

Michael Simon

Virginia's Trout Artist Laureate

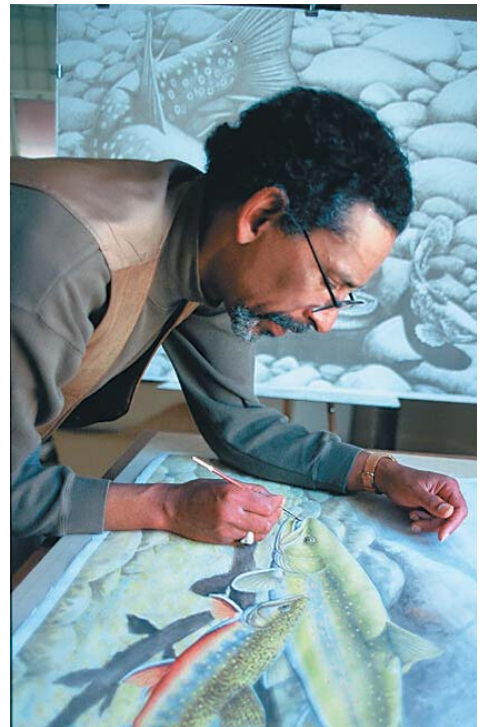
by
Douglas M. Dear

Photos courtesy of Michael Simon

No doubt many have seen the beautiful Virginia brook-trout license plate. Have you ever wondered who did the artwork? The answer is Michael Simon, whose ties to the Old Dominion run deep. He currently lives in the Richmond area—and has on and off for much of his life. Michael, the son of a

Virginia State art professor, has been enamored of two things his whole life—fly fishing and painting.

When his father was appointed a professor at Virginia State in 1951, the family moved to Petersburg. In a way, this was a homecoming for Simon, as six of his eight great-grandparents were from Virginia. But





The Virginia brook trout license plate

Blue-winged olives and rainbow

number of his trout watercolors are still on display at the Catskills Fly Fishing Center and Museum today, and he still fishes there as often as he can. His friendship with John Clutterbuck, whose son was a student of Simon's father, introduced Simon to his first Leonard bamboo fly rod. "When I first held that rod, I just said, 'Wow!' Later, when we moved to Egypt, John gave me



his initial time in Virginia was cut short when his father accepted another teaching position in Paterson, New Jersey. It was during his time in New Jersey that Simon befriended a Norwegian man who lived next door, who was a fisherman. He introduced Simon to fishing and that, as they say, was when the hook was set. As time passed, he became more and more

infatuated with the sport.

While Simon was spending his early youth in New Jersey, he began fishing both locally and in the famous Catskill Mountains of New York. Fishing in the Catskills started his obsession with bamboo fly rods and classic dry fly fishing techniques. It was also during this period that he developed his watercolor style and techniques. A

that rod as a going-away present. Unfortunately it was stolen while we were overseas. But I was hooked on bamboo for life."

His father was appointed by U.S. Information Agency as the cultural affairs officer for Egypt. Simon attended high school in Cairo and then took a year before attending college to move with the family

to Kabul, Afghanistan. Simon spent as much time as he could fishing for the Afghan mountain trout before heading to Drew University that next fall.

His time at Drew was short-lived due to a little too much socializing and not enough studying. So it was off to the Navy for a four-year tour that took him all over the world. His postings even included a stint that involved fly fishing in Alaska. It was during this time that he decided that a career in art (and specifically angling art) was what he really wanted to pursue, and he began to make plans for his life once his service to his country ended. In 1969, Simon headed to the California Institute of the Arts to study painting. He also took a job at a trout hatchery in Southern California. "I realized I liked fishing more than school and decided to head to Colorado to get serious about my fly fishing."

Simon headed to what was in those days the little college town of Boulder, Colorado. There he spent a couple of years tying flies for Hank Roberts Sport Shop, the only fly shop in town at that time. It was his first opportunity to fish Colorado trout waters such as North Boulder Creek, Frying Pan, Gunnison, the South Platt and the many famous rivers of Yellowstone National Park. It was in Colorado that Michael met renowned writer John Gierach, and this resulted in his illustrating Gierach's first novel *Trout Bum*. He finished his studies at the University of Colorado and earned a bachelor degree in fine art. One project in Colorado days was illustrating a book about trout for the famous Yellowstone Park ranger Paul Schullery.

After 11 years in Boulder, fly tying, studying and painting, Simon began to think about heading back East. In 1985, Simon returned to Richmond, where his mother had also returned after living overseas and in Southern California. Simon soon adapted to the change in venue by fishing for smallmouth bass in the James



The artist's line of fine china



River and traveling to Shenandoah National Park to fish for his favorite trout and artistic subject: the famous Virginia brook trout.

In May of 1985, Simon was approached by the Virginia Department of Game and Fisheries to do his first cover for *Virginia Wildlife* magazine. He did a marvelous watercolor of a native brook trout that caught the attention of a senior official who was looking for an artist to do the painting for the brook trout license plate. Simon's plate now graces thousands of cars in the Commonwealth. He has since done several more covers for *Virginia Wildlife*, in addition to illustrations for *Fly Rod & Reel* and many other fishing publications. Simon also married and divorced during these years and decided that he needed to return to the West to fish, paint and renew his soul.

Livingston, Montana, became Simon's home in 1995 where he lived for the next seven years, painting, doing a little commercial art and dealing in Persian rugs. "My Livingston days were some of my best fishing times—I fished every river in Montana and painted like crazy," said Simon. He painted the murals for the Federation of Fly Fishers Museum in Livingston and even designed a line of fine china in a fly-fishing motif. His art was shown in a number of galleries including Museum of the Rockies and Anglers Art, and he had a large one-man show at the Murray Hotel sponsored by Parks Reece. "Despite my love of the West, I yearned for Virginia. My mother was getting older, so I decided to return to Richmond to care for her and maybe let her care for me a little also."

So in 2002, Simon again returned to Richmond. "Richmond had changed a fair amount in the seven years that I had been away. The art scene had really picked up speed, and I quickly got back to fishing my favorite mountain streams like the Rapidan and the Rose River." The shad had

also returned to his beloved James River.

Simon markets much of his work directly on his own Web site and at the many fly-fishing shows and bamboo fly rod events that he attends around the country. "I would much rather have a showing at the Bamboo Classic at Rose River Farm, get to fish and try out a few classic bamboo fly rods than sit in a gallery waiting for a fly fisherman to appear," notes Simon. And that is exactly what Simon did when he graced this author and the attendees of *The Virginia Sportsman*-sponsored Bamboo Classic this past May. He displayed a wonderful selection of his beautiful watercolors as well as some of his vast collection of classic bamboo rods and vintage fly reels.

So what lies ahead for Simon? "More fly fishing and more painting," he says. One of his recent projects is doing portraits of an angler's favorite catch—a great gift that a number of wives have had painted for their husbands. He is also designing a new logo for the famous cane rod builder, Jenkins Fly Rods. In addition, the state of North Carolina has commissioned Michael to design a brook trout license plate for its conservation program. I just hope they realize he is Virginia's Trout Artist Laureate.

Simon's art can be viewed at www.michaelsimonanglingart.com.



The artist with a fine Rose River Farm rainbow trout

Douglas M. Dear is the owner of Rose River Farm, a popular trophy trout fly fishing destination located on the Rose River in Madison County, Virginia (www.rosriverfarm.com). He also serves as chairman of the board of Project Healing Waters, a non-profit organization dedicated to healing our wounded veterans through fly fishing.

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