

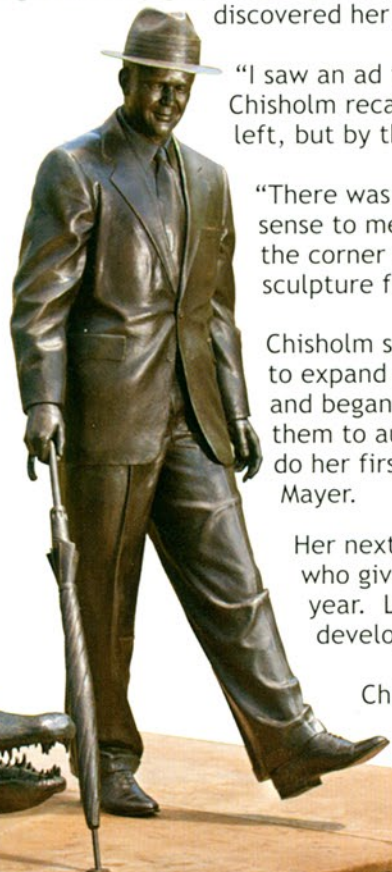
Bringing Home the Bronze

Susie Chisholm's sculptures bring history back to life

If you are exploring the artists' studios in Savannah's City Market this fall, you might just meet American Revolutionaries Samuel Adams and Captain John Parker. Their towering appearance and formidable stares may make it hard to tell, but these two heroes actually have a whole lot of Johnny Mercer in them, thanks to Savannah's own Susie Chisholm.

Chisholm is a sculptor whose work in life-size bronze statues and busts can now be seen in several different corners of the United States. Her subjects include not only historical figures but also charming scenes of everyday life, such as a child reading on a park bench or playing at the beach. Some of the original clay versions of her most notable bronze sculptures are still on display in her studio.

Chisholm grew up in an artistic family, but sculpture was not part of her childhood. Her father was an architect and her mother was schooled in interior design, and Chisholm and her brother Danny Grantham both went to the University of Georgia to study graphic design. It was not until after she was married and was raising three children that Chisholm discovered her love of sculpture.



"I saw an ad in the paper for a sculpture class, and I thought it sounded interesting," Chisholm recalls. "Three weeks into the class, the teacher had found another job and left, but by then I was hooked."

"There was something about working in three dimensions that made sense to me," Chisholm says. "It just made sense to keep going around the corner of whatever I was doing. And the tactile, hands-on nature of sculpture felt right to me."

Chisholm sought the expertise of other artists and even traveled to Italy to expand her study of the art. She found the studio space in City Market and began working on small pieces, often giving them away as gifts or donating them to auctions. After learning to do smaller bronze sculptures, she was asked to do her first life-size piece for "The Runner," which stands at the entrance to Lake Mayer.

Her next life-size bronze was none other than Savannah legend Johnny Mercer, who gives a smile to the thousands of people who walk through Ellis Square every year. Later, she was asked to create a bronze of Charles Fraser, the real estate developer who helped transform Hilton Head into a world-famous resort island.

Chisholm, who was elected for membership in the prestigious National Sculpture Society, now has several life-size sculptures, both in public and in private collections, in Georgia and South Carolina as well as pieces in Colorado, Texas, and Florida. She built Samuel Adams and Captain John Parker for her newest commission from the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum in Massachusetts.



Susie Chisholm



The process is far from simple. First, Chisholm must do extensive research to make sure details such as period clothing and the physicality of the subject are accurate before she even touches a piece of clay. The sculpture can then take five months or more to build.

Chisholm can melt and reuse clay from previous works, which is how so much of Johnny Mercer ended up in Adams and Parker. From there, several molds are created, starting with a rubber mold. That first mold is taken to a fine art foundry, where wax is poured into it. In turn, the wax gets a ceramic mold. The wax is then melted out and the ceramic is hardened in a burn out kiln. The bronze, heated to 2000 degrees, is poured into the ceramic shell. Once the shell is cooled, it is broken off and the bronze pieces are welded back together to make the single sculpture. This takes about three more months.

For the people she creates, Chisholm remains focused on more than historical realism.

"Making sure the personality is there is just as important," she says. "I want you to feel a connection to the person. I want the soul to be there."

"I want you to walk up to Johnny Mercer and feel like he is smiling at you."

Heavy Metal

Whether you are moving works of fine art or storage bins in your garage, proper lifting is needed to avoid lower back injuries. Heidi Prado, a physical therapist and clinical manager at St. Joseph's/Candler's Outpatient Therapy in Garden City, offers these tips on how to lift objects safely:

Plan ahead before lifting, and don't hesitate to ask for help.

Test the weight of the object to determine if you will need help. Clear a path, and if lifting something with another person, make sure both of you agree on the plan.

Lift close to your body.

Why? Because a 10-pound box kept close to your body places 10 pounds of force on your lower back, but at arm's length it can create nearly 100 pounds of force.

Bend your knees and keep your back straight.

Focus on keeping your spine straight or slightly arched inward. Raise and lower objects to the ground by bending your knees, not by curving your back.

Lift with your legs.

Your legs are many times stronger than your back muscles—let your strength work in your favor.

Keep your feet shoulder-width apart.

Holding your feet too close together will be unstable; too far apart will hinder movement. Keeping your legs wide will also allow you to squat with your knees out of the way of the object.

Tighten your stomach muscles.

This will hold your back in a good position and help prevent excessive force on the spine. Don't hold your breath but rather exhale while lifting.

Don't twist.

Pivot with your feet rather than twisting at your waist.

