



**SMART MUSEUM OF ART**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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

*February 15–May 15, 2022*

**First major survey of Bob Thompson's work in more than 20 years travels to Chicago**  
**Acclaimed exhibition is organized by the Colby College Museum of Art**



The University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art presents ***Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine***, the first museum exhibition dedicated to this visionary painter in more than twenty years. Organized by the Colby College Museum of Art, where it debuted in summer 2021, the exhibition features more than 85 paintings and works on paper. *This House Is Mine* centers Bob Thompson's brief but prolific transatlantic career within expansive art historical narratives and ongoing dialogues about the politics of representation, charting his enduring influence.

Born in 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky, Thompson was recognized during his lifetime for his paintings of figurative complexity and chromatic intensity. Over a mere eight years, from 1958 to his untimely death at the age of 28 in 1966, he developed an enigmatic style that used canonical European paintings as points of departure to create radically inventive contemporary allegories. Human and animal figures, often silhouetted and relatively featureless, populate mysterious vignettes set in wooded landscapes or haunt theatrically compressed spaces. Thompson reconfigures well-known compositions by European artists such as Piero della Francesca and Francisco de Goya through brilliant acts of formal distortion and elision, recasting these scenes in sumptuous colors. As the exhibition also shows, on occasion, familiar individuals appear: the jazz greats Nina Simone and Ornette Coleman, and the writers LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Allen Ginsberg.

*"This House Is Mine* offers a timely reconsideration of Bob Thompson's work," said Stephanie Smith, Interim Director of the Smart Museum of Art. "These captivating paintings reward close looking. Together, the works in this exhibition tell a story about how Thompson drew inspiration from peers across time periods and genres, responded to broader social concerns—and defined a vivid,

unforgettable style. We're also especially pleased to bring this scholarly and accessible look at Bob Thompson's art to Chicago since his work has been admired and collected in the city since the mid-1960s, in part through early shows at the Richard Gray Gallery." The Smart's painting *Herdning of the Coms* (1965), a gift of Richard and Mary L. Gray, is included in the exhibition.

## **EXHIBITION OVERVIEW**

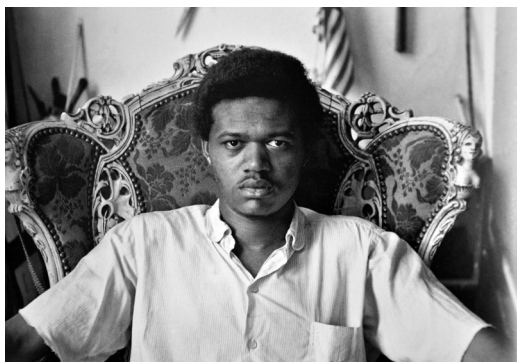
*This House Is Mine* borrows its name from a diminutive but exquisite painting created by Thompson in 1960. With this title, Thompson declared his ambition to synthesize a new visual language out of elements of historic European painting. The exhibition examines both his formal inventiveness and his engagement with universal themes such as collectivity, freedom, bearing witness, struggle, justice and music.



"Thompson's career offers tremendous insight into the aesthetic possibilities available to post-war artists. Faced with the expectation that he, like other Black artists of that era, commit to socially illustrative representation, Thompson instead honed a brilliant and complex figurative style," notes exhibition curator Diana Tuite, who organized the exhibition while at the Colby College Museum of Art. "He brings into relief the unnatural, ideologically constructed, violent—even absurd—conventions underlying canonical Western art, prompting us to see those paintings with fresh eyes, and to examine the exclusion—or conditional inclusion—of artists like himself in certain narratives. *This House Is Mine* highlights the incredible ambition and range of Thompson's work and establishes important connections to historic genealogies, contemporaries, and new generations of artists continuing to press the possibilities of figuration. Artists have always been looking at Bob Thompson."

The exhibition includes work from almost 50 public and private collections across the United States and is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue featuring contributions from scholars, artists, and poets, published in association with Yale University Press. Following the presentation at the Smart Museum, the exhibition next travels to the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (June 18–September 11, 2022) and Hammer Museum at UCLA (October 9, 2022–January 8, 2023).

## **ABOUT THE ARTIST**



Robert Louis (Bob) Thompson briefly studied medicine at Boston University before enrolling in the studio program at the University of Louisville, which had desegregated in 1951. As an art student, Thompson explored the languages of totemic abstraction then in vogue and developed an extraordinary proficiency in academic drawing. He spent the summer of 1958 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he continued his training at the Seong Moy School of Painting and Graphic Arts and forged valuable friendships.

Thompson also encountered the work of the recently deceased German émigré artist Jan Müller (1922–1958), whose figurative style pointed him toward new expressive possibilities.

Thompson soon settled in New York City, where he joined fellow artists Allan Kaprow and Red Grooms in some of their first so-called “Happenings,” multimedia performance events. A devotee of jazz, Thompson frequented downtown clubs such as Slugs’ Saloon and the Five Spot Café, where legendary performers including Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and Charlie Haden played. These musicians materialize in many of Thompson’s paintings and drawings including *Ornette* (Birmingham Museum of Art, 1960–61) and *Garden of Music* (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 1960). This pivotal period was marked by Thompson’s first solo New York City exhibition, and within the next few years his work entered some of the preeminent modern art collections in the United States.

In 1961, Thompson and his wife, Carol, made their first trip to Europe together, spending time in London and Paris and eventually settling in Ibiza. Thompson was able to fully immerse himself in the traditions that formed the core of his practice. While in Spain, he deepened his study of Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), and canvases such as *Untitled* (Colby College Museum of Art, 1962) demonstrate his heady dialogue with *Los Caprichos*, the Spanish artist’s mordantly satirical print series. On a second trip to Europe, the couple settled in Rome, where Thompson died tragically on May 30, 1966, of complications following gall bladder surgery.

Memorial exhibitions at the New School for Social Research (1969) and the Speed Art Museum (1971) celebrated his life and career. In 1998, Thelma Golden and Judith Wilson mounted a foundational scholarly retrospective of his work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. More recently, paintings by Thompson have featured in group exhibitions such as *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, *The Color Line: African-American Artists and Segregation*, and *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. The Estate of Bob Thompson is represented by Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

### **RELATED PROGRAMS**

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Smart Museum will present an array of free virtual and in-person programs, including talks by artists and scholars, hands-on workshops, family days, and performances. A complete list of programs will be posted to the Smart Museum’s website at [smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/calendar](http://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/calendar).

### **VISITING THE SMART MUSEUM**

The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago is free, and open to everyone who can safely visit. Reservations are strongly encouraged. The University of Chicago’s COVID-19 health protocols and precautions apply to everyone on campus, including visitors to the Smart Museum. Beginning in February, guests can make a reservation via Tock by visiting [www.exploretock.com/smartmuseumofart](http://www.exploretock.com/smartmuseumofart). Current protocols will be updated on a regular basis at [smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/visit](http://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/visit).

### *Hours*

Monday: Closed

Tuesday: 10 am–5 pm

Wednesday: 10 am–5 pm

Thursday: 10 am–8 pm

Friday: 10 am–5 pm

Saturday: 10 am–5 pm

Sunday: 10 am–5 pm

This exhibition is open to all invitees who are compliant with UChicago vaccination requirements and, because of ongoing health risks, particularly to the unvaccinated, participants are expected to adopt the risk mitigation measures (masking and social distancing, etc.) appropriate to their vaccination status as advised by public health officials or to their individual vulnerabilities as advised by a medical professional. Public convening may not be safe for all and carries a risk for contracting COVID-19, particularly for those unvaccinated. Participants will not know the vaccination status of others and should follow appropriate risk mitigation measures.

### **ABOUT**

*Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine* is organized by the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, and curated by Diana Tuite. The presentation at the Smart Museum of Art is organized by Jennifer Carty, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art with Orianna Cacchione, Curator of Global Contemporary Art. It will continue its national tour with stops in Atlanta and Los Angeles.

The exhibition is generously supported by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, and the Alex Katz Foundation.

Principal support for the presentation at the Smart Museum of Art has been provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Additional support has been provided by the Museum's SmartPartners.



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### **Images**

Bob Thompson, *Blue Madonna*, 1961. Oil on canvas. 51 1/2 × 74 3/4 in. (130.8 × 189.9 cm). The Detroit Institute of Arts. Gift of Edward Levine in memory of Bob Thompson. © Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York. Photo: The Detroit Institute of Arts, USA / Bridgeman Images.

Bob Thompson, *Garden of Music*, 1960. Oil on canvas. 79 1/2 × 143 in. (201.9 × 363.2 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund. © Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York. Photo: Allen Phillips / Wadsworth Atheneum.

Bob Thompson, *Untitled*, 1962. Oil on canvas. 48 × 36 in. (121.9 × 91.4 cm). Colby College Museum of Art. Gift of the Alex Katz Foundation. © Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York. Photo: Luc Demers.

Bob Thompson in his studio on Rivington Street, NY, c. 1964. © Charles Rotmil.

### **About the Smart Museum of Art**

The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago is a site for rigorous inquiry and exchange that encourages the examination of complex issues through the lens of art objects and artistic practice. Through strong community and scholarly partnerships, the Museum incorporates diverse ideas, identities, and experiences into its exhibitions and collections, academic initiatives, and public programming. The Smart first opened in 1974. Admission is always free.

### **Smart Museum of Art**

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[smartmuseum.uchicago.edu](http://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu)

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