



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

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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Walton Family Foundation and the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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Collection Overview

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

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.

Preferred Citation

Bob Thompson papers, 1949-2005. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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.

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"Bob Thompson Happening" (1965) video: Permission to publish, quote or reproduce requires written permission from Joanne Elkin. Contact Reference Services for more information.

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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.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as 7 series.

Missing Title:

- 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
Billiard Place
Bridwell, Margaret
Covi, Dario A.
Crodel, Charles, 1894-1973
Cruz, Emilio, 1938-
David Anerson Gallery
Donald Morris Gallery
Ginsberg, Allen, 1926-1997
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

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1953-2003

0.2 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: 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.

Arrangement: This series is arranged in chronological order.

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

Box 1, Folder 1	Driver Safety Certificate, 1953
Box 1, Folder 2	High School Graduation Program and Boston University Acceptance Letter, 1955
Box 1, Folder 3	Memorial Service and Obituaries, 1966
Box 1, Folder 4	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

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Series 2: Carol Thompson's Correspondence, 1971-2000

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: 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.

Arrangement: This series is arranged alphabetically by name of correspondent.

Available Formats: This series has been digitized in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 8	A, Miscellaneous, 1978-1999
Box 1, Folder 9	Carver Federal Savings Bank, 1996-1997
Box 1, Folder 10	David Anderson Gallery, 1985-1990
Box 1, Folder 11	Donald Morris Gallery, 1978-1980
Box 1, Folder 12	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
Box 1, Folder 16	R-S, Miscellaneous, 1983-1998
Box 1, Folder 17	Thompson, Bessie, 1971-1979
Box 1, Folder 18	T, Miscellaneous, 1989
Box 1, Folder 19	Wilson, Judith, 1983-1998

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Series 3: Writings, 1949-1998

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: 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.

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

Box 1, Folder 20	Church Speeches, circa 1949-1954
Box 1, Folder 21	Letter to the Editor of Louisville Courier Journal, 1955
Box 1, Folder 22	"Today was my everyone day" Poem, circa 1963
Box 1, Folder 23	Artist Statement, 1965
Box 1	Writings by Others
Box 1, Folder 24	Poems by "Ryan", 1960-1961
Box 1, Folder 25	Bessie Thompson Writing About Bob Thompson, circa 1966
Box 1, Folder 26	Tributes by Friends for Memorial Exhibition, 1966-1971
Box 1, Folder 27	Essays About Bob Thompson by Various, circa 1967-1976
Box 1, Folder 28	Carol Thompson Writing About Bob Thompson, 1998

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Series 4: Exhibition Files, 1978-2001

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: 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 1998-1999.

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

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

Box 1, Folder 29	Studio Museum in Harlem - The World of Bob Thompson (1978-1979), 1978-1979
Box 1, Folder 30	California Afro-American Museum - Novae: William H. Johnson and Bob Thompson (1990), 1985-1990
Box 1, Folder 31	National Museum of American Art - Free Within Ourselves: African American Art from the National Museum of American Art (1994-1995), 1976-1992
Box 1, Folder 32	Skoto Gallery - The Elegance of Memory (1996), 1996
Box 1, Folder 33	Whitney Museum of American Art - Bob Thompson Retrospective (1998-1999), 1995-2000
Box 1, Folder 34	Detroit Institute of Arts - Bob Thompson Retrospective (1999-2000), 1999-2000
Box 1, Folder 35	Pacifico Fine Art Gallery - Art on Paper (2001), 2000-2001

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Series 5: Personal Business Records, 1965-2001

0.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: 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.

Available Formats: The bulk of this series has been digitized except duplicates.

Box 1, Folder 36	Art Inventory, circa 1966
Box 1, Folder 37	"Inventory of Paintings Destroyed by Fire", 1977
Box 1, Folder 38	Miscellaneous Loan and Consignment Forms, 1981-1993
Box 1, Folder 39	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
Box 1, Folder 42	Robert Miller Galleries, 1978-1980
Box 1, Folder 43	Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, 1981-1995
Box 1, Folder 44	Wadsworth Atheneum, 1986-2001

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Series 6: Printed Material, 1960-2005

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

Scope and Contents: 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.

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

Available Formats: 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
Box 1, Folder 46	Exhibition Announcements and Brochures, 1970-1989
Box 1, Folder 47	Exhibition Announcements and Brochures, 1990-2005 Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 4, Folder 1.
Box 1, Folder 48	Undated Exhibition Announcements and Brochures, circa 1964-circa 2000
Box 1, Folder 49	Exhibition Catalogs, 1964-1968
Box 1, Folder 50	Exhibition Catalogs, 1969-1973
Box 1, Folder 51	Exhibition Catalogs, 1974-1979
Box 1, Folder 52	Exhibition Catalogs, 1980-1988
Box 1, Folder 53	Exhibition Catalogs, 1990-2001
Box 1, Folder 54	Magazines, 1987-2000
Box 1, Folder 55	News Clippings, 1959-1969
Box 1, Folder 56	News Clippings, 1970-1979
Box 1, Folder 57	News Clippings, 1980-1989
Box 2, Folder 1	News Clippings, 1990-1999
Box 2, Folder 2	News Clippings, 2000-2005
Box 2, Folder 3	Undated News Clippings, circa 1960-circa 2000
Box 2, Folder 4	Postcards, 1974-1999

Box 2, Folder 5 [Posters, 1960-1987](#)
Notes: Oversized material housed in OV 5.

Box 2, Folder 6 [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)

Scope and Contents: 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.

Available Formats: 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 Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 4, Folder 2.
Box 2, Folder 8	Bob Thompson in Clinton Street Studio, circa 1960
Box 2, Folder 9	Bob Thompson at Rivington Street Studio, circa 1965
Box 2, Folder 10	Bob Thompson in Ibiza, Spain, 1963
Box 2	Group Photographs with Friends and Family
Box 2, Folder 11	General, 1951-1965 Notes: Oversized photograph housed in Box 4, Folder 3.
Box 2, Folder 12	Boat Trip to London, 1961
Box 2, Folder 13	Paris, France, circa 1961
Box 2, Folder 14	Ibiza, Spain, circa 1962
Box 2, Folder 15	Album, Personal, 1960-1975 Notes: Oversized album housed in Box 4, Folder 4.
Box 2, Folder 16	Album, Wedding Reception, 1960
Box 2, Folder 17	Album, Exhibitions (Disbound), 1986-1990
Box 2, Folder 18	Album, Exhibitions (Disbound), 1990-1991
Box 3, Folder 1	Album, Vanderwoude Tananbaum Exhibition, 1988-1989

Box 3, Folder 2	Slides of Detroit Institute of Arts Exhibition, 1999-2000
Box 3, Folder 3	J.B. Speed Exhibition - Bob Thompson 1937-1966: The Afro-European Connection (1987), 1987
Box 3, Folder 4	Studio Museum Exhibition, 1978
Box 3, Folder 5	Miscellaneous Exhibitions, 1960-1998 Notes: Oversized photograph housed in Box 4, Folder 5.
Box 3, Folder 6	Artwork by Bob Thompson, circa 1960-circa 1962 Notes: Oversized photographs housed in Box 4, Folder 6.
Box 3, Folder 7	Artwork by Bob Thompson, circa 1963-circa 1966
Box 3, Folder 8	Artwork by Others, circa 1960-circa 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
Box 4, Folder 4	Oversized Album scanned with Box 2, Folder 15, 1960-1975
Box 4, Folder 5	Oversized Exhibition Photograph scanned with material from Box 3, Folder 5, 1960
Box 4, Folder 6	Oversized Artwork Photographs scanned with material from Box 3, Folder 6, 1961-1962

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