento mori in the galleries, it parallels the biological metaphor that archaeologists use to distinguish periods of time in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica: Preclassic, Classic, Postclassic, reflecting earlier beliefs about the transition from nascent, unformed cultures, to the florescence of a middle period, and ultimately to an inevitable decline. Simonds's mysterious works provide sites for thinking about these enduring, structuring cycles of birth, maturation, and decay, in a setting where such questions are particularly resonant. This idea continues in the garden, where *Head (from I, Thou)* (1993) appears almost like a fallen architectural tenon, its grimace and cracks seemingly reflecting the impact of the fall as much as the specific inherent psychological complexity of the work itself.

The other resonant presence in the Pre-Columbian galleries supplied by Charles Simonds is the very material of *Rock Flower* and *Wilted Towers*: clay. After entering the first gallery in the Johnson pavilion, visitors generally turn to the right and proceed into a second gallery containing Aztec and Mixtec objects, along with works from one of their ancestral cities, Teotihuacan. These Central Mexican works flanked Simonds's *Head* (1991, left), a work of ambiguous anthropomorphic/zoomorphic characteristics. Made of clay and plaster, its rich red hue is a reminder of the earth from which it was made. Depending upon a viewer's interpretative inclination, it could equally be read as gradually achieving form (i.e., coming into existence) or losing form (i.e., eroding, decaying, and dissolving).

Clay was one of the foundational materials of Pre-Columbian material culture, yet it is notable for its relative absence in the Bliss collection. Clay, as a material, figures



prominently in Pre-Columbian origin myths, particularly the Maya *Popol Vuh*, where man is first created out of clay, just as it does in Simonds's own early works, particularly *Birth*, a film and photographic series from 1970.⁶ Bliss himself, however, considered clay objects to be in the realm of anthropological collections and largely eschewed objects of this material, unless they were very finely crafted, fired works with interesting iconographies. *Head* stood out as a primordial form, the inchoate ambiguity of its human/animal characteristics creating tension and unease in a gallery filled with disturbing objects.

Head's companions in the gallery included a necklace with shell beads in the form of human skulls and a necklace with gold ornaments in the shape of either human skulls or spider monkey heads (with moveable mandibles, top right).⁷ These Mixtec-Aztec necklaces echo the themes of the transformation/decay of flesh and the disconcerting ambiguity of Simonds's sculpture. Across from *Head*, in its own case, was a small ornament fashioned from the shell of the thorny oyster, *Spondylus* (bottom right). The ornament represents the Aztec god Xipe Totec, "Our Lord the Flayed One," a deity associated with fertility. The priests of Xipe Totec wore the flayed skins of sacrificial victims, symbolically replicating the new corn emerging from dying husks. In Aztec belief, sacrifice was essential for fertility and the continuation of life. The flayed skin served as a metonym for the concept of death and rebirth. In the carved ornament, one can observe the mouth of Xipe below the mask of flayed skin.

Spondylus, which was highly valued and closely associated with concepts of fertility and sacrifice in the ancient Americas, was a ritual material of great importance. Difficult to obtain and work, the shell ranges in color from white to orange, with some specimens and species achieving a rich red or purple. The variegated red-orange used for the Dumbarton Oaks Xipe Totec underscores the connection between blood, sacrifice, and fertility. The skull necklace was similarly fashioned from *Spondylus*, but it also reveals the addition of a sprinkling of red pigment, possibly cinnabar, as an allusion to the blood of sacrifice. Cinnabar was also sprinkled on bodies in tombs, possibly as a synecdoche for the ritual of blood sacrifice in an enduring form. *Head* itself was encircled by a light sprinkling of red clay dust in its temporary entombment in the museum case, an unanticipated connection to a long-standing funerary tradition in ancient Mesoamerica, and one that invokes further unease if one reads *Head* as a decaying form.

The disembodied *Head* also prompted comparisons with the next gallery, where the Gulf Coast collection is displayed.⁸ The Gulf Coast region is known for the early and elaborate articulation of the Mesoamerican ball game. In Classic-period Veracruz, the





ballgame was closely associated with sacrifice, and thin stone heads—really just profile heads, known as *hachas*, the Spanish word for axe—are thought to represent the severed heads of sacrificial victims (top, far left). But the anthropomorphic/zoomorphic ambiguity of *Head* also encouraged comparison with sculptures associated with the Olmec culture, one of the earliest complex societies of Mexico. Dating to the first millennium before the Common Era, Olmec “transformation” figures are among the most striking works from the ancient Americas (top left). These small-scale greenstone figures seem to represent beings in the process of metamorphosis. Human bodies sprout jaguar heads and paws, or jaguars adopt the stance of human boxers. The intriguing figures speak of animal strengths and potentials, giving them a power that belies their small scale. As with *Head* and *Stugg* (1991), a large-scale work on view on a garden terrace, there are strong resonances between the ancient and the contemporary, particularly concerning ideas about transmutation and transmogrification.

Very different affinities and associations were prompted by the siting of *Tumbleweed* (1993). Placed across the pavilion from *Head*, in a gallery featuring Pre-Columbian art from the Andean highlands, this delicate work in dazzling white porcelain invokes a hybrid, imaginary botanical form. *Tumbleweed* is formally similar to the structure of its namesake, desiccated remains of desert plants blown from their root systems. But unlike tumbleweeds, the work features the promise of new life in the form of tiny leaves emerging from the dead plant. As with *Xipe Totec*, it offers an idea of rebirth from death.



In an unexpected way, *Tumbleweed* (facing page) seemed at home in the Andean galleries. As John Beardsley notes in this volume, this imagined desert plant was consonant with the Andean landscape itself, particularly the hyperarid region of the coast, home to the Moche and Chimu objects in the next gallery. Formally, its bright, spiky forms echoed not only the mother-of-pearl of the inlay of a Wari mosaic mirror with a zoomorphic handle, but also that other marine creature so highly valued in the ancient Americas, *Spondylus*, especially in the delicate/threatening parallel between the spiky white spines of the bivalve and the points of *Tumbleweed*. The idea of recreating botanical forms in precious materials was one the Inca explored in spectacular detail (bottom left). The Coricancha “golden enclosure,” in Cuzco, a temple dedicated to the sun, included a garden of full-size replicas in gold of plants found in far-flung regions of the Inca Empire.

Tumbleweed not only plays with ideas of cyclical existence but also presents another formal tension between vulnerability and strength. Porcelain, a clay with a high kaolin content, requires great skill to manipulate the balance of water to mineral. When fired at a

very high temperature, however, it achieves full vitrification; its surprising tensile strength makes possible works of breathtaking thinness and translucency. *Tumbleweed* was created at the Manufacture Nationale de Céramique, Sèvres, where Simonds was part of the program of distinguished artists in residence. In some ways, the work is a descendent of the tour de force porcelain rooms of the eighteenth century with their abundant floral imagery. But *Tumbleweed* takes the material in a new direction, referencing not the refined species of palace gardens but the undomesticated wild west, its sprouts of new growth reading more as barbed wire than as inviting blossoms. Although it initially appears to be a work quite apart from *Wilted Towers* and *Rock Flower*, it shares with both not only biomorphic forms but also a sense of abandoned sites and desolation. A sense of play also infuses the piece, particularly in the very idea of a tumbleweed—its abiding characteristic one of rootless, aimless movement—rendered in a material at once hard and yet so easily shattered. It is this tension between the ephemeral and the enduring, delicacy and strength, the very purposefulness behind the creation of a solid object the name of which invokes something that we have come to regard culturally as the veritable cliché for the quintessentially random and transient, that imbues the work with its remarkable power.

Beyond the Johnson pavilion, Simonds's works continued to provoke and provide a subversive counterpoint to other museum collections and the gardens. *Pyramid*, in a corner of the main courtyard of the museum, was a quiet counterpoint to the classicism of the surrounding architecture and collections. Again a primordial presence, *Pyramid* stood as an allusion to a far more ancient architecture that preceded the creation of the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine objects nearby. *Y*, installed in the "altar" area of the Byzantine gallery, was in many ways at home in the ritual setting, conceptually and even formally, with its cross form echoing the Christian imagery on the liturgical silver from the Sion Treasure, a sixth-century Byzantine hoard from the south coast of Turkey. But the humble material of *Y*, clay and plaster, seems to be a reminder of a more modest ritual tradition, even a sly rebuke, to the ostentation of Byzantium.

One of the intentions of Johnson's pavilion was to bring the outside in, to make the boundaries between the garden and galleries disappear. Charles Simonds's installation at Dumbarton Oaks worked in this spirit, with the sculptures in the galleries recalling the natural world and the works in the garden bringing us back to objects in the Bliss collection. *Stugg*, the large-scale work on the garden terrace, depicts an anthropomorphized botanical form, a stem from which the torso and head of a figure sprout. The head is again ambiguous, between human and animal, between animation and decay. *Stugg* presents one of the





striking affinities—similarities without direct links—of the exhibition *Landscape Body Dwelling* at Dumbarton Oaks. One of the treasures of the Pre-Columbian Collection at Dumbarton Oaks is a small Maya Jaina-style polychromed ceramic whistle (top left). Recalling the anthropomorphism and phytomorphism of Simonds's *Stugg* (bottom left), this whistle features an aged man emerging from the stem of a flower.

Jaina is the name given to a class of Maya figurines from the Late Classic period (600–900 CE).⁹ These figurines are most closely associated with the island of Jaina, in the Gulf of Mexico, off the western coast of the state of Campeche, where they have been found in burials. Some scholars believe that the number of burials on Jaina exceeds the number that would be expected for a population of such a small island and argue that the island served as a necropolis. The Maya conceived of watery places as portals to the underworld, suggesting that the island was a particularly auspicious place “to enter the water,” to use the phrase the Maya used to signify death. Figurines of the Jaina style have also been found on the mainland, at sites in the states of Campeche, Tabasco, and Chiapas. Jaina figurines were created as individual figures and as male/female and animal/human pairs.¹⁰

Another type of Jaina figurine is represented by the Dumbarton Oaks whistle. There are at least six other examples of figurines with an aged man emerging from a blossom. Occasionally a younger male is represented, in which case he is usually identified as the beautiful young maize god, his metamorphosis echoing the growth of this essential Mesoamerican crop. The Dumbarton Oaks figure may not be a young maize god, but he may still be divine. For example, in a Lacandon Maya creation myth, gods, lineage founders, and their helpers were born of plumeria blossoms. Whatever the precise meaning of the figure, the piece was undoubtedly used in some sort of a ritual before its eventual interment. As a whistle, its potential for sound links it to a broader world of flutes and other instruments terminating in a floral shape, a synesthesiastic allusion to music emitted as aromatic sounds and to the breath of the soul.¹¹

The parallel phytological metamorphosis of *Stugg* and the Jaina whistle was one of the many unanticipated affinities of the exhibition *Landscape Body Dwelling* at Dumbarton Oaks. Hundreds, if not thousands, of years separated the Pre-Columbian and Byzantine collections from the sculpture of Simonds, yet the juxtaposition of the works provided unique opportunities for reflection on enduring themes. One of the greatest pleasures of Simonds's intervention in the galleries and gardens, and in the life of the residential research institute of Dumbarton Oaks, were the conversations that the work elicited, conversations that continue today among those who experienced the installation.

NOTES

- 1 Philip Johnson, quoted in James N. Carder, "The Architectural History of Dumbarton Oaks and the Contribution of Armand Albert Rateau," in *A Home of the Humanities: The Collecting and Patronage of Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss*, ed. James N. Carder (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection), 110.
- 2 Luis Jaime Castillo, Andrew Nelson, and Chris Nelson, "'Maquetas' Mochicas: San José de Moro," *Arkinka* 2, no. 22 (1997): 120-28.
- 3 Juliet Wiersema, "The Architectural Vessels of the Moche of Peru (CE 200-850): Architecture for the Afterlife" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2010).
- 4 John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (London: John Murray, 1841).
- 5 Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (1969). See also John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, 4th ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 2006); and Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- 6 For a recent translation of the *Popol Vuh*, see Allen J. Christenson, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007). For a more detailed discussion of *Birth*, see Beardsley, this volume.
- 7 Susan Toby Evans, ed., *Ancient Mexican Art at Dumbarton Oaks: Central Highlands, Southwestern Highlands, Gulf Lowlands* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2010).
- 8 For more information on the Gulf Coast collection, see Evans, *Ancient Mexican Art at Dumbarton Oaks*. For the Olmec transformation figures, see Karl A. Taube, *Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2004).
- 9 Megan O'Neil, "Jaina-style Figurines," in *Ancient Maya Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, eds. Joanne Pillsbury, Miriam Doutriaux, Reiko Ishihara-Brito, and Alexandre Tokovinine (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, forthcoming).
- 10 The male/female pairs include older males with younger females, possibly representing specific deities and ideas of fertility, although some scholars have suggested that the sexual play represented is of a decidedly earthier nature, and that such figurines represent burlesque theatrical performers.
- 11 Karl A. Taube, "Flower Mountain: Concepts of Life, Beauty, and Paradise among the Classic Maya," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 45 (Spring 2004): 69-98.



Top left: Colossal head in the *sacro bosco* at the Villa Orsini, Bomarzo, Italy (late sixteenth century)

Bottom left: Simonds's photograph of a goat head in South Carolina (1984).

From the Dumbarton Oaks Collection

Top right: Mixteca-Puebla-style necklace with ornaments in the shape of human skulls or monkey heads, 900-1520 CE, cast gold and turquoise

Center right: Aztec ornament representing Xipe Totec wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim, 1500 CE, carved *Spondylus* shell

Bottom right: Mixtec-Aztec necklace with beads in the shape of human skulls, 1200-1520 CE, carved shell



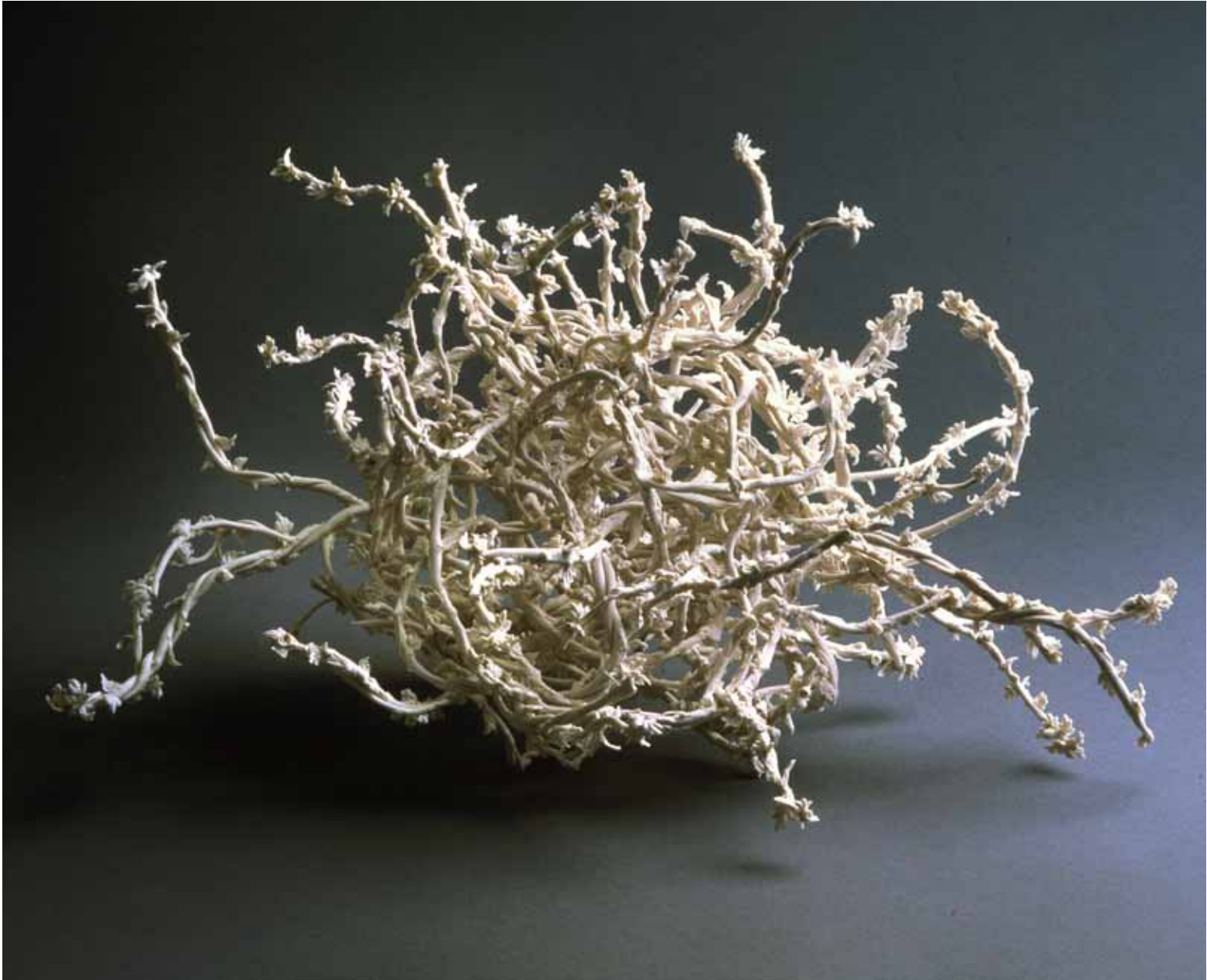


Head, 1991
Plaster and clay, 8 x 15 x 11 inches
Collection of the artist

Wari mosaic mirror, 650–1000 CE,
shell, pyrite, and turquoise

Detail of a nesting porcelain plate service
with carved mountain imagery, created
by the artist (along with *Tumbleweed*) at
Manufacture Nationale de Céramique,
Sèvres, in 2009.





Tumbleweed, 1993 | Porcelain, 9 x 16 x 17 inches | Collection of the artist

Y installed in the Byzantine gallery, Dumbarton Oaks.





Y, 2001

Clay and plaster, 60 x 35 x 11 inches

Collection of the artist





Rock Flower, 1986 | Clay and wood, 10 x 24 x 24 inches
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Museum
Purchase, 1999

Top: Photomontages by the artist of imaginary playlots that suggest analogies between the body and landscape (1973)

Center: *Stugg* installed on the Fountain Terrace in the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens.

Bottom left: *Stump* (1984, clay and wood, 15 x 24 x 24 inches, collection of the artist); bottom center: Simonds's photograph of a blossom at the botanical garden in Berlin (1978); bottom right: Simonds's photograph of Antoni Gaudí's *Basilica de la Sagrada Família*, Barcelona (begun 1882).





Wilted Towers, 1984 | Clay and wood, 12 x 24 x 24 inches | Private collection