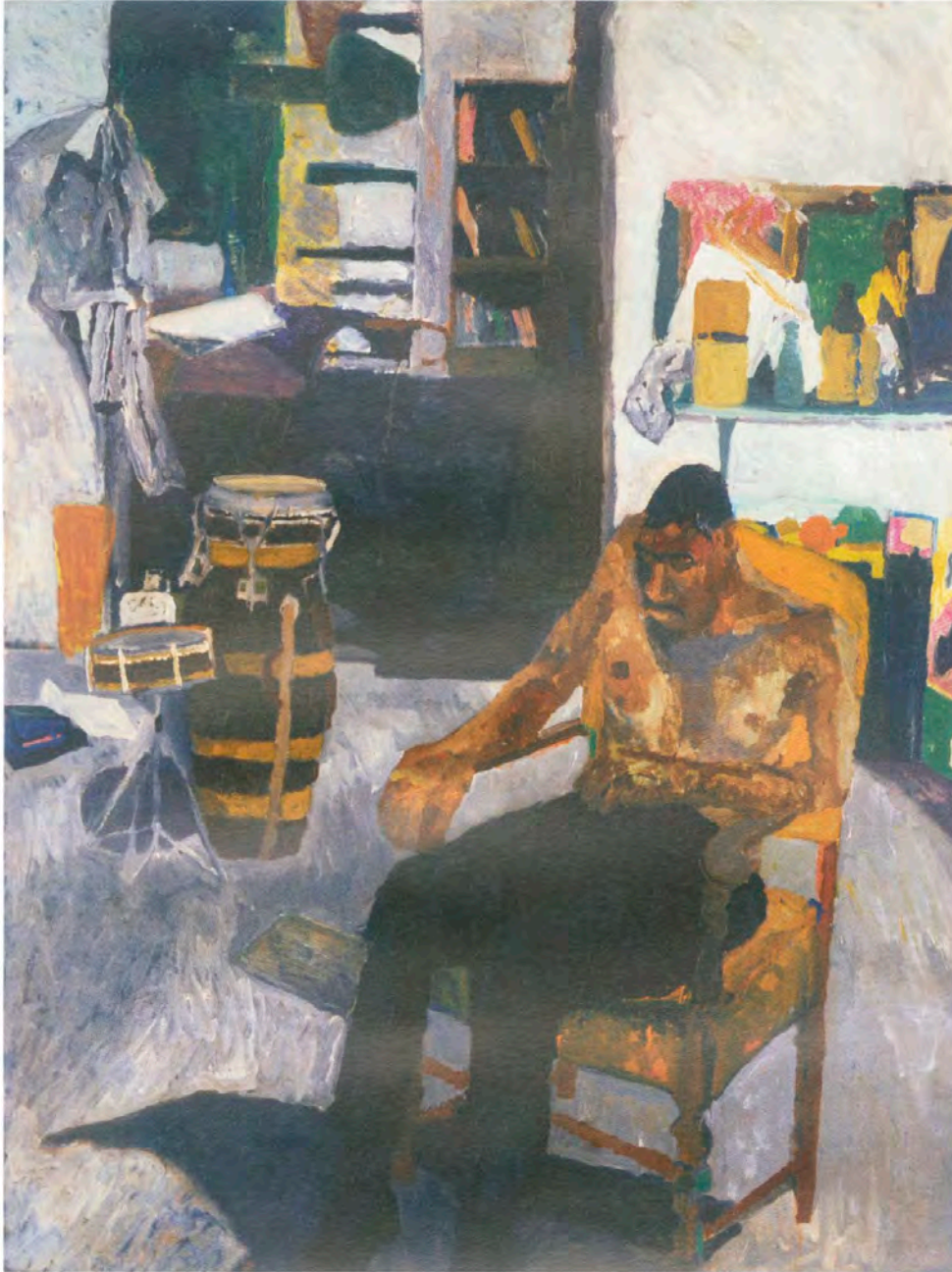


# BOB THOMPSON







SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE STUDIO, 1960; oil on board; 40" x 30" / 101.6 x 76.2 cm

### David Carrier

How can old master painting inspire a gifted modernist artist? The paintings of Bob Thompson (1937–1966) reveal his highly original answer to that question. In the late 1950s and early 60s, when he was exhibiting in New York, the leading American theory of contemporary art laid great stress upon the role of tradition. According to Clement Greenberg, who then was highly influential, modernist painting extended old master visual culture by flattening the pictorial plane. When, finally, no space remained for pictorial content, then painting had to become purely abstract. As a consequence of this formalist theory, Jackson Pollock, so it was claimed, was the sole legitimate successor of Giotto. Agreeing about the importance of visual tradition, Thompson's extraordinary original achievement was, in effect, to turn this way of thinking completely inside out in his figurative paintings. He offers a completely novel vision of modernism.

*Thompson painted his figures with absolutely flat fields of bright high-pitched monochromatic colour. It's as if a steam-roller had pressed them into the landscape backgrounds.*



GARDEN OF MUSIC, 1960; oil on canvas; 78 7/8" x 143 1/2" / 202.9 x 364.5 cm

Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund



Above **TRIBUTE TO AN AMERICAN INDIAN**, 1963; oil on canvas; 63 1/8" x 86 3/4" / 160.3 x 220.3 cm

Below **LE ROI JONES AND HIS FAMILY**, 1964; oil on canvas; 92.5 x 123 cm; 36 1/2" x 48 1/2"; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC



THE SACKING, 1963; oil on canvas; 58 3/4" x 54 7/8" / 149.2 x 139.4 cm

Quoting the old master European artworks he admired, in images frequently entirely lacking in modeling, Thompson painted his figures with absolutely flat fields of bright high-pitched monochromatic colour. It's as if a steamroller had pressed them into the landscape backgrounds. His very literal way of quoting European old master paintings, but with flat modernist figures may sound like an odd technique, but he was skilled enough to bring it off. Thompson was a gifted colourist—his pictures really sing. What, then, was the significance of this very personal way of working? Meyer Schapiro, who was a friend of Thompson, spoke of his aspiration "to a serene classic art like Piero della Francesca's and Raphael's, with large clearly balanced forms. He wished to embody in a grand noble style, but with intense colors an imagery all his own . . ." It's amazing to see that an artist whose sadly short personal life was far from serene had this exalted aspiration. When Thompson quotes Nicolas Poussin in *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* (1965) or in *Echo and Narcissus* (1965), or Dieric Bouts in *The Entombment* (1964), he uses their compositions for his own expressive purposes. It's as if he wanted to put himself (or at least: his art) in direct contact with these old master works. Often he quoted Piero della Francesca. *Queen of Sheba's Vision to King Solomon* (1963) is loosely based upon Piero's image of that scene; *An Allegory* (1964), surely derived from Piero's *Double Portrait of the Dukes of Urbino*, in the Uffizi; and *St. Jerome and the Donor* (1964) based on the Piero of that title, which is in a Berlin museum. And Thompson's *Expulsion and Nativity* (1964), a painting that has to be seen to be believed, quotes Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* from Florence on the left and Piero's *Nativity*, which is in London, on the right. It is an astonishing visual synthesis.

Perhaps, it has plausibly been suggested, Thompson emulated the jazz musicians he knew and admired, who embellished songs to make them their own while preserving traces of the original melody. This would explain his *Garden of Music* (1960), which shows a group of famous jazz musicians, and also *Homage to Nina Simone* (1965). Certainly I would not want to reduce Thompson to a mere appropriation artist, for often he modifies his sources in revealing ways. In his *St. George and the Dragon* (1961) after Tintoretto, for example, he created a marvellous dragon which is all his own.

Aware of his place within the history of painting, Thompson deliberately raids the themes of old masters creating unique compositions, exploiting unusual vibrant color schemes we may only know from Renaissance art, only in order to embed his own contemporary and social references within. What indeed can we make of *Blue Madonna* (1961)—is she a sacred or a profane figure? And what about *Enchanted Rider* (1962-63), which has some affinities with early Chagall? Or *Triumph of Bacchus* (1964), which shows the pagan god accompanied with a giraffe—or is it a dinosaur? Thompson was a true visionary. What then did the old master visual tradition mean to him? That question is not easy to answer.

Had his pictures been painted in 1908, Thompson might have been identified as an eccentric follower of Paul Gauguin or André Derain, a Fauve who took his subjects from the museum. But I should not exaggerate his singularity, for Milton Avery and Alex Katz, who otherwise were very different painters, were also involved with such literal flatness. As it



BOB THOMPSON IN HIS RIVINGTON STREET STUDIO, NEW YORK CITY, c.1965  
Photographer unknown



ADORATION OF THE MAGI (POUSSIN), 1964; oil on canvas; 8 1/8" x 10 1/8" / 20.6 x 25.7 cm; Private Collection

was, Thompson, a highly skilled painter, although out of the mainstream in the 1960s American art world, did exhibit frequently and found some very supportive collectors. And if only he had lived another twenty years, just into early middle age, long enough to see the revival of figurative painting, then he would have fitted right in. Now of course, thanks to the liberating demise of historicist ways of thinking about the history of modernism, we are ready to appreciate fully the marvellously inventive way that he uses intense pure colour to achieve decorative effects. Commentaries on Thompson inevitably place great stress on his role as an African-American working in a hostile environment. As much as this is certainly true and can still be experienced today, as far as I can see, the true relationship between his racial identity and the most distinct visual features of his painting remains hard to pin down. Thompson is a deeply original artist, a man whose remarkable achievement is unparalleled. Even though his oeuvre was limited by his excessive life cut short at age 28, he left us with much to discover. As we try to further our comprehension of his work, he now looks more modern and contemporary than ever.



THE GOLDEN ASS, 1963; oil on canvas; 62 1/2" x 74 1/2" / 158.8 x 189.2 cm

All works © Estate of Bob Thompson;  
 Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Frontispiece **STAIRWAY TO THE STARS**, c.1962; oil and photostat on Masonite; 40" x 60" / 101.6 x 152.4 cm