

Bob Thompson
American, 1937–66
Homage to Nina Simone, 1965
Oil on canvas
H. 48 inches, W. 72 inches
The John R. Van Derlip Fund 89.83



Theme

Many of us find our personal heroes and heroines in athletes, musicians, film stars, or other public figures. Bob Thompson's colorful *Homage to Nina Simone*, painted in 1965, is his personal tribute to the singer whose music affected his life. Because he based the composition on a 17th-century painting by the French classicist Nicolas Poussin, this painting is also an acknowledgment of Thompson's respect for the older artist.

Background

New York City in the 1960s was the world's center for the production of experimental visual arts. Action painting, initially an abstract art movement, had dominated the New York art scene for over a decade, but by the late 1950s, many artists were adapting its expressive and spontaneous qualities to figurative painting. Many of the same young artists also participated in live art performances called Happenings, which challenged all existing definitions of fine art.

New York City was also a center for vanguard music, where jazz greats, including John Coltrane and Thelonius Monk, and younger musicians, like Ornette Coleman and Nina Simone, congregated.

Eunice Waymon, who later changed her name to Nina Simone, was born in 1933 in North Carolina. The sixth of eight children, all of whom sang or played an instrument, she began to

play the piano by ear at the age of six and the organ three years later. Private piano lessons followed, and later she studied at the renowned Juilliard School in New York City.

After four years as an accompanist to other singers, Simone landed her first singing job in an Atlantic City nightclub in 1954. She gained national prominence in just a few years. Though most closely associated with jazz, her songs often incorporate elements of folk, gospel, African, and contemporary music. Dubbed the "high priestess of soul,"¹ Simone has captivated many with her deep rich voice. Over the past 30 years, she has composed 500 songs and made 56 albums.

Homage to Nina Simone

Bob Thompson's *Homage to Nina Simone* celebrates the rhythms of avant-garde jazz and exhibits his admiration for Simone's music, which he undoubtedly became familiar with in New York during the early 1960s.

The flattened figures—adults and children—relax, dance, and play, creating a comfortable atmosphere charged by the bright, intense colors and swirling clouds. In spite of this energetic environment, Thompson creates an underlying sense of calm by carefully arranging the figures into triangular groups. The standing, seated, and reclining figures on the left form one triangle, and the central group forms another. Other triangles appear throughout, in the bushes, in the mountains, and in color patches on the ground. Changes in color throughout the landscape form strong horizontal lines, which are balanced by the vertical lines of the figures and tree trunk.

This stable composition, which initially may seem at odds with the subject of music and merrymaking, owes a great deal to a 17th-century painting, *Bacchanale—The Adrians*, by Nicolas Poussin, which Thompson had studied at the Louvre museum in Paris. Thompson frequently borrowed compositions from artists he admired, transforming and infusing them with his own personal meanings. He made no apologies for this since he found in the masters pleasing complex structures that gave him the basis from which to create his pure and simple images.

In this case, Poussin's picture of a bacchanal, a riotous celebration in honor of the classical wine god, Bacchus, might have roused in Thompson a spirit similar to his feelings when listening to Simone's music. A blue-clad woman strumming her guitar in Poussin's painting inspired the rich blue vision of Simone playing guitar in the center of Thompson's homage.

Though this painting closely resembles Poussin's in composition, Thompson's freedom with color and loose brushwork, most visible in the sky and grass, make it uniquely his own. It is through the color that one truly understands the artist's subjective response to the music of his own time. Thompson's style emphasizes the physical activity of painting itself. The varied paint surfaces—thin, thick, and variegated—enable us, in some degree, to recreate the artist's process.

¹ Eileen Southern, *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 340.

Artist

Bob Thompson developed an enthusiasm for music, especially jazz, as a young boy in Louisville, Kentucky. Born in 1937, he was raised in a close family. Upon graduating high school, Thompson went to Boston University on a full scholarship, with the intention of eventually studying to be a doctor. But his desire to be an artist led him instead to take classes in Louisville in 1957 on an art scholarship. At the time, Louisville was a center for progressive jazz as well as for the visual arts. Thompson, along with other black artists, formed an artists' group, which they later dubbed Gallery Enterprises. They actively partook in live painting performances and poetry readings.

Thompson spent the summer of 1958 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he made contacts with other figure painters and performance artists. These contacts led him to New York City's Lower Eastside, where he moved in 1959. There he associated with progressive musicians, artists, and avant-garde poets. He achieved unprecedented success for a young black painter in New York; collectors sought his work and he became affiliated with the influential Martha Jackson Gallery. Presumably to keep up with his rather wild lifestyle and the physical demands of painting, Thompson turned to drugs and alcohol. He died in 1966 at the early age of 29, having already created over 1,000 works of art.