

Charles Simonds The Dumbarton Oaks Project John Beardsley



In the spring of 2009, Dumbarton Oaks inaugurated an occasional series of contemporary art installations intended to provide unexpected experiences and fresh interpretations of its remarkable gardens and collections. The first artist selected for the program was the American sculptor Charles Simonds, who is well known for clay sculptures that document the wanderings of a fantastical civilization of Little People whose landscapes, architectures, and rituals have been imagined by the artist since the early 1970s. Because ideas about landscape and nature are so pervasive in his art, Simonds was invited initially to intervene in the gardens. As he came to know Dumbarton Oaks, however, he found that he was also intrigued

by correspondences among his sculptures and the Pre-Columbian and Byzantine collections; moreover, he found himself captivated by the institution's trove of rare garden books, a number of which contained images of the kind that have inspired his work over the years. The outcome was a project that spanned the whole institution. A wide range of his current sculptures—some architectural, some figural, and some evocative of landscape; most pre-existing but one made especially for the exhibition—was installed between May and October 2009 in various spaces at Dumbarton Oaks: in the Orangery (left) and several terraces in the garden, in the Byzantine and Pre-Columbian galleries in the museum, and in the space outside the Rare Book Room. For this last space, the artist also assembled a “cabinet of curiosities” and presented films and photographs that collectively comprised the beginnings of a creative autobiography. Simonds mined collections across the institution; he also collaborated with staff in most of its divisions. He worked with me to select sculptures for the installation and to identify a range of locations for them within Dumbarton Oaks; with Linda Lott, the librarian of the Rare Book Room, to identify materials for the cabinet of curiosities; with museum director Gudrun Bühl and her staff to position sculptures in the galleries; and with garden director Gail Griffin to install sculptures outdoors.

As detailed in essays by Ann Reynolds and Germano Celant in this volume, Simonds introduced his imaginary civilization on the streets of New York in the early 1970s, building their habitations on sidewalks and window ledges on the Lower East Side. He subsequently took them around the world to dozens of cities, including Dublin (top left), Paris (bottom left), Berlin, Genoa, and Shanghai, and was eventually invited to present them to museum audiences. While the Little People still make an appearance in his more recent work, this work displays an expanding range of concerns—especially an exploration of the analogies among the body, earth, and architecture (all of which are conceptualized as different forms of dwelling), and a comparison of these elements to plants. In particular, Simonds sees in the growth and decay of plants parallels to the growth and decay of the body, the rise and fall of buildings, and the formation and erosion of landscape. Thus, many of his sculptures combine human, vegetal, architectural, and geomorphic elements—a rich stew distinctly suited to the environment of Dumbarton Oaks.

Simonds's installation at Dumbarton Oaks was far from his first institutional project. He has been the focus of numerous exhibitions around the world, beginning with a solo exhibition at the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, in 1975 and an installation for the “Projects” gallery at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1976. Subsequent solo exhibitions were held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1981); Guggenheim Museum, New York (1983); Architecture Museum, Basel (1985); Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris (1994); and Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia (2003). But the Dumbarton Oaks project was unprecedented in his work in several respects. It was his first exhibition to be dispersed around an institution and to reach across the internal boundaries of the institutional environment. It was uniquely calibrated to its place, as it used the collections to shed light on his work and conversely used his work to provide new views into the collections and gardens of Dumbarton Oaks. Other artists have done similar projects: in recent years, such interpretive installations have become a more frequent, if still somewhat unusual, way of shedding reciprocal light on artists and the institutions that collect and display their work. In 2006, for instance, the French-born sculptor Louise Bourgeois installed thirty-nine of her sculptures throughout the galleries of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, setting up dialogues between her work and similarly themed artifacts from the museum's collection. More analogous to Simonds's work at Dumbarton Oaks, however, might be Mark Dion's project, *Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered*, with Bartram's Garden in Philadelphia. Dion set out to retrace Bartram's 1773–77 botanical


expedition to the Carolinas, Georgia, and North Florida; he sent back seeds, bark, leaves, soil, shells, shark's teeth, water samples, dead

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birds, and bugs that, together with paintings, drawings, postcards, and a host of cultural curiosities (including bottle caps, fish hooks, old tools, ceramic fragments, and alligator figurines), were assembled into an installation at the garden in the summer of 2008.¹

Simonds's project for Dumbarton Oaks falls somewhere between those of Bourgeois and Dion. Like Bourgeois, he juxtaposed his work with museum artifacts in an act of reciprocity. Like Dion, he engaged the institution's particular assets to create an installation that reinforced shared themes from natural and cultural history. By dispersing his work throughout the institution, he intended to provoke speculation on a wide range of unexpected comparisons, including—but not only—between his sculpture and plant morphology, between the ritual practices of the Little People and those of the Byzantine and Pre-Columbian cultures, and between his architectures and those of the ancient Americas. At the same time, he underlined some of the more idiosyncratic attributes of the institution: the chronologically and geographically far-flung sources of its collections, their narrow but sharp focus, and the often overlooked presence in the garden of narrative and decorative elements—some of the latter with a decidedly grotesque character. In all, Simonds created a unique occasion in his life and in the life of Dumbarton Oaks to explore some hidden but essential trajectories of his work along with some of its more arcane autobiographical and cultural resonances, even as he underlined some of the more intriguing, even idiosyncratic attributes of the institution.

In the introductory gallery to the exhibition adjacent to the Rare Book Room hung a series of twenty-two color photographs entitled *Birth* (1970, above), in which the artist is seen to emerge naked from the muck of a New Jersey clay pit. Nearby played a sixteen-millimeter film with the same title that recorded the same event. In both the photo sequence and the film, Simonds affirmed his identity with the moist earth as the source and primary material of life while simultaneously signifying his genesis as an artist and the importance of clay to his work. Alternating on a continuous loop with *Birth* was another film, *Landscape/ Body/Dwelling* (1973, right), a record of a ritual the artist performed regularly in the 1970s, in which he smeared his body with clay to make a landscape, on which he then constructed the dwellings of the Little People. These rituals underscored his notion of the analogies


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among the body, earth, and architecture—all animate, all human habitations, and all subject to cycles of growth, maturation, and decay. The connections between plants and architecture were underlined in the print of an installation entitled *Growth House* (1975, left). This is a depiction of a seasonally renewable dwelling, constructed at full scale on several occasions, with earthen bricks that have edible plant seeds in them. As the seeds sprout, growth transforms the built structure—the dwelling is converted from shelter to food and is harvested and eaten.

The principal components of the first part of the exhibition, however, were two cases that Simonds imagined as contemporary variations on the traditional cabinet of curiosities. They presented some of the many images and texts from which the artist has drawn inspiration, interspersed with autobiographical materials and several small sculptures (facing page). Simonds culled the archival material from sources including the Rare Book Room at Dumbarton Oaks, the C. G. Jung Institute and the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism in New York, his family's papers, and his own collection; the material included both particular images and texts the artist used in the past and related materials uncovered more recently. Books, papers, and illustrations were paired with sculptures that began to suggest how the historical material has shaped his work; these, in turn, were complemented with photographs of larger sculptures that were installed around Dumbarton Oaks, with the aim of facilitating in the viewer a sense of the resonances among the historical materials, the autobiographical narratives, and the sculptures that composed the rest of the exhibition.


A complete portfolio of images of the case materials can be found elsewhere in this volume, together with the accompanying notes by Linda Lott. For the purposes of this essay, it is important only to establish their general character. The cases included some artifacts from the artist's earliest works on the Little People: a plaster cutting board on which he made the bricks for their dwellings, and a mixed-media collection of their tools, games, building materials, and ritual objects. Also exhibited were some manipulated postcards, including a selection of reproductions of Van Gogh landscapes that Simonds assembled end to end to suggest a narrative of birth, death, and resurrection. The cases

included some early publications on the artist, including Charles Simonds (1975), the first book on his work, which features a cover photograph of Simonds enacting one of his Landscape/Body/Dwelling rituals; and *Three Peoples* (1975), his own narrative of the three groups, known by the geometric form assumed by their architecture (linear, circular, and spiral), in his imaginary civilization.

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While these materials had a fairly straightforward archival character, they were surrounded by curiosities that evoked a number of themes not previously presented by the artist in any depth, which added remarkable detail to an understanding of his work and its links to natural and cultural history. The son of two Vienna-trained psychoanalysts, Simonds is attentive to a wide array of psychological notions, including traditional Freudian ideas of psychosexual development, his mother's challenge to those ideas, and his own discovery of the language of Jungian archetypes. More pertinent to the research and collections of Dumbarton Oaks, he finds inspiration in the conflation of plant and animal forms characteristic of the grotesque, in alchemical images of plants transmuted into animals, in archaic physiognomies that compare human and animal or human and plant morphology, and in myths of figures transformed into trees. Materials that evoked this wide range of intellectual and psychological inspirations were assembled in the cases. Included in one cabinet, for instance, were offprints of his mother's writings on castration anxiety in boys, which, contrary to orthodox Freudian theory, was traced to fears about the loss of the testes rather than the penis. Nearby was a small sculpture that resembled a scrotal sac or plant tubers; this conflation of body parts and plants was reinforced in the other cabinet, which featured a copy from the Dumbarton Oaks Library of Giambattista della Porta's *Phytognomonica* (1588), an early effort at plant classification based on concepts of resemblance. Porta (1535?–1615) was an Italian scholar, playwright, and polymath who lived in Naples during the scientific revolution; his book applied a belief common in the sixteenth century called the Doctrine of Signatures, which suggested that there were analogies between a plant's form and its properties—for instance, poisonous roots might resemble snakes. The book was opened to a plate comparing the orchid with like objects, such as the testicles of a small animal (indeed, the name for the Orchidaceae family derives from *Orchis*, a flower whose roots were believed to resemble testicles, which in Greek is ὄρχις). Such zoophytes were also of interest to Claude Duret (d. 1611), a French judge with a fascination for mystical and mythological plants, whose *Histoire admirable des plantes et herbes esmerueillables & miraculeuses en nature* (1605), also from the Dumbarton Oaks Library, was opened to a page showing the mushroom "Phalle Hollandique" whole and in three parts.



Simonds's fascination with archaic analogies between the body and plants was reinforced in the cases by copies of a fourteenth-century print of Adam with a tree sprouting from his loins and a fifteenth-century print of Apollo and Daphne. But examples of human-botanical connections were drawn not only from European sources, as the cases also included photographs of Classic Maya ceramic figurines from Jaina, an island off the

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Yucatan coast that is believed to have served as a necropolis for Maya elites. The figurines were of a type unknown to the artist before this project; they showed figures emerging from flowers, much like one found in the Pre-Columbian Collection at Dumbarton Oaks. (More on the surprising affinities between Simonds's work and the Pre-Columbian Collection can be found in Joanne Pillsbury's essay in this volume.) The cases also featured materials that presented the analogies between human and animal physiognomy, including *The Man and the Ram* (left), an illustration from a copy of Ernst Kris's *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1952) that once belonged to the artist's mother. (Given his parents' profession, it is perhaps not surprising that Simonds reports that everything in their household was given a psychoanalytic spin—even art.) Kris presumably took the illustration from Porta's 1586 publication on human physiognomy. Although now largely dismissed as a pseudoscience (and this may help explain Simonds's interest in it), physiognomy, like the Doctrine of Signatures, suggested that there was a connection between outward form and internal characteristics—a man with goatlike features might have goatlike qualities, for instance. These ideas descend directly into Simonds's work: the exhibition included a clay slip- and sand-covered plaster *Head* (1991, page 33) suggestive of ideas about physiognomy. Part desiccated skull, part leering face, part rocky landscape, *Head* embodies a universe of allusions that only get stranger and more elusive the more they are pursued. Combining what appears to be a death mask with the

parted lips of an aroused male goat, it suggests attention to the effects of aging on the body in general and on sexuality in particular. The cases helped establish a partial genealogy for the sculpture by juxtaposing a photograph of it with Porta's illustration in Kris's book, suggesting the rich imaginative possibilities of conflating human and animal morphologies. Other specific comparisons were drawn in the cases: a photograph of the sculpture *Stugg* (1991, page 95), on view in the garden, was juxtaposed with images of Jaina figures similar to the one from the Pre-Columbian Collection; like the latter, *Stugg* features a torso and head emerging from what might be a seed pod or sprout.


From this introductory gallery, the visitor, armed with an exposure to some of the botanical, art historical, psychoanalytical, and mythological notions that converge in Simonds's work, could set off in search of the rest of the exhibition: the sculptures dispersed through the museum galleries and the gardens. Indoors were six sculptures, several related to the Little People. *Pyramid* (1972, page 38) was located in the museum courtyard, juxtaposed with Late Classic and Byzantine artifacts. It was an appropriately archaic form for the setting; it also evoked some of the artist's ancient history, as it was one of his first efforts to present the ritual places of the Little People. In an adjacent gallery hung the enigmatic *Y*

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(2001, page 37). While it deploys the tiny clay bricks of the Little People, this sculpture is not an explicitly architectural piece. Instead, it suggests both a saguaro cactus and a headless body, with hips and rounded belly below outstretched arms. Here again is the fanciful combination of human and botanical elements, but seen in the context of the Byzantine Collection at Dumbarton Oaks, the sculpture took on different connotations (right). What was surprising was how much it conversed with some of the liturgical objects nearby. The shared cross motif was perhaps most evident (the artist has even described the sculpture as "a pregnant cross"), but the slight pink swellings that protrude from the sculpture also took on new associations. What might be read as buds in a botanical context here looked like sores, as if they were some sort of diabolical affliction.

The Pre-Columbian galleries housed four more sculptures, one in each of the corner galleries of the square building designed by Philip Johnson in the early 1960s and composed of eight circular domed spaces around a central courtyard. *Head* was in Gallery One, juxtaposed with Aztec skull necklaces and carved stone masks. *Rock Flower* (1986, page 39) was in Gallery Three among Classic Maya artifacts (including Jaina figurines); it beautifully evoked the artist's idea of the correspondences among plants, earth, and architecture by featuring rock walls opening like the petals of a flower to reveal the bud of a building within. If this was an image of architecture blossoming, then *Wilted Towers* (1984, right) was an image of a building in decay: a collection of limp structures sprawling in the sand, an implausible combination of desiccated tubers, detumescent phalluses, and collapsing columns. In Gallery Seven was Simonds's most explicitly botanical creation: a porcelain *Tumbleweed* (1993, page 35) made at the Sèvres factory in Paris. Working with resident craftsmen, Simonds fabricated elongated strands of porcelain on string, which incinerated during firing; these were then assembled into an evocation of the matured and dried desert plants that blow about in western landscapes—and western movies. (Often called Russian Thistle, tumbleweed is an invasive Eurasian plant partial to disturbed ground; it can be one of several species of *Salsola* or other members of the family *Amaranthaceae*.) But unusual details—such as spiky flowers that are variations on the delicate blossoms that often adorn Sèvres creations—make this particular tumbleweed, already evocative of desolation, seem more like a crown of thorns. While thus suggestive of Christian iconography, *Tumbleweed* also evoked the Peruvian desert landscape that is the source of the Nazca, Moche, and Chimú objects that surrounded it at Dumbarton Oaks.

Outside in the gardens were other species of Simonds's sculptures. An enormous landscape, *Mental Earth* (2003), was suspended from the roof beams of the Orangery, an



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1810 brick conservatory open to the elements in the summer and enclosed to shelter tropical plants in the winter. A fantasy of a landscape freed from gravity, *Mental Earth* (top left) is representative of a number of very large pieces that the artist made from time to time over the years, including a vast spiral mountain created for the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1983 (*Age*, bottom left). *Mental Earth* was made for his retrospective at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern in 2003. Although conceived for another space, the piece could not have looked more suited to the

Orangery. Its size was perfect for the place; its elongated elements, made of steel rods covered with extruded foam finished with clay, clay slip, and sand, seemed to fill the rectilinear space. But more than this, the sculpture's organic forms—its fleshy tubers, sprouting rocks, and spiraling or dangling towers—were oddly consonant with the 150-year-old ficus vine that ornaments the inside walls of the Orangery: the vine has been pruned over its long life into pendulous green globes. Hidden in the sculpture's surface was a vast dreamscape: cliffs and deserts, pathways and debris pits, buildings with faces, and even an eel's head.


From the Orangery, an axis extends east and down through several of the garden's principal spaces: the Beech, Urn, Rose, Fountain, and Arbor terraces. Simonds's sculptures were located on three of these terraces, creating a narrative sequence through this section of the gardens. Looking from the Orangery's east doors, a sculpture was just visible on the stone walk at the far end of the Rose Terrace. On approach, the piece proved to be a large terracotta-colored head with a grimacing face. Cast in plaster from a clay original that was allowed to crack as it dried, the sculpture evokes a disturbed landscape. But it is also an anguished self-portrait, with blank eyes, parted lips, and a tongue that seems poised in an expression of rage or nausea. Titled *Head (from I, Thou)* (1993, pages 60–61), the sculpture was once part of a yoked double portrait of the artist and his father, which together suggested an effort at exorcism of intergenerational conflict. Here was the artist's signature psychoanalytic content, expressed through exaggerated physiognomy.

From the Rose Terrace, stairs lead down to the Fountain Terrace, where a sculpture called *Stugg* lay on the grass. Cast in cement from a clay original and finished with several shades of clay-colored paint, this is a narrative sculpture, depicting a desiccated earth pod that sprouts a pubescent torso and terminates in the same conflation of clown face, goat head, and death mask as the *Head* on view in the museum. As such, the piece recapitulates themes encountered in figural images elsewhere in the exhibition: cycles of birth, growth, and decay; transitions between plant, animal, and human worlds; the generative force of sexuality; and the mocking image of death's grin.

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The final work in the installation was encountered on the adjacent Arbor Terrace: a piece titled *Growth* (2009, right) made specifically for the exhibition. Fabricated in polyurethane and clay and finished with the same clay-colored paints as the other outdoor works, the sculpture seemed to sprout from an enormous, ancient wisteria that sprawls over the vaulted structure that gives the terrace its name. The sculpture was fashioned over a broken wisteria branch given to the artist by one of the gardeners; it rose from a cleft in the plant, wired to the arbor like an errant vine. Here again were the suggestions of tuberous plants that resembled body parts, the twisted earth, and the spiral dwellings— all of which evoked the image of rampant growth entirely compatible with the irrepressible energy of the wisteria that was its host.

Public reaction to Simonds's work at Dumbarton Oaks was mixed.² While the sculptures in the museum and the various materials in the cabinet of curiosities were generally received with enthusiasm, the sculptures in the garden incited some controversy. To some extent, this might be explained by the fact that garden visitors sometimes encountered the sculptures without the benefit of first seeing the introductory and interpretive materials in the museum, although an explanatory handout was available at the garden entrance. In a larger sense, the discrepancy might have been an expression of the different contexts in which the sculptures were seen. Museums are widely understood as curated spaces; people expect to encounter objects collected, presented, and interpreted by professionals, and typically yield to their expertise. Moreover, as sites of temporary exhibitions, museums are associated with change. Gardens, by comparison, are more apt to be thought of as natural rather than curated, managed by biological processes rather than artistry. Where their designs are recognized, they are likely to be regarded as frozen in time— notwithstanding their seasonal aspects, which are assumed to repeat themselves in predictable cycles. (Gardeners at Dumbarton Oaks report constant phone calls in the spring requesting precise information about bloom times, as if these never varied.) Assumptions of an unchanging aspect are associated especially with gardens like those at Dumbarton Oaks, which have attained such stature that they seem to be regarded as finished works of art that should not be altered in any way. But these gardens—like all gardens—are far from fixed: as plants age and die, they are replaced by others, sometimes of a very different sort. As the principal designer of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens, Beatrix Farrand, herself wrote, “a garden is not a static object . . . it must be constantly not only weeded and

cared for, but . . . replanted from time to time in order, like the Red Queen in Alice, to stay in one place . . .”³ Moreover, the designs are transformed: Dumbarton Oaks itself changed significantly when The Dumbarton Oaks Project 9

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Fairview Hill
Cherry Hill
Forsythia Dell
Ellipse
Pre-Columbian Gallery
Byzantine Gallery Main House
Rare Book Room
Beech Terrace r
Terrace
RRose
AArbor Terrace
Fountain Terrace
Museum Entrance

Dumbarton Oaks Museum and Gardens, locations of installations shown in red.

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North Vista
Crabapple Hill
Green Garden
Orangery
Garden Entrance
Pebble Garden
Cutting Garden
Herbaceous Border Orchard Orchard
Kitchen Garden
Lovers' Lane Pool
Prunus Walk
32nd Street NW
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Lovers' Lane
R Street NW
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Farrand retired after the Second World War and her place was taken by her former associate Ruth Havey. The latter was responsible for some of the more decorative elements of the gardens, including the transformation of the tennis court into the Pebble Garden and the stone scrollwork on the Arbor Terrace, which changed the character of these areas of the garden significantly and permanently.

Gardens are also transformed by changes in ownership and mission. Dumbarton Oaks was designed as private garden, but became part of an educational institution when its patrons, Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss, donated the house, collections, and gardens to Harvard University in 1940. Farrand herself realized this would have profound impacts on the gardens, as detailed in a prescient report she wrote to the administrative board of the newly established Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in 1941.⁴ “The transfer of ownership from an intimately personal control to a necessarily more impersonal but an enduring educational institution must alter the point of view from which the gardens are considered,” she wrote. Paramount in this shift from personal to institutional is the emergence of an educational mission: “It is not necessary to emphasize that the first duty of an educational institution is to use its resources for the benefit of its students.” As a research rather than a teaching facility, Dumbarton Oaks serves scholars rather than students, but the point is the same. Further, Farrand recognized that the gardens would have a role in intellectual development: “The training of the eye to an understanding of outdoor beauty should be recognized as a vital part of the student’s life at Dumbarton Oaks. The composition of the views from the windows at which they may study, the unconscious infiltration into their minds of daily familiarity with garden problems and their solution must be important.”

Farrand thus hoped that “the larger lines of the design may remain approximately unchanged, as none of them have been established without much thought.” As examples of those larger lines, she singled out such features as the entrance roads, the wide lawns to the south and southeast of the house, the North Vista, the flower terraces, and the Lovers’ Lane Pool. She also asked that the main principles of the design be respected: the sense of withdrawal from the surrounding streets,

reinforced with perimeter plantings of evergreens; and the sense of spaciousness, provided by contrasting lawns within. She asked that signature trees be cared for and replaced, and the understory of shrubs maintained. In sum, she said, “there is no intention implied or suggested that the design be kept exactly as it was given to Harvard, but the suggestion is made that if alterations are considered they be made after careful study and with a reasonable hope of their fitting into an already established scheme.”

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Temporary installations of contemporary art certainly fit into the educational mission of Dumbarton Oaks. But are they compatible with Farrand’s “established scheme”? One might argue that temporary changes—like art installations—do not have to rise to this standard, that the alterations Farrand referred to were permanent ones. But Farrand’s scheme—her design—still merits deep respect, and it is clear that part of the controversy surrounding the presence of Simonds’s work in the garden was its perceived incompatibility with Farrand’s aesthetic sensibilities. The sculptures in the garden were more challenging in some respects than those in the museum: the latter were more fanciful, revolving around the myths of the Little People; the former were more emotionally and psychologically charged, with disconcerting overtones of sexuality and death. The anguished self-portrait on the Rose Terrace was a special target of antagonism; several visitors complained that it dishonored not only Farrand, but also the Blisses, who are interred there.

But these sculptures share a deep connection of their own with garden history and aesthetics, especially through their connections with the grotesque. Although the term now signifies anything especially odd, unnatural, disturbing, or deformed, it has specific meanings in art history. In the Renaissance, it referred to the incongruous combination of animal and vegetal motifs found in paintings on the walls of underground vaults or crypts (*grotte*) of ancient Roman buildings. Decorative flourishes based on these motifs became widespread in sixteenth-century architectural friezes, engravings, illustrated books, and garden ornaments, especially in Italy. The grotesque later came to denote anything fancifully extravagant or bizarre, in which, as John Ruskin observed in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), the ludicrous is yoked to the fearful. The word was applied retrospectively to describe, for example, hybrid monsters in the stone carvings of medieval cathedrals. In the contexts of art, in other words, the grotesque denotes combinations of animal and vegetal forms that are both serious and playful, fanciful and horrible.⁵

It is these specific meanings of the grotesque to which Simonds is heir. He creates implausible confluences of human, animal, and vegetal forms; at times they are witty, at others, disturbing. The various heads in the Dumbarton Oaks installation are examples of the latter—monstrous hybrids of landforms with human and animal physiognomy, at once ludicrous and loathsome. Like the eighteenth-century Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, known for a series of grimacing heads—mostly self-portraits—that reveal how the face changes in response to different emotions (left), Simonds deploys the grotesque to explore the states of his own psychic history; it seems to provide him with the license to think or make almost anything, be it arcane, disconcerting, or embarrassingly

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self-revelatory. In the context of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens, it evokes associations often glossed over in the discourses of garden history, especially those of sexuality and mortality—associations that were evidently unwelcome to some of the garden’s visitors. But these associations are already there. The garden is full of intimations of mortality—including the crypts of the Blisses and numerous memorial inscriptions—and suggestions of surreptitious sexuality, like Lovers’ Lane. And although it is not widely recognized, the grotesque is also a subtext at Dumbarton Oaks: Simonds installed *Growth* under the wisteria arbor, right next to a nineteenth-century French lead fountain mask (top right) that is said to represent a river god, with a scallop-shell diadem, pointed animalistic ears, and an open mouth that trickles water into a pool. Acquired by the Blisses in 1927 and incorporated by Farrand into the design for the arbor, the mask occupies the wall opposite the central arch of this three-bay structure. Farrand drawings from the early 1930s suggest that this space was imagined for some sort of fanciful emblem—a lion’s or a satyr’s head—before becoming home to the river god, who is framed by sheaves of wheat, the Bliss family emblem.⁶ Its incongruous combination of human and animal features resonated with Simonds’s *Stugg* on the adjacent Fountain Terrace; its open mouth and prominent tongue, with his self-portrait on the Rose Terrace (bottom right). More generally,

its fanciful combinations of human, animal, and plant forms were reiterated by the sculpture with which it shared the shady arbor.

In sum, Simonds created at Dumbarton Oaks a moment unique in his work and in the life of Dumbarton Oaks. While his installation was not universally loved, it was creative, provocative, and revealing—both of his imaginative life as an artist and of the intellectual and aesthetic traditions to which Dumbarton Oaks is heir. In the ever-swelling repositories of human history, we seldom have time to deal with more than generalities; as Ann Reynolds and Germano Celant both observe in their essays in this volume, we create various short-hand systems to make connections through time and across cultures. Sometimes it takes an insistent, even irritating, character to make us pause and look beneath the surface of things—to see hidden details, to ponder meanings, to grasp allusions. Sometimes it takes a fresh set of eyes to enable us to look anew at that which we have become inured to seeing— or to reconsider things about which we think we know everything already. It was Simonds’s point to bring new perspectives and even controversy to Dumbarton Oaks; with respect to the gardens especially, he sought to reveal them as a living and evolving place, where the past literally grows into the present and future. In some eyes, he unearthed discomfiting themes: he was briefly the serpent in our Eden. But he demonstrated without question the ways that contemporary culture can connect us to the past, reinvigorating historical tropes

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while enlivening the institutions that continue to speak them. In both the museum and the garden, he found ways to make the past alive in the present, even as he challenged people’s assumptions about both. As we look forward at Dumbarton Oaks to future installations of contemporary art, we can only hope that they will be as revelatory and transformative as Charles Simonds’s has been.

Notes

1 On Dion’s project, see Mark Dion: *Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Bartram’s Garden, 2008).

2 My reading of the responses to the Simonds project come from several sources: a comment book in the museum, casual conversations with visitors, observations made to Dumbarton Oaks docents during tours, and telephone calls.

3 Beatrix Farrand to John S. Thatcher, June 27, 1944, Beatrix Farrand file, Rare Book Collection, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

4 Beatrix Farrand, “Report Submitted to the Chairman of the Dumbarton Oaks Administrative Board, on the Grounds of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection,” November 24, 1941, Beatrix Farrand file, Rare Book Collection, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

5 For more on the grotesque, see E. H. Gombrich, “The Edge of Chaos,” in *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979). The reference to John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London: Smith, Elder, 1851–53) is from vol. III, chap. III, par. XXIII.

6 For more on this plaque and the design of its setting on the Arbor Terrace, see Linda Lott, with James Carder, *Garden Ornament at Dumbarton Oaks* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 16–19; and Linda Lott, “The Arbor Terrace at Dumbarton Oaks: History and Design,” *Garden History* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 209–17.

14 | John Beardsley

Uroboros, 1973 | Resin, 121/2 x 121/2 x 23/4 inches | Collection of the artist | 15