Diane Simpson

Formal Wear

Arts and Letters

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When Diane Simpson was in graduate school in the late 1970s, her dining room doubled as a sculpture studio. There, surrounded by the rhythms of family life, she carefully cut sheets of corrugated cardboard with a jigsaw fitted with a knife-edge blade, creating her first three-dimensional works. The dinner table served as her work surface. For critiques, she developed an ingenious system: Her sculptures disassembled completely, packing flat so she could transport them on the train downtown to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. What began as a practical solution to the constraints of domestic life became fundamental to her sculptural language. This way of thinking about space, structure, and the relationship between two and three dimensions has defined her work for the last five decades.

Simpson isolates fragments of the everyday—the turn of a collar, the flounce of an apron pocket, a building facade—and transforms them into sculptures that exist between the familiar and the uncanny. Working from photographs she has collected over decades, Simpson develops each piece through meticulous axonometric drawings on graph paper, using 45-degree angles to render three-dimensional forms as flattened geometric representations before reconstituting them as sculptures that retain those same distortions. Her drawing system calls on the spatial perspectives of medieval paintings, Persian miniatures, and Japanese scrolls, creating what she calls a "bird's-eye view that results in a very immediate presence."[1] Simpson's sculptures grew directly from the drawing practice she cultivated in graduate school. It was at a teacher's suggestion that Simpson first began translating her drawings into sculptures, "curious to see what would happen if [she] applied the same rules of perspective . . . to real space."[2]

Spend enough time with her work and you begin to see potential Simpson source material everywhere. Her sculptures have a way of making the everyday pop, of heightening awareness of the constructed world—the way fabric drapes over an arm, the geometric logic of a subway grate, the unexpected beauty in utilitarian design. This observational training speaks to what drives her practice: an eye for the overlooked structural details that organize our daily experience. Yet she deliberately chooses familiar materials for her transformations, creating a productive tension between the transformed and the recognizable.

Her material vocabulary draws from the hardware store and the domestic realm—corrugated board, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), aluminum, brass, linoleum, and galvanized steel, alongside everyday fabrics like linen, leather, and mesh. Her early cardboard works, such as *Pleated Column #2* (1978), exemplify Simpson's sophisticated construction from everyday materials. Using a jigsaw, router, and other tools, she painstakingly handcrafts each work, developing methods to meet the needs of different pieces and materials. Each transformation involves playful shifts of scale—her works always reference the body through clothing or architecture, "the subject of the body without the body," as she puts it, but their proportions are often surprising.[3] "Things happen when I construct the form that I can't anticipate," she explains, describing how this distinctive process distances her sculptures from their sources.[4]

Simpson's graduate education positioned her uniquely within Chicago's art ecosystem—while the Imagists had been establishing themselves in the late 1960s, she was "too busy changing diapers," arriving at the School of the Art Institute when figures like Barbara Rossi and Ray Yoshida had become professors.[5] Though she shared educational connections and friendships with artists like Christina Ramberg, and later gallery representation through Phyllis Kind with the Imagists, Simpson's sculptural practice drew more from post-Minimalist artists like Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor.

Her earliest works already demonstrated a distinctive approach to the relationship between ornament and illusionism. In *Pleated Column #2*, Simpson rubbed the surface with wax crayon, revealing the corrugation pattern beneath—an integral decoration that came from the material itself. But she also drew illusionistic planes on the surface, creating tension between actual three-dimensional forms jutting out and drawn shadows that appear to recede.

A similar dynamic operates in *Chaise* (1979), made from the gray archival board Simpson adopted after her earliest cardboard works. The sculpture transitions from wall to floor, its interlocking planes connected at 45-degree angles that create multiple layers of spatial ambiguity. Most compelling is the meticulously pencil-shaded grid that covers the chair's seat, punctuated with structural bolts that double as upholstery buttons and suggest the soft compression of stuffing within the geometric pattern. This gradient grid prefigures the surface ornament and patterning that would become central to later works.

Simpson's Samurai series marked a decisive shift in both material and inspiration. Simpson had become entranced by Akira Kurosawa's film *Kagemusha*, particularly a scene where several samurai sit in a formal semicircle, "the segments of their armor skirts" forming "arcs cascading from their waist onto the floor."[6] This led her to study diagrams of Japanese armor construction, finding in the slotted metal plates and systematic assembly a perfect marriage of structure and ornament. The Samurai works also marked Simpson's move from cardboard to MDF, a shift that required the relocation of her studio from the dining room to the garage to accommodate both the power tools—table saw, band saw, and router—she was learning to use, and the dust the process produced.

Simpson's works in her Historical series of the mid-1980s signaled a new approach to source material. She began working directly from specific visual documents, a transition visible in preparatory drawings like *Studies for Green Bodice* (1985) and *Study for Muff* (1997), in which collaged fragments from historical sources are pasted onto graph paper alongside her geometric translations. These collaged elements came from reproductions in costume compendiums, particularly J.H. de Hefner-Alteneck's *Costumes, oeuvres d'art et ustensiles depuis le commencement du moyen âge jusqu'à la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (1911). The method reveals Simpson's research process: how a sixteenth-century bodice or an elaborate sleeve becomes the starting point for sculptures that capture their structural logic while bearing little obvious resemblance to their origins. This approach to transforming found images became central to Simpson's practice, resulting in works like *Green Bodice* (1985) and *Underskirt* (1986).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Simpson's series became increasingly specific, focusing on particular garment details. *Amish Bonnet* (1992) exemplifies her approach in the Headgear series. She considered taking a welding class to join the sculpture's grid of brass tubes, but instead flattened them at each joint and bound them with colored cords—a solution that was both structural and decorative. The cord connections became an automatic ornament, demonstrating one of her long-standing principles, learned from the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, that "surface details are interdependent with shape, structure and function of the object."[7]

The Window Dressing project (2007–8) brought Simpson's clothing sculptures—including those in the Sleeves and Aprons series—into dialogue with commercial displays. Working from 1920s and '30s trade journals dedicated to the art of window displays, Simpson devised installations for a museum's street-level windows. *Window Dressing, Window 6: Collar & Bib-Deco* (2007/2008) features collar and bib works from her Cover-Ups series, displayed on a custom platform incorporating patterned linoleum—a material that spans domestic and commercial contexts and recurs across Simpson's works. Alongside its references to the distinctly commercial language of display, the project also places Simpson in dialogue with sculptors like Brancusi and Noguchi, who understood that pedestals could be as important as the sculptures themselves. Rather than serving as neutral elements, Simpson's platforms, stands, and display structures function as integral sculptural components.

Simpson's deep engagement with architecture has been ongoing throughout her career, but her recent turn toward vernacular architectural forms represents a natural evolution from

her clothing investigations. *Portico* (2021), based on a corner building detail she photographed in New York, demonstrates the conceptual bridge between her earlier and current work. Like the peplums she explored in her 2014–18 series—those "unnecessary"[8] decorative flourishes that project from basic garment forms—a portico, though it can provide shelter, is essentially an ornamental protrusion from a building's facade. *Drawing for Peplum IV + Valance* (2015), where she considered clothing and architectural details together, suggests her intuitive understanding of their shared logic.

The most recent works in this exhibition, *Neighbor* (2021) and *Winged* (2022), extend this architectural thinking into the designed objects that mediate between bodies and spaces. On her shift in focus from garments to architectural forms and furniture, Simpson said: "I had used every part of the body."[9] Therefore, she explained, it "seemed natural to move from clothing to architecture to chairs."[10] These works return to some of her earliest motifs—the chairs seen in *Chaise* and the drawing *Chairs* (1976)—but move entirely off the wall. Yet they also remain nonfunctional and maintain her illusionistic play. Unlike Scott Burton's furniture sculptures that are functional and materially solid, made from granite and wood, Simpson's engage with visual illusionism and remain impossible to inhabit, as with her garments, referencing the body but refusing it full access. The seats are skewed beyond usability, and *Neighbor*'s slats tilt at progressively steeper angles, facing forward rather than forming a horizontal surface. These works retain the perceptual complexity of her earlier corrugated board sculpture *Chaise*, but incorporate more unexpected, even cheeky, juxtapositions of everyday materials—patterned linoleum with high-gloss paint, and canvas-wrapped MDF rubbed with pencil, rendering its surface too sensitive to be touched. Simpson's furniture sculptures combine material honesty with visual illusion, a productive tension between what something is and how it appears.

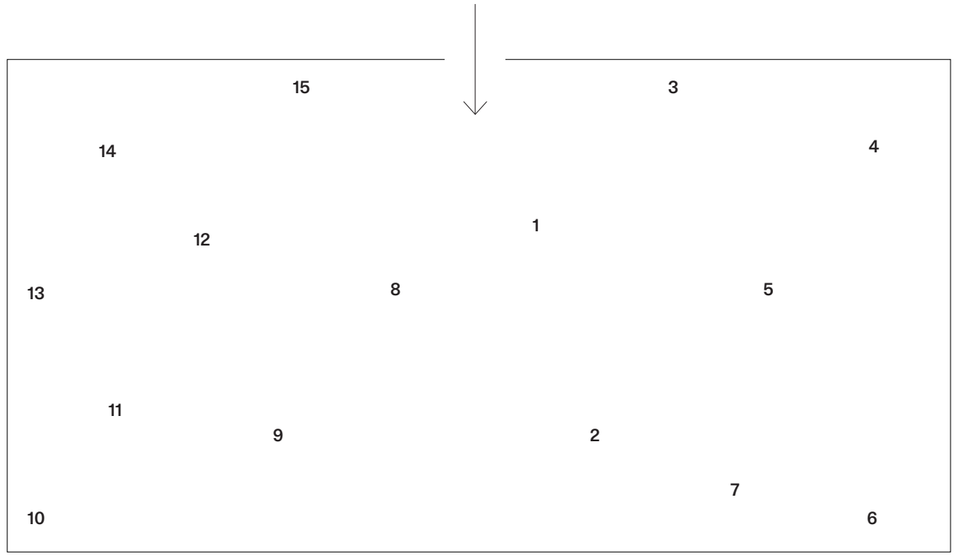
For decades, Simpson exhibited primarily in Chicago and the Midwest, largely outside the international art world's spotlight, though her work was well known and highly respected by Chicago artists. Her work gained broader recognition beginning in 2008 when fellow artists, including B. Wurtz, Matthew Higgs, Matt Keegan, and Nairy Baghramian, championed her work in key group exhibitions outside of Chicago. This renewed visibility led to new gallery representation in Chicago, New York, and London.[11] A major institutional breakthrough came with her 2015 solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, curated by Dan Byers. A wave of major international retrospectives—recent and upcoming—has brought Simpson's work the recognition it has long deserved.

Throughout these later-career successes, Simpson has maintained her fundamental approach. At ninety, Simpson continues working in that same garage studio, fabricating every piece herself with techniques refined over five decades.[12] Each work represents what she calls "trial-and-error and working-it-out," a self-taught approach that has consistently led to original solutions.[13] Standing among Simpson's sculptures, viewers encounter objects that seem both utterly familiar and completely strange. This productive disorientation reflects the essence of her achievement: transforming the overlooked details of our constructed world into forms that make us see differently. Her sculptures propose that the familiar world around us contains infinite potential for transformation, requiring only the kind of sustained, methodical attention that Simpson has made her signature. The everyday, in her hands, reveals itself as perpetually extraordinary.

Kristin Poor

1. Diane Simpson, "Formal Wear," interview by Judith Clark, *Frieze* (April 2016): 113.
2. Simpson, "500 Words," as told to Alex Jovanovich, *Artforum*, December 16, 2015, www.artforum.com/features/500-words-diane-simpson-226151/. On the suggestion by her professor, Ted Halkin, see Simpson, Jasmin Tsou, and Benjamin Chaffee, "In Conversation," in *Diane Simpson: Cardboard-Plus, 1977–1980* (Middletown: Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, 2022), 30.
3. Simpson in "Diane Simpson," 2019 Biennial Audio Guide, whitney.org/audio-guides/48?stop=13628.
4. Simpson, "Formal Wear," 112.
5. Simpson and Dan Byers, "Interview," in *Diane Simpson* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2015), 50. On the context of Chicago Imagism, see Chaffee, "Good for Future," in *Diane Simpson: Cardboard-Plus, 1977–1980*, 15. Simpson credits Whitney Halstead's art history courses at SAIC as formative, as they were for many Chicago artists, including those associated with Imagism. In particular, her ongoing interests in self-taught artists and the arts of Oceania, Japan, and Africa originated in his teaching. See Simpson, Tsou, and Chaffee, "In Conversation," in *Diane Simpson: Cardboard-Plus, 1977–1980*, 29.
6. Simpson in Simpson and Byers, "Interview," 55.
7. Simpson and Byers, "Interview," 53–54. On the Bechers, see also Simpson, in Distinguished Alumni Lecture Series, Visiting Artist Lecture Program, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, April 5, 2016, youtu.be/NdM1wck7eRo.
8. Simpson in "Diane Simpson," 2019 Biennial Audio Guide.
9. Simpson, conversation with the author, August 4, 2025.
10. Press release for the exhibition *Diane Simpson* (November 17, 2023– January 20, 2024) at Corbett vs. Dempsey, corbettvsdempsey.com/exhibitions/diane-simpson2/.
11. For more information about Simpson's career developments and inclusion in artist-curated exhibitions of this period, see Byers, "45°," in *Diane Simpson* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2015), 41–42, 44, and Tsou, "Diane Simpson Interview Part 1: Ben Chaffee and Jasmin Tsou Interview Diane Simpson," JTT Podcast, creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/jasmin-tsou/episodes/Diane-Simpson-Interview-part-1-Ben-Chaffee-and-Jasmin-Tsou-interview-Diane-Simpson-epb5if.
12. For Simpson's most recent body of work—her first outdoor sculptures, commissioned for the Art Institute of Chicago's Bluhm Family Terrace—she has worked with assistant Dave Wagner since September 2024. Simpson required physical assistance in moving and constructing these pieces due to their scale and the weight of the weatherproof MDF, though she continues fabricating them in her garage studio. This exceptional circumstance reflects practical constraints rather than a fundamental shift in her practice.
13. Simpson in Simpson and Byers, "Interview," 53.

South Gallery



1. *Underskirt*, 1986
   Oil stain and paint on MDF, cotton mesh
   Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

   For *Underskirt*, Simpson drew inspiration from an eighteenth-century pannier, a structured undergarment that created an elliptical silhouette beneath women's skirts. Simpson's sculpture transforms this historical reference into the architectural ziggurat seen here—two asymmetrical sections of painted MDF framework covered with cotton mesh, each tilting subtly outward from apparent bilateral symmetry. The related *Drawings for Underskirt*, on view in the gallery downstairs, documents Simpson's process of translating the original garment form through her characteristic axonometric drawing system.

2. *Green Bodice*, 1985
   MDF, epoxy paint, vinyl
   Miller Meigs Collection

   Based on a sixteenth-century bodice found in a historical costume compendium, *Green Bodice* demonstrates Simpson's meticulous handcraft approach, with its precise curves cut using a router and carefully shaped MDF framework beneath. The transparent vinyl mesh, sourced from a fabric store for its ready-made pattern, reveals the white painted MDF structure below while creating the illusion of a translucent garment form. At the neck opening, the vinyl loops around to frame empty space, emphasizing the sculpture's exploration of presence and absence within the suggested bodice form. *Studies for Green Bodice*, on view in the gallery downstairs, shows how Simpson translates historical garment sources through her geometric drawing process.

3. *Formal Wear*, 1998
   Industrial fiber, poplar, cotton webbing
   James Keith Brown and Eric Diefenbach, New York

   Part of Simpson's Sleeves series (1996–2000), *Formal Wear* takes inspiration from the exaggerated cuffs depicted in a Lucas Cranach painting. The work consists of layers of spunbond polyester—a strong, versatile industrial fabric Simpson frequently employs—suspended from a poplar bar. This piece exemplifies the series' exploration of different materials and suspension systems for transforming clothing details into sculptural forms.

4. *Samurai #5*, 1982
   MDF, colored pencil, jute
   Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

   Samurai #5 demonstrates Simpson's distinctive technique of first covering the entire MDF surface with a slotted pattern using a router, then cutting out the sculptural form, ensuring decoration and structure function as one unified element. The work emerged from Simpson's fascination with Akira Kurosawa's film *Kagemusha*, particularly a scene where seated samurai warriors create "arcs cascading from their waist onto the floor" with their segmented armor skirts. This inspiration led her to study Japanese armor construction diagrams, finding in their slotted metal plates and systematic assembly a perfect marriage of structure and ornament that she translated into her own sculptural language for the Samurai series (1981–83).

5. *Window Dressing, Window 6: Collar & Bib-Deco* (2007/2008)
   Linoleum, paint on aluminum and wood, industrial fiber
   Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

   Window Dressing, Window 6: Collar & Bib-Deco features a custom platform incorporating patterned linoleum based on a design from a 1920s trade journal dedicated to the art of window displays. The work is part of Simpson's Window Dressing project, originally conceived for six street-level windows at the Racine Art Museum, and brings her clothing sculptures from the Cover-Ups series (2006–12) into dialogue with the language of commercial displays. Rather than serving as a neutral support, Simpson's platform functions as an integral sculptural component, with the same patterned linoleum appearing in *Neighbor*, also on view in this gallery.

6. *Amish Bonnet*, 1992
   Brass tube, waxed linen thread, fabric
   James Keith Brown and Eric Diefenbach, New York

   Amish Bonnet exemplifies Simpson's approach in the Headgear series (1991–95), where practical problem-solving becomes integral to the work's aesthetic. She considered taking a welding class to join the sculpture's grid of brass tubes, but instead flattened them at each joint and bound them with colored cords—a solution that was both structural and decorative. The cord connections became automatic ornament, embodying Simpson's belief that surface details should be interdependent with shape, structure, and function rather than applied as afterthoughts.

7. *Deep Pockets*, 1999
   Mahogany, lexan, pigmented ink
   Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

   Another work from the Sleeves series, *Deep Pockets* originated from Simpson's encounter with Ammi Phillips's folk painting *Girl in Red Dress with Cat and Dog* (1830–35), though the resulting sculpture bears little literal resemblance to its source. Simpson began with the distinctive shoulders and sleeves, constructed from hand-painted translucent polycarbonate panels, then built downward to create a mahogany base skewed at such sharp angles that it evokes bird feet. The work demonstrates how Simpson's translation process can move far from the original inspiration while retaining its essential structural logic.

8. *Apron X*, 2005
   Aluminum and leather
   Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

   The Aprons series (2000–2005) culminated with *Apron X*, based on a "flouncy, feminine pink apron with two rows of large soft pockets" that Simpson found in a 1930s sewing pamphlet.* The sculpture transforms this domestic garment into a highly structured aluminum and leather construction and completely reconceives a familiar form.

*Simpson, in Distinguished Alumni Lecture Series, Visiting Artist Lecture Program, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

9. *Neighbor*, 2021
Fiberboard, oil stain, acrylic paint, Baltic birch plywood, linoleum, screws
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

10. *Portico*, 2021
Painted MDF, stained gatorboard, oil paint marker, screws
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

Neighbor takes the familiar Adirondack chair and subjects it to Simpson's geometric logic, skewing both the overall form and individual seat slats to her signature 45-degree angles. *Winged*, on view nearby, employs similar formal strategies, with its canvas-covered surface rubbed with pencil and crayon creating a delicate texture that contrasts sharply with the sculpture's black beveled edges. These edges create the three-dimensional equivalent of a drawn outline—the same effect achieved in brilliant turquoise in *Portico*.

11. *Peplum I*, 2014
Fiberboard, enamel, copper, plywood
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

12. *Pleated Column #2*, 1978
Corrugated board, colored pencil, crayon
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

This sculpture is the earliest in the exhibition and was included in Simpson's first solo commercial gallery exhibition at Phyllis Kind Gallery in 1980. Constructed of four interlocking pieces of tri-wall cardboard that intersect at 45-degree angles rather than 90, *Pleated Column #2* balances ornament and abstraction. Simpson rubbed the surface with wax crayon, revealing the corrugation pattern beneath—an integral decoration that came from the material itself. But she also drew illusionistic planes on the surface, creating a push-pull between actual three-dimensional forms jutting out and drawn shadows that appear to recede. Ingeniously, the pieces are held together by two hidden wooden dowels that slide between the interior layers of the cardboard—joinery that uses the existing structure of the material in a resourceful way that would become characteristic of her problem-solving approach.†

† On the construction of *Pleated Column #2*, see *Pleated Column #2*, instructional drawing with handwritten notes reproduced in *Diane Simpson: Cardboard-Plus, 1977–1980* (Middletown: Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, 2022), endpapers, and Simpson, in Distinguished Alumni Lecture Series, Visiting Artist Lecture Program, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, April 5, 2016, https://youtu.be/NdM1wck7eRo.

13. *Peplum IV*, 2015
Aluminum, galvanized steel, rivets, enamel
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

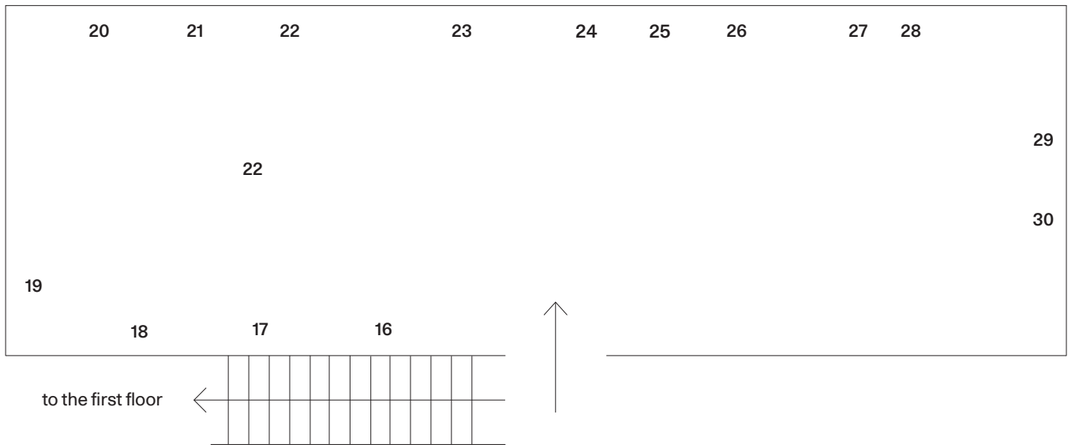
Peplum IV and *Peplum I*, nearby, explore what Simpson calls the "unnecessary" decorative flourish that projects from basic dress forms, demonstrating her interest in ornamental elements that serve no functional purpose. The works showcase Simpson's varied material approaches within a single series—*Peplum I* combines warm copper with fiberboard and plywood, while *Peplum IV* features bright purple painted outlines on aluminum and galvanized steel. Both sculptures reveal Simpson's understanding of peplums as architectural protrusions that share conceptual logic with building ornaments like porticos, marking a transition in her practice between clothing and architectural investigations.

14. *Winged*, 2022
Fiberboard, Baltic birch plywood, gatorboard, canvas, colored pencil, crayon
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

15. *Chaise*, 1979
Corrugated archival board and crayon
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

In *Chaise*, two side panels rest against the wall but appear to recede through their angled positioning and Simpson's applied shading. These wingbacks present a dual reality: One side shows a flat trapezoid affixed to the vertical surface but cut and shaded to suggest angular projection, while the opposite side features an actual three-dimensional extension. The main body of the chair emerges from the wall at a 45-degree angle—isometric perspective rendered in actual space. *Chaise*'s layered cardboard construction connects directly to Simpson's early collagraph prints on view in the gallery downstairs, in which she cut similar forms to create three-dimensional illusions on the printing plate.

Hassam Gallery



16. *Study for Muff*, 1997
Pencil on vellum graph paper with collage
Collection of Victoria Lautman, Los Angeles

17. *Studies for Green Bodice*, 1985
Pencil on vellum graph paper with collage
Miller Meigs Collection

These drawings reveal Simpson's research process of transforming found images into sculptural forms. Collaged fragments from historical sources like J.H. de Hefner-Alteneck's *Costumes, oeuvres d'art et ustensiles depuis le commencement du moyen âge jusqu'á la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (1911) are pasted onto graph paper alongside Simpson's geometric translations, showing how a sixteenth-century bodice or elaborate muff becomes the starting point for sculptures. Simpson's method demonstrates how the final sculptures capture the structural logic of the historical garments while bearing little obvious resemblance to these origins.

18. *Contained Containers*, 1976
Shaped mixed-media collage (with rubbing)
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

19. *Chairs*, 1976
Graphite, embossed paper, printing ink on rag board
Bonnie and Joe Stanfield, Chicago

These two early works, which date from just prior to Simpson's graduate studies, demonstrate her transition from two-dimensional prints toward sculptural objects that exist in space. *Contained Containers* uses the axonometric perspective of her drawings in combination with mixed-media techniques, beginning to work as a three-dimensional object on the wall rather than a flat work on paper. Both works incorporate textured materials and rubbing techniques developed through Simpson's collagraph printmaking process. The "container" forms in *Contained Containers* show her emerging interest in geometric structures that attach and emerge from the wall, a feature that would soon define her sculptural practice, as in works like *Chaise* on view upstairs.

20. *Drawing for Chaise*, 1980
Pencil on vellum graph paper
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

21. *Drawing for Samurai #6*, 1982
Pencil on vellum graph paper
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

22. *Samurai #1: print with construction (multiple of 2)*, 1981
Print: collagraph on German Etch. Construction: paper, ragboard, ink, acrylic
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

Samurai #1: print with construction exists simultaneously as collagraph print and sculpture, with the print functioning as both artwork and assembly guide. Like the textured surfaces in *Chairs* and *Contained Containers*, this work demonstrates Simpson's continued use of collagraph printmaking techniques to create relief textures and patterns that inform her sculptural practice.

23. *Drawings for Court Lady (composite)*, 1984
Pencil on vellum graph paper
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

The elaborate construction of *Court Lady* is based on Japanese armor, indicating Simpson's interest in samurai armor construction extended beyond the Samurai series (1981–83) into her Historical series (1984–90). These drawings reveal Simpson's breakthrough in construction technique, showing how she developed methods for creating curved sculptural forms while maintaining her preference for flat-pack assembly and transport.

24. *Apron Armour III*, 1976
Collagraph print
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

25. *Green Box Series III*, 1976
Collagraph print
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

26. *Folding Forms I Variation 1/1*, 1977
Collagraph print
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

These early collagraph prints—*Green Box Series III*, *Apron Armour III*, and *Folding Forms I Variation 1/1*—reveal the origins of Simpson's sculptural practice and connect directly to *Chaise*'s layered cardboard construction upstairs, and in the related *Chaise* drawing on view nearby. To create these prints, she built up her printing plates with layered cardboard forms that produced three-dimensional illusions, gradually enlarging the plates until they became too large for the press and naturally evolved into wall sculptures. This transition from printmaking to sculpture establishes Simpson's consistent interest in translating two-dimensional representations into spatial constructions, a process that would define her work for decades to come.

27. *Drawing for Bib (quilted)*, 2006
Pencil on vellum graph paper
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

28. *Drawing for Apron X*, 2005
Pencil on vellum graph paper
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

29. *Drawings for Underskirt*, 1986
Pencil on two sheets of vellum graph paper
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

Drawings for Underskirt highlights Simpson's process of translating an eighteenth-century pannier through her characteristic axonometric drawing system, with the elliptical structure of the original undergarment clearly visible in the drawing at the lower left. These drawings show how Simpson transforms the structured garment into plans for the related sculpture, revealing her method of creating two asymmetrical sections that tilt subtly outward from apparent bilateral symmetry, repeating downward from the source-inspired form at top.

30. *Drawing for Peplum IV + Valance*, 2015
Pencil on two sheets of vellum graph paper
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York

Drawing for Peplum IV + Valance exposes Simpson's intuitive understanding of the shared logic between clothing and architectural details. In this drawing, she considers both garment elements—like the peplum, an "unnecessary" decorative flourish that projects from basic dress forms—and architectural features such as the portico, which similarly functions as an ornamental protrusion from a building's facade. The work displays the conceptual bridge in Simpson's practice between her earlier clothing investigations and her recent turn toward vernacular architectural forms, showing how both types of sources operate as decorative additions to underlying structures.

Diane Simpson (b. 1935, Joliet, IL) decided to be an artist as a teenager during weekend drawing classes at the Junior School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She began painting at the University of Illinois, transferred to SAIC, and married in 1956, continuing her studies until her first pregnancy. Simpson then stepped away from school into ten years of motherhood woven with artmaking, her studio wherever family life with three children allowed. In 1968, she returned to school, earning her BFA in 1971. She discovered printmaking and bought her own press, making collagraphs that grew progressively larger. In 1977, in her early forties, she entered SAIC's graduate program, where she developed an idiosyncratic system of drawing on large sheets of graph paper. After completing her MFA in 1978, she had her first New York show with Phyllis Kind Gallery in 1980. Working out of Chicago, she eventually transitioned from cardboard to MDF, aluminum, and other materials in her garage studio behind their Wilmette home. Her work gained broader recognition beginning around 2008, when artist B. Wurtz included her in a group exhibition at White Columns in New York—the start of a period in which her work was championed by fellow artists. This renewed visibility led to gallery representation with Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago following her retrospective at the Chicago Cultural Center (2010), and with JTT and James Cohan in New York, and Herald St. in London. Major solo exhibitions have been held at the ICA Boston (2015), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2016), and Nottingham Contemporary (2020). Simpson's first exhibition of outdoor sculpture opens at the Art Institute of Chicago in October 2025, and a major retrospective will travel from the Sara Hildén Museum in Finland (2026) to Mumok in Vienna (2027).

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