A Finding Aid to the Bob Thompson Papers, 1949-2005, in the Archives of American Art

Kimberley Henze and Rihoko Ueno

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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives of American Art
Title: Bob Thompson papers
Identifier: AAA.thombob
Date: 1949-2005
Extent: 2 Linear feet
Creator: Thompson, Bob, 1937-1966
Language: English
Collection is in English.

Summary: The papers of New York African American figurative painter Bob Thompson measure 2 linear feet and date from 1949 to 2005. The collection includes biographical material, videotapes, correspondence, writings by Bob Thompson and others, exhibition files, scattered personal business records, printed material, photographs, and photograph albums. The correspondence is mostly between Carol Thompson, the artist's wife, and others concerning Bob Thompson's artwork.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The collection was donated by Elaine Plenda, the artist's sister-in-law, in 2006, 2010, 2011, and 2012.

Available Formats

The bulk of the collection was digitized in 2017 and is available on the Archives of American Art's website. Materials which have not been scanned include blank pages, blank versos of photographs, and duplicates. In some cases, exhibition catalogs and other publications have had their covers, title pages, and relevant pages scanned.

Additional digital content, such as digital user copies of sound and video recordings, may also be available for use at Archives of American Art offices.

Processing Information

The papers were initially organized by Carol Thompson, Bob Thompson's wife. Upon arrival at the Archives, the collection was processed to a minimal level, and a finding aid was prepared by intern Kimberley Henze in 2015. The collection was fully processed and prepared for digitization by Rihoko Ueno in 2017 with funding provided by The Walton Family Foundation and the Terra Foundation for American Art.
Bob Thompson papers
AAA.thombob

Preferred Citation

Restrictions
Use of original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C. Research Center. Use of video recording requires advance notice. Contact Reference Services for more information.

Conditions Governing Use
The Bob Thompson papers are owned by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Literary rights as possessed by the donor have been dedicated to public use for research, study, and scholarship. The collection is subject to all copyright laws. The "Bob Thompson Happening" videocassettes are available for on-site research only and permission for reproduction must be made to Joanna Elkin, the daughter of the filmmaker.

Biographical / Historical

Bob Thompson (1937-1966) was an African American figurative painter who worked primarily in New York City.

Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1937. He attended Boston University as a pre-med student, but quit the program and returned to Kentucky to attend the University of Louisville and study painting under German expressionist artist Ulfert Wilke. As a student, he spent a summer in Provincetown, Massachusetts and immersed himself in the art communities there. In 1958, Thompson moved to New York City and reunited with several artists he had met in Provincetown and participated in some of the earliest "happenings," somewhat informal art events or gatherings usually involving performance art and music, in 1960. He became a regular at the jazz clubs The Five Spot and Slugs and became friends with several jazz musicians. Many of Thompson's paintings reflect his interest in jazz. He also formed friendships with writers Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones. In 1960, he had his first solo exhibition at the Delancy Street Museum.

The same year as his first solo exhibition, Thompson married Carol Plenda and the couple lived in Paris from 1961-1962 after he received a Whitney Foundation fellowship. They lived in Ibiza, Spain the following year. Thompson painted prolifically while abroad, and when he returned to New York City in 1963, he brought many paintings with him. He quickly found representation by Martha Jackson Gallery and the gallery featured Thompson's work in solo exhibitions in 1963-1965. His reputation grew and more exhibitions across the country followed.

In late 1965, Thompson and his wife traveled to Rome, Italy, where he continued to study art and paint. Thompson died in Rome in 1966 at the age of 28 from a drug overdose not long after receiving gall bladder surgery.

Scope and Contents
The papers of New York African American figurative painter Bob Thompson measure 2 linear feet and date from 1949 to 2005. The collection includes biographical material, videocassettes, correspondence, writings by Bob Thompson and others, exhibition files, scattered personal business records, printed
material, photographs, and photograph albums. The correspondence is mostly between Carol Thompson, the artist's wife, and others concerning Bob Thompson's artwork.

Biographical material includes certificates, school memorabilia, biographical chronologies, a memorial program and obituaries, and a transcript of "Bob Thompson: His Life and Friendships" panel discussion with several notable artists commenting on Thompson. There is also a video recording copy of a 1965 film by Dorothy Levitt Beskind titled *Bob Thompson Happening* which was made to accompany a 1999 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art.

Carol Thompson's correspondence is with various galleries, dealers, and friends primarily concerning Bob Thompson's artwork and posthumous exhibitions. There is correspondence with art historian Judith Wilson, the artist's mother Bessie Thompson, David Anderson Gallery, and Donald Morris Gallery.

Writings by Bob Thompson include church speeches, a letter to the editor of *Louisville Courier Journal*, a poem, and an artist statement. There are also writings about Thompson by others, including his mother Bessie Thompson, wife Carol Thompson, and artists and friends, including Margaret Bridwell, Dario Covi, Carl Crodel, Emilio Cruz, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, Mary H. Martin, Mary Spencer May, Carter Ratcliff, Meyer Schapiro, A. B. Spellman, Ulfert Wilke, and Ken Young. The writings by friends are mostly in the form of recollections by friends that were gathered as a memorial tribute to Thompson.

Exhibition files consist of material related to posthumous group and solo exhibitions of Bob Thompson's work.

The majority of the personal business records are posthumous and include inventories, loan and consignment forms, sales and appraisal records, and scattered correspondence.

Printed material includes exhibition catalogs, magazine and newspaper clippings about Bob Thompson, blank postcards of artwork, posters, and press releases.

There are photographs of Bob Thompson, family, and friends, including many artists, shot in various locations in New York City and Provincetown, as well as in Spain, France, and Italy. There are images of Thompson's Rivington Street studio, the Billiard Palace and the Slugs Jazz Club in New York City, exhibitions, events, street scenes, and artwork. There are four photographs albums, one of the Thompson's wedding, two of exhibitions (one is disbound), and one personal album with many photographs of friends and family, including the artist's mother Bessie Thompson and wife Carol Thompson.

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**Arrangement**

The collection is arranged as 7 series.

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1953-2003 (0.2 linear feet; Box 1)
- Series 2: Carol Thompson's Correspondence, 1971-2000 (0.1 linear feet; Box 1)
- Series 3: Writings, 1949-1998 (0.1 linear feet; Box 1)
- Series 4: Exhibition Files, 1978-2001 (0.1 linear feet; Box 1)
- Series 5: Personal Business Records, 1965-2001 (0.1 linear feet; Box 1)
- Series 6: Printed Material, 1960-2005 (0.7 linear feet; Boxes 1-2, 4, OV 5)
- Series 7: Photographs, 1951-2000 (0.7 linear feet; Boxes 2-4)
Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
- African American artists
- Artists' studios -- Photographs

Types of Materials:
- Photographs
- Video recordings

Names:
- Baraka, Amiri, 1934-2014
- Beskind, Dorothy Levitt
- Bridwell Place
- Bridwell, Margaret
- Covi, Dario A.
- Crodel, Charles, 1894-1973
- Cruz, Emilio, 1938-
- David Anerson Gallery
- Donald Morris Gallery
- Ginsberg, Allen, 1926-
- Martin, Mary, 1913-
- May, Mary Spencer
- Ratcliff, Carter
- Schapiro, Meyer, 1904-
- Sluggs Jazz Club
- Spellman, A. B., 1935-
- The Billard Palace
- Thompson, Bessie
- Thompson, Carol
- Whitney Museum of American Art
- Wilke, Ulfert, 1907-1987
- Wilson, Judith, 1952-
- Young, Kenneth, 1933-

Occupations:
- Painters -- New York (State) -- New York
Series 1: Biographical Material, 1953-2003

0.2 Linear feet (Box 1)

Biographical material includes a driver’s safety certificate, high school graduation program, letter of admission to Boston University, professional chronologies, memorial program material, and a transcript of the “Bob Thompson: His Life and Friendships” 1984 panel featuring Bill Barrell, Emilio Cruz, Mimi Gross, Edward Levine, Jay Milder, Sheila Milder, and Anne Tabachnick. There is also a video recording copy of a 1965 film by Dorothy Levitt Beskind titled *Bob Thompson Happening*. The film contains footage of Bob Thompson in New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts, and an appearance by Hans Hofmann. The film was reformatted on VHS to accompany a 1999 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art.

This series is arranged in chronological order.

The bulk of this series has been digitized except for duplicates.

Box 1, Folder 1  
Driver Safety Certificate, 1953  
*Image(s): Driver Safety Certificate: 1953*

Box 1, Folder 2  
High School Graduation Program and Boston University Acceptance Letter, 1955  
*Image(s): High School Graduation Program and Boston University Acceptance Letter: 1955*

Box 1, Folder 3  
Memorial Service and Obituaries, 1966  
*Image(s): Memorial Service and Obituaries: 1966*

Box 1, Folder 4  
Transcript of "Bob Thompson: His Life and Friendships", 1984  
*Image(s): Transcript of "Bob Thompson: His Life and Friendships": 1984*

Box 1, Folder 5-6  
Copy of *Bob Thompson Happening* (1965) by Dorothy Levitt Beskind, 1999  
2 videocassettes (vhs) (video copies of motion picture film original; location of original unknown. )

Box 1, Folder 7  
Chronologies, circa 2003  
*Image(s): Chronologies: circa 2003*
Series 2: Carol Thompson's Correspondence, 1971-2000

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Correspondence is between the artist's wife Carol Thompson and various galleries, dealers, businesses, and friends and concerns mostly business matters with some personal letters interspersed as well. This series consists of letters exchanged with Judith Wilson, an African American art historian who studied Thompson, as well as general correspondence, which includes letters from business entities as well as from Bessie Thompson, the artist's mother.

This series is arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent.

This series has been digitized in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 8  A, Miscellaneous, 1978-1999
Image(s): A, Miscellaneous: 1978-1999

Box 1, Folder 9  Carver Federal Savings Bank, 1996-1997

Box 1, Folder 10  David Anderson Gallery, 1985-1990
Image(s): David Anderson Gallery: 1985-1990

Box 1, Folder 11  Donald Morris Gallery, 1978-1980
Image(s): Donald Morris Gallery: 1978-1980

Box 1, Folder 12  G-J, Miscellaneous, 1979-2000
Image(s): G-J, Miscellaneous: 1979-2000

Box 1, Folder 13  L-M, Miscellaneous, 1978-1997

Box 1, Folder 14  N-P, Miscellaneous, 1983-1996

Box 1, Folder 15  Reading and O'Reilly, Inc., 1991-1999
Image(s): Reading and O'Reilly, Inc.: 1991-1999

Box 1, Folder 16  R-S, Miscellaneous, 1983-1998

Box 1, Folder 17  Thompson, Bessie, 1971-1979
Image(s): Thompson, Bessie: 1971-1979

Box 1, Folder 18  T, Miscellaneous, 1989
Image(s): T, Miscellaneous: 1989

Box 1, Folder 19  Wilson, Judith, 1983-1998
Series 3: Writings, 1949-1998

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Writings by the artist include church speeches Thompson gave as a teenager, a letter to the editor of a journal, a poem, and an artist statement. Writings by others include notes from Thompson's mother Bessie; writings by Carol Thompson, memorial poems and tributes, and questionnaire answers in the form of essays written by Margaret Bridwell, Dario Covi, Carl Crodel, Emilio Cruz, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, Mary H. Martin, Mary Spencer May, Carter Ratcliff, Meyer Schapiro, A. B. Spellman, Ulfert Wilke, and Ken Young.

The bulk of this series has been digitized except for duplicates.

Box 1, Folder 20  Church Speeches, circa 1949-1954
Image(s): Church Speeches: circa 1949-1954

Box 1, Folder 21  Letter to the Editor of Louisville Courier Journal, 1955
Image(s): Letter to the Editor of Louisville Courier Journal: 1955

Box 1, Folder 22  “Today was my everyone day” Poem, circa 1963
Image(s): “Today was my everyone day” Poem: circa 1963

Box 1, Folder 23  Artist Statement, 1965
Image(s): Artist Statement: 1965

Box 1  Writings by Others

Box 1, Folder 24  Poems by "Ryan", 1960-1961
Image(s): Poems by "Ryan": 1960-1961

Box 1, Folder 25  Bessie Thompson Writing About Bob Thompson, circa 1966
Image(s): Bessie Thompson Writing About Bob Thompson: circa 1966

Box 1, Folder 26  Tributes by Friends for Memorial Exhibition, 1966-1971
Image(s): Tributes by Friends for Memorial Exhibition: 1966-1971

Box 1, Folder 27  Essays About Bob Thompson by Various, circa 1967-1976
Image(s): Essays About Bob Thompson by Various: circa 1967-1976

Box 1, Folder 28  Carol Thompson Writing About Bob Thompson, 1998
Image(s): Carol Thompson Writing About Bob Thompson: 1998

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Exhibition files consist of correspondence, loan forms, checklists, catalogs, printed material, and other documents related to posthumous group and solo exhibitions of Bob Thompson's artwork, including a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art in 1998-1990.

The material in this series is arranged chronologically by exhibition date.

The bulk of this series has been digitized except for duplicates.

Box 1, Folder 29


Box 1, Folder 30


Box 1, Folder 31


Box 1, Folder 32

Skoto Gallery - The Elegance of Memory (1996), 1996

Box 1, Folder 33


Box 1, Folder 34


Box 1, Folder 35


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0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Personal business records document the posthumous appraisal, sale and study of Thompson's work. Found are inventories, sales and price lists, invoices, consignment agreements, and limited correspondence. Many of the records concern business affairs with various art galleries, including the Martha Jackson Gallery.

The bulk of this series has been digitized except duplicates.

- Box 1, Folder 36: Art Inventory, circa 1966
  Image(s): Art Inventory: circa 1966

- Box 1, Folder 37: "Inventory of Paintings Destroyed by Fire", 1977
  Image(s): "Inventory of Paintings Destroyed by Fire": 1977

- Box 1, Folder 38: Miscellaneous Loan and Consignment Forms, 1981-1993
  Image(s): Miscellaneous Loan and Consignment Forms: 1981-1993

- Box 1, Folder 39: Christie's Sale of Painting, 1993-1994
  Image(s): Christie's Sale of Painting: 1993-1994

- Box 1, Folder 40: Daniel Goldreyer, Ltd. Appraisals, 1982-1987

- Box 1, Folder 41: Martha Jackson Gallery, 1965-1978
  Image(s): Martha Jackson Gallery: 1965-1978

- Box 1, Folder 42: Robert Miller Galleries, 1978-1980
  Image(s): Robert Miller Galleries: 1978-1980

- Box 1, Folder 43: Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, 1981-1995

- Box 1, Folder 44: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1986-2001
  Image(s): Wadsworth Atheneum: 1986-2001

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Series 6: Printed Material, 1960-2005

0.7 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2, 4, OV 5)

Printed material includes publicity for exhibitions, exhibition catalogs, magazines, and news clippings concerning Bob Thompson and his art, unmarked postcards of artwork, posters for exhibitions, and press releases.

The material in this series are grouped together by document type such as catalogs, announcements, and clippings, and then arranged chronologically within those groupings.

The bulk of this series has been scanned. Materials that have not been scanned include duplicates and the backs of clippings. In some cases, exhibition catalogs and other publications have had their covers, titles pages, and relevant pages scanned.

Box 1, Folder 45  Exhibition Announcements and Brochures, 1964-1969
Image(s): Exhibition Announcements and Brochures: 1964-2001

Box 1, Folder 46  Exhibition Announcements and Brochures, 1970-1989
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 47  Exhibition Announcements and Brochures, 1990-2005
Image(s)
Oversized material housed in Box 4, Folder 1.

Box 1, Folder 48  Undated Exhibition Announcements and Brochures, circa 1964-circa 2000
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 49  Exhibition Catalogs, 1964-1968
Image(s): Exhibition Catalogs: 1964-2001

Box 1, Folder 50  Exhibition Catalogs, 1969-1973
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 51  Exhibition Catalogs, 1974-1979
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 52  Exhibition Catalogs, 1980-1988
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 53  Exhibition Catalogs, 1990-2001
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 54  Magazines, 1987-2000

Box 1, Folder 55  News Clippings, 1959-1969
Image(s): News Clippings: 1961-2005

Box 1, Folder 56  News Clippings, 1970-1979
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 57  News Clippings, 1980-1989
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 1  News Clippings, 1990-1999
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 2  News Clippings, 2000-2005

Box 2, Folder 3  Undated News Clippings, circa 1960-circa 2000
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 4  Postcards, 1974-1999
Image(s): Postcards: 1974-1999

Box 2, Folder 5  Posters, 1960-1987
Image(s): Posters: 1960-1987
Oversized material housed in OV 5.

Box 2, Folder 6  Press Releases, 1966-1993
Image(s): Press Releases: 1966-1993

Box 4, Folder 1  Oversized Exhibition Announcement scanned with material from Box 1, Folder 47, 2005

Box OV 5  Oversized Posters scanned with material from Box 2, Folder 5, 1960-1987

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Series 7: Photographs, 1951-2000

0.7 Linear feet (Boxes 2-4)

Photographs are of Bob Thompson, Thompson with family and friends, travels, artwork, exhibitions, and places. Locations depicted include Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; Provincetown, Massachusetts; Paris, France; Rome and Florence, Italy; Ibiza, Spain; and New York City, specifically the Rivington Street studio, the Billiard Palace on 14th Street, and the Slugs Jazz Club. There are images of Irene and Bill Barrell, Robert Beauchamp, Ornette Coleman, Robert Frank, Lorenzo Hale, Christopher Lane, Malachy McCourt, Sheila and Jay Milder, Moondog, Steve Pepper, Dorothea Rockburne, and A.B. Spellman, as well as the artist's mother Bessie Thompson and wife Carol Thompson, among others. Also found are photograph albums - one of personal photographs, one of Thompson's wedding, and two of exhibitions, one of which is disbound. Also found here are an album of photographs showing the wedding reception, albums of exhibition installations, and loose photographs of artwork.

The bulk of this series has been digitized, except for blank versos of photographs, blank pages of albums, and duplicates.

Box 2, Folder 7 Bob Thompson, 1951-1965
Image(s): Bob Thompson: 1951-1965
Oversized material housed in Box 4, Folder 2.

Box 2, Folder 8 Bob Thompson in Clinton Street Studio, circa 1960
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 9 Bob Thompson at Rivington Street Studio, circa 1965
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 10 Bob Thompson in Ibiza, Spain, 1963
Image(s)

Box 2 Group Photographs with Friends and Family

Box 2, Folder 11 General, 1951-1965
Image(s): General: 1951-1965
Oversized photograph housed in Box 4, Folder 3.

Box 2, Folder 12 Boat Trip to London, 1961
Image(s): Boat Trip to London: 1961

Box 2, Folder 13 Paris, France, circa 1961
Image(s): Paris, France: circa 1961

Box 2, Folder 14 Ibiza, Spain, circa 1962
Image(s): Ibiza, Spain: circa 1962

Box 2, Folder 15 Album, Personal, 1960-1975
Oversized album housed in Box 4, Folder 4.

Box 2, Folder 16  Album, Wedding Reception, 1960
Image(s): Album, Wedding Reception: 1960

Box 2, Folder 17  Album, Exhibitions (Disbound), 1986-1990
Image(s): Album, Exhibitions (Disbound): 1986-1991

Box 2, Folder 18  Album, Exhibitions (Disbound), 1990-1991
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 1  Album, Vanderwoude Tananbaum Exhibition, 1988-1989
Image(s): Album, Vanderwoude Tananbaum Exhibition: 1999-2000

Box 3, Folder 2  Slides of Detroit Institute of Arts Exhibition, 1999-2000
Image(s): Slides of Detroit Institute of Arts Exhibition: 1999-2000


Box 3, Folder 4  Studio Museum Exhibition, 1978
Image(s): Studio Museum Exhibition: 1978

Box 3, Folder 5  Miscellaneous Exhibitions, 1960-1998
Image(s): Miscellaneous Exhibitions: 1978-1992
Oversized photograph housed in Box 4, Folder 5.

Box 3, Folder 6  Artwork by Bob Thompson, circa 1960-circa 1962
Image(s): Artwork by Bob Thompson: circa 1965-1975
Oversized photographs housed in Box 4, Folder 6.

Box 3, Folder 7  Artwork by Bob Thompson, circa 1963-circa 1966
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 8  Artwork by Others, circa 1960-circa 1966
Image(s): Artwork by Others: circa 1959-1966

Box 4, Folder 2  Oversized Bob Thompson Photographs scanned with material from Box 2, Folder 7, circa 1951-1960

Box 4, Folder 3  Oversized Photograph of Bob Thompson with Family Member scanned with material from Box 2, Folder 11, circa 1952
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 4, Folder 4</th>
<th>Oversized Album scanned with Box 2, Folder 15, 1960-1975</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box 4, Folder 5</td>
<td>Oversized Exhibition Photograph scanned with material from Box 3, Folder 5, 1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 4, Folder 6</td>
<td>Oversized Artwork Photographs scanned with material from Box 3, Folder 6, 1961-1962</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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