

# University of Delaware Honorary Degree

**SIMMIE KNOX**  
DOCTOR OF FINE ARTS

**Determined, resilient, and gifted**, you moved in life from an early childhood spent on a sharecropper's farm to being the favored portrait artist of cultural icons, judges, politicians, and, your most noted achievement, the President of the United States.

Born in 1935, you grew up in the segregated South, a place where it was not even possible for you to take an art class, so instead you began your training under the tutelage of a mailman. Although you were endowed with great artistic skill and you loved drawing, you saw no future for yourself as an artist in the United States of the 1950s, so you joined the military. Later you matriculated at Delaware State University and then the University of Delaware. At first you studied subjects other than art, but even so your talent did not go unnoticed by your professors, and you soon switched your major to art education and earned your degree from UD in 1967.

**Multi-talented teacher and visual artist**, you went on to teach art for 18 years at a series of schools and colleges in the Mid-Atlantic. Simultaneously you earned both a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Master's degree from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University.

At first you produced the abstract art that was favored at the time, and you had success with it, even participating in a group exhibition with top artists at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. But your heart told you that abstract art was not your calling. You began to paint portraits, and in 1980 you stopped teaching to focus solely on producing art.

**Acclaimed portrait artist**, although you never took a course in portrait painting, you taught yourself through painting people and even details such as hands over and over again. Your aim with your portraiture, you once said, "is to tell a story, to summarize that person and that person's life in a picture."

You began to get noticed, and in 1986 you had your first significant commission from Bill Cosby. From there your career took off, as you painted other celebrities, including Muhammad Ali, Alex Haley, and Hank Aaron, as well as numerous politicians and judges, including Supreme Court Justices Thurgood Marshall and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

You came to the attention of then President Bill Clinton, who selected you to paint his official White House portrait. You were the first African-American ever selected for that great honor and your work now hangs alongside that of America's greatest portrait artists.

Edouard Manet once said, "You would hardly believe how difficult it is to place a figure alone on a canvas, and to concentrate all the interest on this single and unique figure and still keep it living and real." Indeed, portraiture demands the greatest skill from an artist—the ability to paint not only the face, but also the soul. Simmie, in your long, distinguished career as a portrait artist, you have shown again and again the talent to portray the very essence of your subjects.

Therefore, under the authority of the Board of Trustees of the University of Delaware, I have the pleasure and honor of conferring upon you, Simmie Knox, the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts and do declare you entitled to all the rights, honors, and privileges to that degree appertaining throughout the world. In testimony thereof, I am pleased to present to you this diploma.

*A. Gilchrist Sparks III*  
*May 26, 2012*

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The honorary degree is the highest honor the University of Delaware bestows and is presented to individuals whose contributions to the public good warrant exceptional recognition.