

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER

128

Interview with
Simon Michael
January 10, 1972

Place of Interview: Rockport, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens
Terms of Use: Open
Approved: Simon Michael
(Signature)
Date: Oct 22, 1972

Copyright ©2016

**THE BOARD OF REGENTS OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
IN THE CITY OF DENTON, TEXAS**

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without permission in writing from the Director of the Oral History Program or the University Archivist, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas 76203

Oral History Collection

Mr. Simon Michael

Interviewer: Dr. A. Ray Stephens

Place of Interview: Rockport, Texas

Date: January 10, 1972

Dr. Stephens: This is an interview with Mr. Simon Michael, Rockport, Texas, January 10, 1972.

Mr. Michael: I became interested in the art at the age of eight. It was at a time when my father, who was an orthodox priest, commissioned a German artist, a Mr. John Drayhagen, to come and paint an altar piece. And this was in Monessen, Pennsylvania. I took private lessons with Mr. Drayhagen and was encouraged from that time on to continue. And I continued taking private lessons all during my school years. Eventually, it led me to St. Louis where at Washington University School of Fine Arts I established the important groundwork for what continued from that time on to be a career in art. At the age of eighteen I was exhibiting at the competitive shows, also held an exhibition in Paris, France, 1927. Also, I did some teaching in France. I exhibited around the United States, represented in various collections throughout the United States and Europe. I accepted some important commissions at that

early date, and continued to paint mural decorations, marines still life, figures. I also worked under Ralph Holmes, a sculptor of importance, and continued with sculpturing, carving, and also in wood carving. And then from that time on combined painting and sculpturing and also any other form that went with it in the way of art . . . even work in metal work and some in bronze. I entered a foundry in order to learn the ground work on what makes a mold and how to make a mold and what to do without it. And in this way, it has led into a very adventurous career and a versatile one. I have never believed in specialization in my case because I didn't wish to narrow it down to merely painting a sunset or merely painting a boat-- and at the same time merely painting a sunrise. I felt that wherever--and I love traveling . . . since an early age I have traveled extensively, and I wanted to depict the things I was able to see, the things I was able to feel. And I continued to do so in that way. I found that I was leading a much fuller life than I would have had I concentrated on a specialization-- along a certain field. And this is what happened. And at the time World War II came along I was taken into the big draft and went on to Mineral Wells, Texas, where I served for four and a half years. And at the

time I arrived there, there was very little work done in what one might consider training aids. We had a few publications on the subject out of Washington D.C. And I got to thinking about why not establish a master studio on the camp grounds making it possible for us to blow up training aids to where an entire battalion could readily understand rather than having to read about it. And so in this way I managed for four and a half years to work through plans and training and special service and camouflage which enabled us to build actual sized German and Japanese villages that led to eventually the presentation of the Legion of Merit for the designing of architectural subjects, and also for the contribution to the war effort by way of artistic efforts, by way of mural decorations, by way of the painted portraits of the various generals who came into the camp and also in that way it helped the morale of the men in special service by painting large murals, creating the sculpture piece, "Saluting Soldier" in iron, which eventually was known as "Rusty Mike," because at the time there was a \$25,000 fine for anyone using bronze during the war. And so we managed to get into a foundry and we produced "Rusty Mike," a saluting soldier, which was seen by several

million men in the service and training through Camp Wolters at the entrance to the camp, and was saluted daily by generals and officers alike as they entered Camp Wolters. And I believe that it is still in existence, and I think one of the statues is owned by the state of Texas and the other is owned by the U. S. Army. That led me from there into the determination to remain in Texas. Before the war, I had not seen much of the Lone Star State. This has been my first trip to Texas, and in that way I decided that I had covered most of the pastures up in through Michigan and Ohio and northern Michigan and Canada and Idaho and Wyoming, and I decided that this might be a wonderful field to remain here in Texas and pave what I considered at the time, artistically speaking, help to pave some of the muddy roads. And I immediately, after being dismissed from service after the war, continued to paint and with my sculpture and also went around the state of Texas, traveled, and lectured at the various schools and the universities and high schools and Negro schools and all hoping to pass on a bit of information that might be helpful to the younger people, who in turn might be inspired to carry on in their work. And this was the work of love, because oftentimes as I would travel around there

was small remuneration and possibly at times a bit of fruitcake and a coca-cola was the reward for having traveled maybe 150-200 miles. And that . . . it was great fun, and at the same time I felt that this was a wonderful way to carry on. I later arrived in Austin, Texas, from Mineral Wells, where I had made headquarters, and I did a number of political portraits. And also I was representing a . . . that is I was not representing, but I was encouraged to come to Austin, Texas, by a lobbyist who apparently was at that time doing some important work, what they considered important work, in Austin. And it was through having come to Austin that I decided to head further south. I have always loved to be near the water. And so it encouraged me, knowing that I was so close to the Gulf of Mexico, to come down to Rockport, Port Lavaca, and Port Aransas and Aransas Pass and Corpus Christi. And this inspired me at the time, seeing that it had an abundance of subject matter and so important to my work and so important to the works of those who apparently could possibly follow if they became aware of not the fact that it was merely a fishing center, that it also had beauty of the outdoors and the ever changing moods. And it had a richness and a substance,

and it had a tradition that is so important to feel when a painter is inspired to actually work at it with some ambition to get out and capture the various moods of the sea and also to capture the varied twists and turns of the oaks that we have and the ever changing lights and shadows and the colorful architectural subjects that were possible here because it had something of the old about it that was . . . and had not changed too radically. And that was a part that was yet to come. And out of it, why, the result was I settled at Fulton, Texas, and remained there at Fulton, Texas, for two or three years--going on three years. I established a school, the Fulton School of Fine Arts. And I worked classes at the Fulton School of Fine Arts, with these classes for at least three years we carried on in that way. And out of that was the great inspiration and the source that made it possible for us to expand into other sections of Texas such as the Corpus Christi, Victoria, Refugio, Goliad, Beeville, Port Lavaca, Bay City, Schulenburg, Yoakum, El Campo, Freeport, Sake, Jackson, Alvin, Cuero, and also as far as Angleton. And this necessitated my leaving Rockport on a Monday and returning to Rockport on a Saturday night, having Sunday as the only day off and back again to work on

a Monday. And I became an itinerant teacher. And in that way, became known almost as the evangelist painter who traveled along as they did in the old days. And this was a fascinating experience. It was fresh. There was a freshness about it, and I found that there was a great desire to learn, wanting to learn, and especially the short cuts, rather than have to read long text books on the subject, that you benefit from the experience of an instructor who has been around and who apparently feels that in a way that the great contribution that a teacher can give a student consists of how to at least shorten the path of success and lead him on to a greater desire rather than to have him become overly discouraged by the so-called, "It takes so long to do it, and so don't expect to shorten it out." Short cuts are available at all times according to the experience of the instructor. And, of course, being willing to pass it on, it rapidly grew in this manner and so they were able to benefit, and schools were established in these various towns. Now in turn, in the various towns, they also are experiencing what is being done in Rockport. There are galleries and schools and instructors and experts and judges and writers and musicians, and so they in turn had benefited from that little seed that was planted here in Rockport.

Stephens: When did you first come to Fulton?

Michael: I came to Fulton, it was twenty-four years ago, somewhere around twenty-four years or twenty-five, just going on that, and worked there at Fulton. Fulton, at that time, was very picturesque, and the old shrimp houses and the boats, and it was so colorful. And I found that Fulton, from the very first session held-- an outdoor session that was held at that early date-- why, they were very, most cooperative. There was a warmth of the people, the interest on the part of the people of the community. And those, the owners of shrimp houses and the owners of boats, the captains or the crew, were most cooperative, and they collaborated into any situation most generously by way of making it possible for the students to be comfortable and to secure the subject matter that was available there at the time. And even to the extent of holding boats an hour later before going out so that they could get a drawing or a painting of that boat or some part of the rigging, which was a very encouraging thing to me. And we would enter the fish houses and as boats were being unloaded and as they were carrying on their business we would get off into various corners and sections and were encouraged just to continue and not feel that they were thinking that we were disturbing

them. Ofttimes apologizing for being in the way, you know, and this is kind because they were not in the way; we were the ones who invaded the interior of that place.

Stephens: Oh. Well, you are in Rockport now. What led you to change locations?

Michael; I changed location here because I heard of a bit of property for sale. At that time, I was renting a home at Fulton right on the water, at the water front. And I had rented this home all during the time I was at Fulton. And I had heard at the time that there was a bit of property in Rockport. And attorney-- local attorney, not Emory Spencer at the time . . . not until later. Mr. Spencer became interested in the project. But this attorney informed me that this property, a five acre tract of land on the south end of Rockport was for sale. But that is for quick sale at a certain price. And so I called Mr. Ed Ritchey, an attorney in Victoria, and had him come down. We went over the property, and then I had heard that Mr. Emory Spencer, an attorney and oil man and a promoter in many projects, was the man to see about advice on this bit of property, or before purchasing the property because his advice would prove invaluable

to the project. And I went to Mr. Spencer, who in turn encouraged me to acquire the property, and then later became instrumental in making it possible to develop through help, advice and encouragement almost immediately after the property had been acquired. It was covered over with growth. It was loaded with wind swept trees, and the growth had been neglected for years. And Mr. Spencer made it possible for me to have one of his men come on the grounds. And he remained on the grounds for over a month burning brush and cutting down and tearing out sections that were unnecessary and all. And this gave me the start. And then later in the discussion of a studio home, why, Mr. Spencer designed a studio home, and we discussed it and it proved to be very interesting to me and certainly I could see that there was a future to the project. And Mr. Spencer was the one who made it possible for the home to be built because at the time I was teaching in other parts of Texas. And so I would return on weekends and see the progress, and, of course, you know how excited I was in seeing the thing develop. And then later it was built in a way that made it possible for at any time in the future that I could add an addition to it. And since that time it has grown into various galleries, and also wings

and exhibition rooms and painting rooms. And, of course, one of the most fascinating of all things is that we're able to work on five acres of wind swept trees on the grounds of the school and never run out of subject matter from morning, noon, and night. And this is important. However, in the way the schools are conducted, I encourage them to leave the grounds--the studio and school grounds--and go down the coast--possibly ten to twenty, thirty miles from Rockport--and Rockport after painting at Rockport, then branch out and get a subject matter that varies slightly in difference--the width and the breadth of the land, the simplicity of the sand and the sand dunes, the canals, the Gulf of Mexico on the beach, on top of the dunes and back in the back country where the grass is, the ranch lands. It is so versatile that one . . . there's no need to go too far to find this versatility of subject matter. And how the students react, they're encouraged to react to this, not to duplicate it photographically, depict it in that manner, but to have something to say and to observe, absorb, and apply in their way of thinking, not necessarily in my way of thinking but theirs. It's always been my idea about teaching, that is, at least, that one must have the

fundamentals, and then from the fundamentals and learning the mechanics of the fundamentals they can branch off, move off into a higher form of expression and understanding. Then, should they wish to do the abstract, the modernistic, the cubistic, the surrealist or any other form of art, this is entirely up to that student. And we have students that come from various parts of the country. We have them coming from California, from Wisconsin, from Michigan, from Kansas, from Florida and other states. We have them coming during the summer for three months, during June, July, and August. And then to add additional interest to the possibilities of location and the change of environmental conditions we take them into Mexico and we have been going into Linares between Monterrey, Mexico and Victoria, Mexico. And we take over a motel called the Escondido, the Hideaway, and there the students have the swimming pool facilities and all if they're not too tired at the end of the day to do all this sort of thing. They begin at seven-thirty in the morning until eleven, quarter of twelve, and then from that time we give them a siesta from about that time--twelve--until one-thirty, quarter of two. Then they go on location again and get back anywhere from five-thirty to six o'clock back to the motel. They

are responsible for two subjects a day--one in the morning and one in the afternoon. That does not make any difference as to size. It can be a canvas 24 x 40 or it can be a canvas 10 x 15. It's entirely up to the student, but they are responsible. They're pushed into the work, but at the same time they solve their problems directly outdoors, and then they have the opportunity on a Friday from morning until that evening to work up some of the subjects, add to what they were unable to do when or while on location. And this way it enables them to pull the thing into shape and form a bit. And then later they can use these paintings as wonderful working material when they sit in their studios and plan the composition out more extensively and eliminate or add to it according to the way they feel and as they recall back into that time.

Stephens: I was wondering about your reception here. I'm sure it takes awhile to build up an expansive school, and with the good reputation that you have, would you say something about the reception of the local people and how long it took you to build the school?

Michael: I was very, very pleased and very happy about the reception that I personally had received. I was a

newcomer into the community. And when I introduced myself as a painter and sculptor hoping to settle here within the community, I was received most graciously by the clubs, organizations, by the businessmen in the town, and also by the water front people, and also in other sources--the churches. And the interest on the part of the people was truly surprising. And at the same time, it was through the collaboration of the people and the cooperation of many of them that this thing that has grown in this manner has come about. And it would not have come about had it not been for that. And there were discouraging moments. And oft-times I remember that I had called Mr. Emory Spencer and discussed some of the problems with Mr. Spencer. And his advice has always been most valuable to me. And he has been responsible at times for my remaining in Rockport at times when the going got a little rough. His advice and suggestions were most helpful. And this is the thing that it takes, that we need and what we call the patrons of the art. And this is the thing that keeps it going. And so the people were most generous, and they were also . . . I think from time to time that the newspapers were very generous at the time with the headlines as you have seen. And the announcements of what was to take place. And we

had yearly exhibits, and then it went from one year to every second year we had exhibitions. Now, Mr. Spencer made it possible for the awards at these exhibitions. At that time, \$500 in prizes was unheard of, and Mr. Spencer made it possible to see that the awards were extended to the \$500 limit.

Stephens: How many awards?

Michael: Well, the awards, possibly five. So in \$500, this was worthwhile. This encouraged artists from all over the state of Texas to come in on that. And it was a very, very exciting affair, and we have had as many as 3,000 people attend our exhibition. The exhibits were given in the woods under the trees, and we lined up snow fences. And then, we'd see that they were substantially attached to the trees, and then we would just hang the paintings and the artists would come down and we would have a barbecue. And we would have . . . it was a real, real affair. And it was a fascinating experience. And it would go on for three days. And, of course, we always put it up in the hopes that it wouldn't rain. And there were times when it rained, and we managed to find covers to cover the paintings without having to remove them from the fences and protect them in the night as well. And this was the beginning of the exhibitions

in Rockport. This was the beginning of the art that has grown out of this thing, such as the wonderful number of galleries that are here, that have been established, and the art lovers, and the art seekers, and those who wish to associate with the artists. And some of the important artists in the United States have been here, and very important artists are living here now. And this creates a new world of interest and all that I do wish to give credit to the local people for their cooperation in this. Without it, it would have been impossible. And also, we have tried from time to time to keep the place and the school grounds so that it will be a rather pleasant sight for people as they go by, and they see that it's well kept up and that it is a place for culture, and without any pressure. And it's open to the public. And without charge of any sort to see the collections, and this is what we have made. And also, I find that in Aransas Pass and Port Aransas the people have been wonderful about encouraging students to paint on the grounds and into the various shrimp houses there. And it's been that way. And also, the Game Fish and Oyster Commission up at Austwell. And so wherever we go, we sort of invade, but at the same time we hope that we're treading lightly but appreciatively. Because

we are deeply, deeply appreciative of what they have made possible. Without it, it would have been impossible. It takes that part.

Stephens: You mentioned other artists in town. Would you name them?

Michael: Well, there are a number of artists in town. It has grown so rapidly that it is almost . . . I mean, it's very hard for me to run through an entire list of them. There are many of them, and they are quite outstanding. I mean, these people are exhibiting, and these are people that are now sort of carrying the reins of making it possible for this to become greater, and more far-sighted than what we had ever conceived of in the very beginning. And this is the way it has grown. So these artists and the various ones that are contributing now have been very great in that.

Stephens: Well, you had the first art school.

Michael: Yes, I had the first art school in Rockport . . .

Stephens: I see, and there's another one now.

Michael: . . . and the first gallery. Yes, and that's a good thing. That's coming through the association here. And this is . . . through the membership in this organization they have brought artists and instructors into this part of the . . . into the community, and

they are holding some wonderful workshops and all. And then like for instance, Estelle Stair who had worked here in the gallery and taken care of this gallery for a time has taken a great part in this group. So you do have art schools, and you have this association and group, and they are doing remarkable work, very remarkable work. And this is the reason for it, because who does anything, you know, alone. This is the thing one must and so in the vat it's like throwing a pebble in the water and it just keeps getting larger and larger. But this is wonderful. And look at the Long Galleries that have come in here from Houston, this is wonderful. And then the group . . . the rest estate promotion that has taken place and the very wonderful and interesting architecture that's being brought into the community. And so, it's a broad range, and I think a very, very dynamic thing. It's really, truly wonderful.

Stephens: Do you think this interest in art since the '40's when you were here has contributed to the general appreciation of art and therefore affected the architectural style?

Michael: I think to a great extent. I think people have become more aware of the facing of the buildings and more aware of interesting shapes for houses. They want to

say something, and it's their home. And this is rather than to repeat just one after another. And even to the extent of where I notice that even the shrimp boats have a little more color. And they are interested in more color to the boat and not only that, but there is a neatness and a cleanliness about it than at one time, you know, that, "Get out, get the shrimp. Come back. Scrub it down a little bit," but they have really become conscious of that. And it is surprising, the shrimp boat captains and crews that go out are a very high caliber of men. They all come down and discuss your arrangement or composition. They like your color, or they will tell you that their boat has such and such and that they do hope . . . they have even commissioned the artists that are working with me and with others to do a portrait of the boat. And this is something that they will take home. And oftentimes the artist will give them, present to them, something that they have in the way of a sketch that they have made because their desire to have something that was sort of hand made and painted, you know. And this is important, and so it has rubbed off. It was bound to. Whether one is willing to admit it or not, you know, they

straighten the tie a bit and they do put a little more color into the shirt and they have it, because they're surrounded with it.

Stephens: All of this has come about since you have been . . .

Michael: Oh, yes. And the exhibitions, they've been holding at the water front, the exhibitions by inviting artists, not only by the students, but artists--professional artists, working artists--from all over the state of Texas to exhibit, if they're willing to do so and to come down and take advantage of the fiesta and take advantage of the activities. And this is very, very important. It's of vital importance. And it takes that and all. But I can't understand that if anyone ever comes here to Rockport and lacks subject matter, then I think it is the lacking within the seekers, their ability, or inability to see and absorb and apply.

Stephens: Well, can you compare the other schools where you teach, for instance, that is the subject matter available?

Michael: The subject matter available . . . of course, most of my classes happen to be along the Gulf Coast. So as it is the Gulf Coast, why, naturally . . . for instance, in Bay City, Matagorda is very close by--within twenty miles. The type of subject matter that is . . . where they are influenced by what they do depends. If they have no body of water around in the nearby environmental

conditions, then, of course, we devote our time to architectural subjects, trees, and still life, and figures which is important. So one can be denied one way or the other. And then as the subject varies according to the individual taste. So the groups are not asked collectively to do a certain composition. They are asked to do a composition that aspires to their feeling emotionally and otherwise. So that you in the classroom you might have one who is determined to do an abstract; the other is determined to do an academic subject and the other is determined to do a non-objective and another an impressionistic painting. This is entirely up to them, so long as the feeling is not false nor counterfeited nor stolen in some way or another by having to lean on something they have not experienced nor had anything to do with and expecting the other fellow to work it out for them. This must be worked out on the part of the individual, and in that way it is very rewarding and it does encourage originality, which, of course, is important. How can one contribute anything unless they are going to contribute according to the way they personally feel, their inventiveness, and their feeling about the subject being conscious of contributing something that

has not been produced in the past. You say, "Everything has been produced in the past," but it had nothing to do with that particular person. And the fact that it has to do with my work or the work of another artist makes that difference. We could be working the same boat and no, it won't be the same. And we could be working from the same live model, but it won't be the same. And this is the wonderful thing. And the more we become conscious of that, the more anxiety and interest and inspiration there is in order to get after it and to know that in your way that this is going to be outstanding, not because of the fact that it's a great work of art, but it certainly portrays the difference of my feeling as to the feeling of the other fellow member. It's great.

Stephens: Can you say something about your students? I would like to know the type that you've had through the years. Has it increased in ability, the number of persons? And then something in general about the collective ability of your students.

Michael: I think it's easier now to handle a student and to be able to work with a student because they have been actually saturated with . . . they are more conscious of art. So they have read more on the subject of art, far more than when I started back with the early ones.

It was something . . . painting meant painting, putting paint on the canvases. Now, a student will come to you with the desire to produce a work of art and not just to be putting paint on a canvas or to get by with just merely a little simple pot boiler by saying I'm anxious to run home and show what I've produced because, you know, gee, I think this is great. You don't have that now. You have a very serious minded student who is willing to produce work of quality or aspire to works of quality in preference to just getting paint on a canvas and saying, "I just want to do a picture." Of course, you do have those who feel that they have nothing to say, and so they want to lean on copying a print or a magazine or a photograph. Photographs are very helpful from time to time, especially if they happen to be your own that you have taken. You've been on location and you've utilized the subject matter from that standpoint. It's not being reproduced in a magazine. You know this. There are twelve million others thinking the same thing, and feeling their handicap and lack the ability to produce or react to something of that sort, to look at a photograph and be re-inspired to do something or inspired to do something. This is great, but it is simply only one side of the many factors that

must take place, and do, that exist in order to produce a work of art. So it is that and the consideration from composition first to your drawing, and from the drawing to what lighting conditions, from the lighting condition to the emotional factor, the impact and what not to do and what to eliminate and what to put in, what is necessary, unnecessary, and all. And then you're conscious a bit about the observer as to what his reaction is going to be, and his reaction is going to be one thing. If you're bored with what you're doing, he's going to automatically be bored also. If you're inspired and you're painting with fire--the fires of inspiration--then they, (the observer) in turn, are going to stop in admiration. They may not care for the subject matter, but there is something about it that will make it great. And that if one can encourage students to stand before the easel, to arrange the palette, which is the sounding board or the color board, and in that way if they can be given some thought in the proper frame of minds--to eye encourage that proper frame of mind--to get them realizing that what they are doing is something that is coming from within them emotionally, that this is the originality that can take place, at least is half the battle. And then from there on, the recognition is secondary, really.

Stephens; So you've seen this quality change in your students since you first started. It's something to be doing because it's something to boast about.

Michael: Oh, yes indeed. Yes, yes. Oh, it has changed. Yes, that you've painted or you like, or you didn't have talent or you couldn't draw a straight line. All this sort of thing you don't hear about. You know, they would come to you in the past and say, "But I can't draw a straight line. Can you teach me anything?" Now they come and they know that the straight line is not too important, that it is the freedom of expression and the individual. That it's the individual that I cannot talk enough about. That person must realize that this is an original interpretation on the part of a particular person, and not the fact that you're working in a classroom and you're all going to work on the same problem today and tomorrow. The instructor is going to show us how to paint a leaf and the next day he's going to show us how to paint a cloud. What happens when you go to put the leaf on the tree and what happens when you go to put the cloud in the sky? What sky? What are the conditions that changes so? Why not the overall of all things so that all things become things of interest to the painter and at no time can he cast aside any one portion of anything without

definitely studying it. So he might turn and say, "But it's necessary for me to study ten thousand things." If it's necessary, then it's necessary. You're going to do it and you have to live your life anyway. Why not? Become fascinated. Realize what drawbacks you have and the obstacles that you will be coming in contact with, but learn to hurdle the obstacles and learn to take advantage of what you do not know by searching it out and preferably go to the library after you have gone to nature. Then go to the library, then back to nature for additional insight, because you are more apt to think of what that person or what that book had to say about it rather than your own interpretation. How did you react to it first? Then go back and proceed with the self expression and then add to it at will . . . the book will fortify that and then you have a companion there and you say, "Well, gee, though he knows a lot more, we have something in common because that's the way I felt about it and I did discover that the leaves are silver on one side and green on the other and that all leaves are not all green, but how could they be, and if there was a little bit of a breeze then surely the tree has many, many variations of green and including the reflection of the blue of the sky into the leaves and all. Where does it all

come from?" And this is it. But how can the author sit there and tell you about it because you say, "Well, I take his word for it." That would be unfortunate, just as unfortunate as you take the word of the instructor because, after all, you are not teaching people how to do something, nor what to say, your purpose there is by encouraging them from your experience, but at the same time to think for themselves. This is a big factor. It's to inspire them in turn. So how great the instructor depends on how great his ability is to impart and how at moments he is forced to produce, not just to talk about it but to produce and to show something factual and real and positive to that student so they in turn say, "Well, if he can do it, I think I can do it." You know that, and in a more simplified way so you do not complicate it by too much of that, by saying it's impossible to do it unless you work ten years or so. Now days, I know that what has taken the average painter possibly twenty years to develop . . . in five years they're doing it. They really are.

Stephens: You mean in taking individuals and teaching them, they can do it in five years?

Michael: Yes, yes, because that part depends on how ambitious the instructor is willing to work with a student in

order to give them credit for at least knowing . . . they may not know painting, but they may know a great deal more in many other respects than that of the instructor and it would do him good to learn a little bit about what they, students, already know and what they bring into the classroom. So it's a give and take. It's a collaboration of the two. The student has much to offer the instructor and the fact that the instructor remains in that classroom in the course of the morning or afternoon, that instructor must get the feeling that when he has left that classroom he also has learned much. And unless he closes his mind and says, "Well, wasn't I smart today." That is not the truth because that is how narrow he is, narrow minded he would be or she would be according to that so the students have much to offer, much, a great deal.

Stephens: What about the numbers of students? I'm sure you've had an increase over the years.

Michael: Yes. The students . . . we originally started here in . . . well, at Fulton we started in with no more than five in the very beginning and now have oftentimes reached twenty-five and thirty and forty in a class.

Stephens: Now you close your classes when you get to a certain amount?

Michael: Well, yes, after you get to a certain amount because all instruction that I have ever given is given according to the individual need of a particular student and not because we say, "Well, let's get them all into there and then not give them time for that." There's very little orientation given to the students collectively. Much of that is discussed individually. The type of orientation I give is more or less, "Be careful when you're outdoors." I warn them about snakes. I warn them about poison ivy. I warn them about hazards and rocks and other things they're apt to trip over. And how to get along, because it's like going on a safari in Africa. You must learn how to enter and what to do before you enter in blindly, and say, "Well, I don't know." So they must learn how to protect themselves. The most important thing of all, how do you protect yourself in that sun that's beating down. And so basking in the sunshine is a wonderful thing, but at the same time you're moving when you are playing on the beach, but when you are painting you are at an easel and there is very little movement. And you are attempting to get a sighting on your composition, and once doing that well, then, of course, you must learn what to do,

not to get over baked here and there and the other part. And we have had--I'm very happy to say--that in all of the years that we've been conducting the school, the Simon Michael School of Fine Arts, that we have not had any tragic accidents of that sort. No, we have not. I tell them when they go outdoors put more on and less off. More on because this is the way. Don't the Arabs do it in the desert? More for protection. And this is what we must learn. So when they come down, oftentimes they will bring their little summery clothes for basking in the sunshine and all. They want to get a suntan. But that lasts for the day and then I get to see what they have in the way of clothes. Then I tell them to wear a long sleeve shirt and then whenever they do they can put on their slacks and other things to protect them. Then after that they do what they want. But it's usually a little too late to take all that off after leaving the painting location because it cools off and you do.

Stephens: (Chuckle) Well, what type of students, now, in the sense of who becomes a student of art? It's not the retired grandmothers or the affluent wives around town. I'm sure that's the way it started. My impression is that's the way it started out, but it's grown to a universal . . .

Michael: But surprising enough, you still have the grandmothers. And you still have the in-laws all the way down. And you have the housewives and all because it is . . . there has been such a terrific upheaval in this thing and then the expansions that it takes in all that. You have lawyers and doctors and engineers and all. You have . . . and they all aspired to paint and they all aspired to exhibit their interest in exhibitions. This is not a thing you say, "This is only meant for artistic people." So your classes still have a mixture of various professions and interests, but at the same time it's a more intellectual person.

Stephens: Over the years . . .

Michael: Yes, over the years, yes it has become that. And now people are more conscious of it. Now those who aspire to become professional, of course, there is a tendency of wanting to skip the middles and say, "I want to become a great artist," you know. And they want to hurdle from here over to there to become a great artist. But the serious minded person who is willing to work towards quality . . . now we have this particular consideration. In the early days of art, it was necessary for the artist to make a living. And how do you paint and be an artist and yet, at the same

time, where to get the provisions to carry on, see? So at that time it was rather difficult. All of the artists of the early period experienced this but these are not moments for discouragement. If one is determined to succeed in art or become a professional artist or sculptor or musician or writer or actor, it's necessary for them to have that burning desire to the extent of where they are willing to sacrifice much of what most people feel is essential in order to carry on with their work and not miss an opportunity for a time and not miss an opportunity of being at a certain place where they can feel that out of this is a sufficient amount of material to utilize. So this is where you must have as Voltaire once said, "It takes the very devil in you to succeed in any of the arts." You've got to have that grasping interest to go forward. Now there are many people who will take up art and become discouraged at the time because they judge according to the sales they are making. And this is no way to judge art nor talent. That they become discouraged and say, "Well, I want to paint and I was painting, but Anabelle's paintings sell and mine do not sell." Of course, you don't judge. You have that reaction taking place now because exhibitions are far more available now and possible now. Communities

and cities take a greater interest in seeing that these exhibitions are made possible. But if we are only considering the opportunity to show and not considering there is something that you are showing, that painting that you are showing represents you. And this is what is going to be recalled and remembered. And this is good. Now to say that an exhibition is there and it is my duty to contribute to the exhibition because in contributing to this exhibition it makes the exhibition more important. That is, it adds to the importance by the fact that I come from a certain place and they in turn are able to look at my painting and compare with other paintings and this is the great contribution. You are a participant. And by doing so, well, then it enables you to become more knowledgeable rich. If you do not win a ribbon, ribbons come a dime a dozen or a yard. But if you do not win a ribbon nor become recognized, there is one thing, be thankful. Be thankful that you had contributed to help it become a success. And that next year try again. And this is the rewarding thing. I remember an old German painter who I had been working under-- Professor Getche--and this professor was a very serious minded person and seldom smiled. And I walked up to Mr. Getche at that time--I was a youngster--walked up

and I asked Mr. Getche if it were possible for me to submit two paintings to a certain exhibition. And he looked down and raised his thick eyebrow and he said, "By all means, do so. It might help the other fellow win a prize." This is the sort of thing that we have, see. It was about the same thing that I encountered at one time with a very fine painter, Emerson, and this painter Emerson was exhibiting at the New House Galleries in St. Louis. And I walked in--and I was a young painter--and I did not recognize his type of trees. I was attracted by a painting in the window. And I was so impressed by that beautiful coloration of the landscape and the technique. And I went in, and fortunately, Mr. Emerson was there attending his show. And so I looked around and finally--well, we were alone in the gallery. There had been no visitors all during the time I was there. And I walked up to Mr. Emerson and I asked him this question. I said, "Mr. Emerson, what trees do you paint? I don't recognize the trees whether it is an oak or a fir or an elm." And he looked at me and he smiled and he said, "I paint Emerson trees. Are there others?" It's a wonderful thing. So why not for all of our hopeful artists . . . it's good advice. Are there other trees? Now in the seed catalog you will find . . . and in the book on trees

you will find that these trees differ, but how do you feel about the tree? He painted Emerson trees. Are there others? He wanted to know. This was a good question. I thought he was rather sarcastic at the time. Later, as I became more experienced, I realized this was it. It's Emerson. Be yourself. In other words, where do you fit into the thing and not just because of the other. And this is it. And so with the exhibitions, maybe it will help the other fellow win a prize, but at the same time, it's no sad reflection on you, the fact that you did not come out ahead. Because this thing, you do it for the love of doing it and the desire to do it and not because somebody is waiting there to either hand you a check or anything. It's worthwhile supporting your interests in gardening or doing other things. And then support the thing you really want to do. Now as far as how great one becomes, of course, that could be in any line of work. How great is a business man. And you say, well, so and so is a business man. Well, when you say . . . if you think of a great organization of business and say, well, he is just a little grain of sand as far as . . . but he is a business man and he carries on daily and he brings up his family. And so it is with that other. But one must always keep an open mind. I find there

is a slight limitation at times with groups that artists should live more with the works of others than their own works. This is the thing. To create an environment around them, it creates more versatility. It creates a broadened appreciation of what is being done. I don't want to read about sculpture. I want to collect it and feel it. I don't want to read about other painters. I want the other painters' works, and I want to look at them and see the result and enjoy it aesthetically as I would. Then it creates an environment, an inspirational environment, that you could have done way, way back by accepting a drawing, an etching, a lithograph and exchanging a drawing, an etching, a lithograph or a bit of sculpture. And in this way, great collections have been started by that; and we say later, we say, well, I wish I owned a collection that large. How can you own a collection that way? You can't afford it, but you could have afforded it if little by little by little, and it grows. And then, as it goes on, then you become acquainted with the . . . the professional artists who, in turn, are producing work that far surpasses what you have in your collection, but by that time you, in turn, are producing work of quality that can be exchanged, too, with that painter. And then your work begins to grow

and your collection becomes more important. And then, as you can put aside, I say, a certain amount that the artist earns should be. For instance, if he has sold a painting for 200 dollars, then I would say that fifty dollars of the 200 should be put into buying something that will improve his environment or condition or the works of others. In that way, the artist invests in artists. If it were not for that, how do you expect the public to believe in something, and you simply say I want you to believe in me, but I don't believe in . . . no. It is a cause. It is something that is . . . is something. You're all related within the fraternity of art. Really you are, and so it is in that way. And so, out of this thing can grow a very important collection and, in turn, and this goes for pots and pans and other things that are important, fine copper and brass and, everything. It doesn't necessarily have to include just a bit that you recognize as a figure in sculpture, but it can . . . you are able then to more fully appreciate how certain things can be assembled by way of design or pattern and by way of an expression on the part of an individual artist. And, in turn, it is something that is helpful within a community. So, what you do

within that community is a small part, but, at the same time, it does rub off. Whether you have a beautiful yard or a well-kept yard or whether you trim your trees or refuse. If you have a fish pond and there are fish in there, it inspires others to come and look. And they, in turn, want a fish pond. And . . . this is great. And so you're really giving, giving of yourself daily, but one must be conscious of the fact that this is not being produced as for the sake of making an impression, a superficial type of impression. But because this is real, it is a part of your desire to create an environment around yourself, which is in turn going to inspire others.

Stephens: Can you mention some of your notable Aransas County students?

Michael: There are a number of . . . Lorna, do you have a list of some of the students that are within the area here . . . I'm dealing with students all the time and it would be unfair to embellish upon individual students. Those that are here in Aransas County are conscious artists contributing creative efforts and submitting to competitive shows. My students in other parts of the state I consider of equal importance, earning many awards along with progressive recognition.

Stephens: Mr. Michael, would you explain what the significance of your school has been to the cultural developments of the county?

Michael: Well, the contribution that I feel that the school has made within the community has been to make us all conscious within the community of what we have in the way of our trees, in the way of our water, in the way of our bird life and in the way of the difference of . . . the difference that comes about through being so close to the sand dunes, so close to the beaches, so close to the shells, and anything that is available around that has been produced by this. And to create an inspirational desire on the part of the community, all of us included, to better our lives to the extent in this, that there is a higher aspiration than simply to say that, well, I do my work and I go to work in the daytime, in the morning, and I come back at night. Well, what do I do with that besides looking at television and all? Perhaps I'll pick up a book and become conscious that art is . . . a book on art is something that is available and, at the same time, I'll read a bit about it or I heard something about an artist or I was looking at an artist's work at a certain gallery. And to create a desire to want to possess works of art in order to aesthetically encourage one to aspire to

greater heights. And also, at the same time, to show that an individual who owns a home and not because he owns the home and has some grass that he mows, but what, in his way, can be done to make it more significant by way of how he can better his environment and by the touches that are necessary. And by the encouragement of higher education so that this is always possible, which in turn, influences our younger people that are coming up, more important than our older ones, really, in a way, because it's what the older ones do. Then, in turn, they must pass it on as they pass on the inheritance to the young. And having such a school that encourages the community to go outdoors and see the everchanging moods of nature. And to be able to observe and to analyze color, to analyze and see the reflections within the water. To be able to see that . . . the direction of the light and the long shadows or the short shadows or the shadow directly beneath the tree. And to feel that . . . the entire community, not just one person, nor a group or organization, but that the entire community is contributing towards a great and wonderful thing within this community by . . . encouraging the cultural as well as the aesthetic, as well as the refinements of life. Because without it, we would simply remain

Michael

41

in the dark. And, oh my, we've come a long way. And man has come a long way from that primitive time way back when, in reality, well then if we had no flowers and we had no songs or birds, and if we had none of the refinements of life and the courtesies of life, wouldn't it be a very dull place to live in? And so I hope that this school is contributing a small part of that growth.

Stephens: Thank you.