

## ***Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine***

Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

Curated by Diana Tuite

Installation Organized by Jennifer Carty with Orianna Cacchione

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Reviewed by Carl Schmitz

Independent Art Historian

In Chicago, museum patrons recently had the rare opportunity to experience two generations of twentieth-century artists through the presentation of two distinct retrospectives. Just as the major Cézanne retrospective opened at the Art Institute of Chicago, *Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine* was ending its run across town at the Smart Museum of Art on the University of Chicago campus. While the influence Cézanne bore on modern art's development is universally recognized, the standing of Thompson (1937–1966) has largely been uncertain since his untimely passing. Both artists produced significant bodies of work.

*This House Is Mine* came almost a quarter-century after the Whitney Museum of American Art and Detroit Institute of Arts organized the last retrospective for Bob Thompson, and featured over eighty paintings and works on

paper. As a Black painter, Thompson walked between worlds with a unique vision that was formed during a crossroads in the history of art when midcentury party lines between figuration and abstraction were drawn. Thompson expanded his repertoire even further by remixing compositional sources from as far back as the Quattrocento.

The Kentucky native evolved quickly; his student years at the University of Louisville's Hite Art Institute (1957–58) ended with summering in the Provincetown art colony (from 1958) and led to his falling in with the New York art scene. In Provincetown, Thompson came into contact with Abstract Expressionists Mark Rothko and Jack Tworkov, although he was ultimately more struck by the Figurative Expressionist work of Jan Müller. New York City expanded his creative circle to include musicians like Ornette Coleman, whom

he befriended at the legendary jazz clubs Five Spot and Slugs' Saloon.

Three formative stays in Europe also brought Thompson closer to his most frequent collaborators: artists from earlier periods whose influence on him was profound. In Paris (1961–62), he absorbed Poussin. Ibiza (1962–63) unleashed Goya. The final stay in Rome (1966) enabled trips to Arezzo, where he internalized Piero della Francesca. (Thompson's first attempted grand tour was with fellow travelers Red Grooms and Jay Milder in 1959. Although the trio aimed for Mexico, they only made it as far as Milder's hometown of Omaha, and this less formative stay was marked by the director of the Joslyn Art Museum's inability to accommodate their request for exhibition space.)

As was seen throughout the exhibition, Thompson's lived experiences distinctively blended together on canvas. A sweeping painterliness common in the era of Abstract Expressionism brushed up against the drive to picture allegorical scenes that matched the social passion of Müller. These impulses then passed through the prism of devotion to Old Masters like Poussin, Goya, and Piero, inspiring adaptations of their compositions. All of which was highlighted by a vital sense of color that

draws comparisons to both Gauguin's *The Yellow Christ* (1889) and the Fauvist aspect of Hans Hofmann. As Robert Colescott saw it, this potent combination of content, composition, and color resulted in "a surface you can taste."<sup>1</sup>

*The Funeral of Jan Müller* (1958), painted only two years after Thompson had been studying medicine at Boston University, was one of the few works in *This House Is Mine* that showed the artist's early development. The composition did not stylistically forecast the painter that Thompson would become, but it did illustrate a place-staking vision. As opposed to representing the funeral of Müller, it could be viewed as a funeral "for" Müller in the sense that it affirmed his passionate belief in showing life on the canvas. Thompson accordingly struck out against pure abstraction by using its vocabulary—thick, textural brushstrokes and drips that make their own spontaneous gestures—as a means of figurative and social representation.

A leap forward in figurative style from the monolithic block figures of the previous works, *Self-Portrait in the Studio* (1960, [Speed Art Museum](#)) showed Thompson in his studio with a background mélange of canvases, books, and other studio miscellanea. The artist's treatment of his hands was

reminiscent of Rothko's widely known self-portrait of 1936, but perhaps the most remarkable feature of the painting was the prominent positioning of snare and conga drums in the middle ground. Music-making as inspiration morphed into the depiction of musicians in two other paintings that were included in the exhibition. *Ornette* (1960–61, [Birmingham Museum of Art](#)) is a rough impasto with fragmented Arcadian scenes spinning out from an off-center stereo view of the saxophonist and composer that is an experiment in translating the overhead view of a chapel fresco onto canvas. *Garden of Music* (1961, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford originally entitled "Homage to Ornette"—reverts to planar design with a horizontally aligned ensemble cast of performers including Coleman, Don Cherry, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Ed Blackwell, and Charlie Haden, surrounded by an audience, all of whom are essentialized in nude outline within a polychromatic pastoral expanse.

From hot to cool, the refined *Blue Madonna* (1961, [Detroit Institute of Arts](#)) might be the apex of Thompson's use of movement. A syncopation of trees, figures, and sinewy insinuations of biblical serpents that frame the Madonna with the infant Jesus, Thompson pushed figures and setting through a

zoetrope-like layering of foreground-background ambiguity. His trademark *repoussoir* in a black hat also guides the eye, in a way similar to Jan Müller's Faust, albeit with the additional dynamic of edge tension. Through a committed adaptation of Poussin's *Bacchanale à la joueuse de guitare* (ca. 1625, Louvre), *Homage to Nina Simone* (1965, [Minneapolis Institute of Art](#)) has the *repoussoir* more centrally placed than the titular figure herself. Another product of the artist's loaded palette, the use of color—particularly its cloud-filled sky—evokes Allen Ginsberg's citation of Thompson as "the most original visionary painter of his days, a first natural American psychedelic colorist."

The use of vibrant colors in light-drenched scenes conveys Thompson's underlying enthusiasm for life. Perhaps the only thing that Thompson was incapable of was slowing down. It's said that he created over a thousand artworks in his final seven years, and yet questioning what could have been is unavoidable. Fellow painter and friend Anne Tabachnick felt that it was "painful to think of the forty or fifty years of paintings he will never make."<sup>2</sup> Thompson gave enough of himself on canvas that what survives warrants study and celebration on its own, but also

further contextualization within art history.

Painted the year after Thompson's death, Faith Ringgold's *The American People Series #20: Die* (1967) notably also dates from between the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. A visceral statement on the interracial and gender-based violence that also emerges within Thompson's work, *Die* is a jarring portrayal of unhinged bloodshed and vacant desperation that moves through a circuit of figures who are closely paired despite differences in race, gender, and generation. *Die* became a highlight of the New York MoMA's collection shortly after its acquisition in 2016, but not solely because the diptych is one of Ringgold's iconic works in the medium. With the rationale that Ringgold acknowledged the influence of viewing *Guernica* (1937) during the period it was entrusted to the museum, *Die* was part of a 2019 permanent collection rotation that placed it in a gallery of other works by Picasso. This placement—especially the uneven treatment of including one work by Ringgold in a gallery full of Picassos (a Louise Bourgeois sculpture being the only other gatecrasher)—led some critics to charge that Ringgold's masterpiece was being instrumentalized in a drive to maintain hierarchical

relationships between collection artists. Even though the first posthumous Cézanne retrospective cast an irrevocable spell of influence on Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1911) and *The Bather* (ca. 1885) have generally lived separate lives in the museum's galleries. With *Die* taking its own place as a flagship painting in the retrospective for Faith Ringgold that is also currently traveling, a similar independent context should follow.

Had Ringgold's *Die* otherwise been detached from its Picassoan context, a more equitable pairing from the Bob Thompson retrospective could have been *The Hanging* (1959, [Chrysler Museum of Art](#)), an early painting that has been rarely exhibited. Both works are denotatively titled, with Thompson locating a group of onlookers within a forested area at a short distance from the hangman's tree. This raw and foreboding composition employs little of the sublimity found in later paintings and predates Thompson's extensive use of the Old Masters. Between the shocking directness of Ringgold and the haunting ambiguity of Thompson, these works could facilitate an instructive conversation about the United States in the Jim Crow era, ranging from the murder of Emmett Till and institutional racism, down to the mass shootings

and regional curtailment of civil rights occurring in the present-day. Such a pairing, however, would miss the mark as an illustration of influence, as the artists were contemporaries whose circles did not significantly overlap.

Privileging sources of influence when an artist lives a life as short as Thompson's—without the time given to prolifically inventive artists like Picasso and Ringgold—could overwhelm the presentation of a body of work, but *This House Is Mine* uses a different model for illustrating influence. In the same way that the artist invited features of their artworks into his compositions, the curators invited Goya and Poussin into the exhibition, where comparative works hung alongside those by Thompson. Museum visitors may one day relate more to the work of Ringgold and only come to know Picasso through her body of work, while some art students are likely discovering Piero today through *This House Is Mine*.

With two major museum retrospectives and their monographs forming part of the bridge, the art of Bob Thompson has outlived those who were critical of his methods. Building on the foundational work of the Whitney retrospective (particularly texts by Judith Wilson, Thelma Golden, and Shamim Momin in the regrettably

out of print catalog), *This House Is Mine* was free to explore in further depth how Thompson abstracted narrative forms from the Old Masters. In doing so, the exhibition joined similar projects that looked at Willem de Kooning's use of letters as an impetus for ostensibly non-objective compositions, Hans Hofmann's employment of still lifes in modeling push-pull dynamics, and Grace Hartigan's own free-study exorcisms of the Old Masters. Beyond method, our means of interpreting these compositions takes us through the history of art, the life of the artist, and down to drawing our own connections to the present-day. Thompson's avowed preference for private symbolism remains generative. Meyer Schapiro observed that Thompson's paintings are "an innocent soliloquy without thought of an audience."<sup>3</sup> *This House Is Mine* offered a special opportunity to be that audience.

*This House Is Mine* has left the University of Chicago, but the Smart Museum created exhibition content that lives online. A series of videos highlighting works from the exhibition ("Object Chats" on the [exhibition webpage](#)) contain succinct and thought-provoking reflections. Chicago was also an opportune venue within the context of jazz, and the museum commissioned an [artist-created playlist](#)

that includes many whose paths crossed with Thompson, including Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Charlie Haden, and Nina Simone. With a soundtrack that hints at Thompson's musical tastes outside of jazz, the freewheeling documentary *Bob Thompson Happening!* (1965) by Dorothy Levitt Beskind (played on a loop in the Smart Museum galleries and currently available through the [High Museum website](#)) splices together Thompson in the course of a day in New York City and Provincetown and the artist at work in the studio. In the video, initial pigment layers are applied to *The Carriage* (1965, [Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden](#)), an ominous painting also featured in the retrospective that is a variation on Poussin wherein Thompson has turned the reaping of a harvest from the field into flesh.

*Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine* was organized by the [Colby College Museum of Art](#), where the exhibition opened last year. The retrospective traveled to the [Smart Museum of Art](#) at the University of Chicago from February to May, opened recently at the [High Museum of Art](#) (remaining in Atlanta through September 11), and in October makes its final stop at the [Hammer Museum at UCLA](#). The accompanying catalog has been co-published by the Colby College Museum of Art and [Yale University Press](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Colescott, "An Artist's View: Robert Colescott on William H. Johnson and Bob Thompson," in *Novae: William H. Johnson and Bob Thompson*, ed. Lizzette LeFalle-Collins (Los Angeles: California Afro-American Museum, 1990), 33; cited in Lowery Stokes Sims, "A Tale of Two Bobs," in *Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine*, ed. Diana Tuite (Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Tabachnick, "Bob Thompson; 1937–1966," 1967. Bob Thompson papers, 1949–2005, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer Schapiro, quoted in "Bob Thompson Retrospective Exhibit Honors Late Black Artist," *New School for Social Research News* (February 1969), 1 (New School Archives and Special Collections object title PR#3748, Bob Thompson Retrospective, [https://digital.archives.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS030107\\_001509](https://digital.archives.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS030107_001509)).