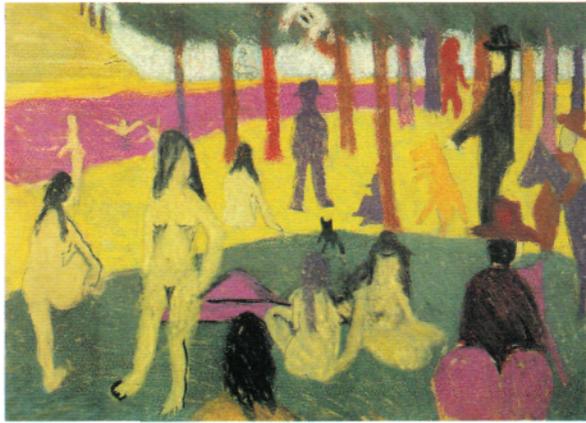


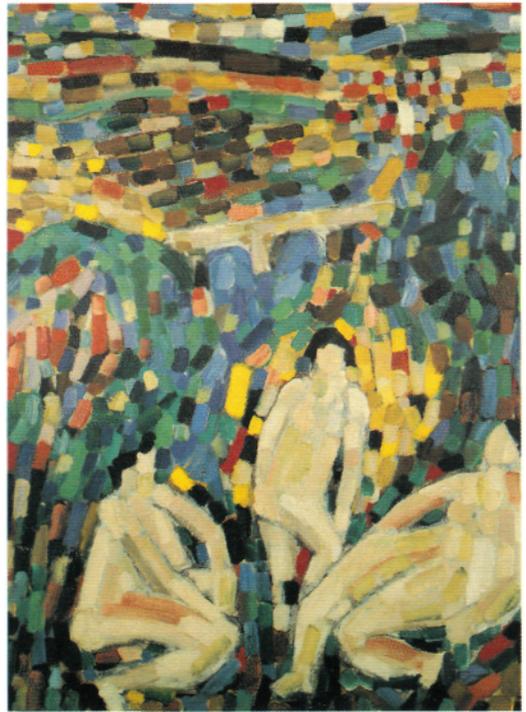
*Search for the Unicorn:
Paintings by Jan Müller and Bob Thompson*





Above: BOB THOMPSON *Untitled* (after Seurat/Manet), c. 1960.
Pastel on paper, 18 x 24 in.

Right: JAN MÜLLER *Untitled (Three Figures in Landscape)*, c. 1952–54.
Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in.



The Pastoral Idylls and Bacchanales of Jan Müller and Bob Thompson

April Kingsley

IN THE 1950s PROVINCETOWN was a hotbed of artistic activity, primarily due to the presence there of Hans Hofmann's famous art school, whether or not one actually studied with him. Shack studios could be rented for very little, and there were plenty of evening jobs available in the town's many restaurants. That left the days for painting and the nights for partying, both of which were accomplished with tremendous gusto. Nude bathing in the woods' ponds at night or on the beaches in the daytime, sunset horseback rides in the dunes, wee hours revelry in Provincetown's bars and shadowy backyard gardens, drinking and trying other ways to alter consciousness—all combined to provide artists with a reality that readily translated into fantasy when put on canvas.

When Jan Müller spearheaded the movement toward the figure and away from Hofmann's emphasis on abstraction, nudes in the landscape—pastoral

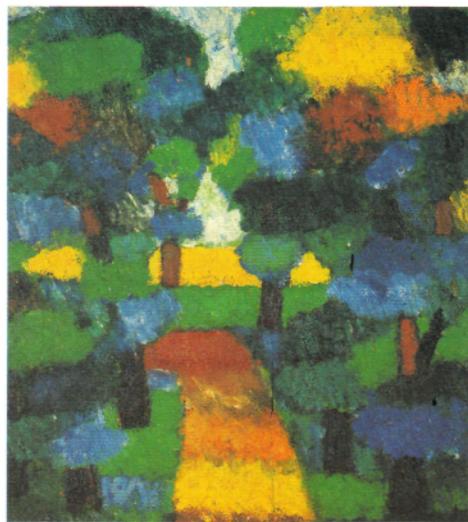
idylls—supplied the necessary level of abstractness (apparent unreality) to ease the way. Many who were influenced by Müller, or were on parallel paths themselves, used the same vehicle. Robert Beauchamp, Selina Trieff, Bill Barrell, Sherman Drexler, Jay Milder and Mary Frank come to mind, but the artist who was ultimately closest to Müller was Bob Thompson, even though they never met. It was in the air—artists believed in gestural honesty, but they wanted to paint something real.

Three paintings in the exhibition mark Müller's shift from abstraction to idyll: *Mosaic*, 1952, completely abstract and optically activated according to Hofmann's spatial push/pull principles; *Untitled (Two White Figures on Mosaic Ground)*, 1953–54, in which the figures are in an indeterminate abstract setting; and *Untitled (Three Figures in Landscape)*, 1952–54, where mosaic forms the figures and dissolves into patches of blue and green foliage. (In one telling instance a year later, Müller painted a landscape with a Provincetown house on the back of an abstraction probably painted between 1945 and 1950 when he studied with Hofmann.)

After 1954, which is also the year Müller had an operation to replace a diseased valve in his heart with an artificial mechanism, he concentrated on landscapes which are informed by Hofmann's teachings and German Expressionism, such as the two *Autumn Groves*, or he painted figures in landscapes based on literature and classical themes, such as the Rape of Europa. *The Bible*, *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, and *Faust* were favorite sources of imagery. Even when they are not nocturnal scenes, the way he depicts the white fleshed females is as if they are about to be sacrificed or misused, especially when they are in situations where men on horseback dominate. Sex and danger are implied. One of his favorite subjects is the myth of the unicorn, a fabulous creature which can only be captured when it lays its horn in the lap of a virgin. *The Great Hanging Piece* of 1957, the year before he died, with its Jawlensky-like heads, glaring red eyes, and women, mounted on the backs of other women jousting with

men on horseback, is painted, like so many of his works, on rough wood panels. The lack of preciousness was a genuine solution to the high cost of art supplies, but it was also characteristic of a driven artist, aware with every click and clack of his plastic heart valve, that time could not be wasted.

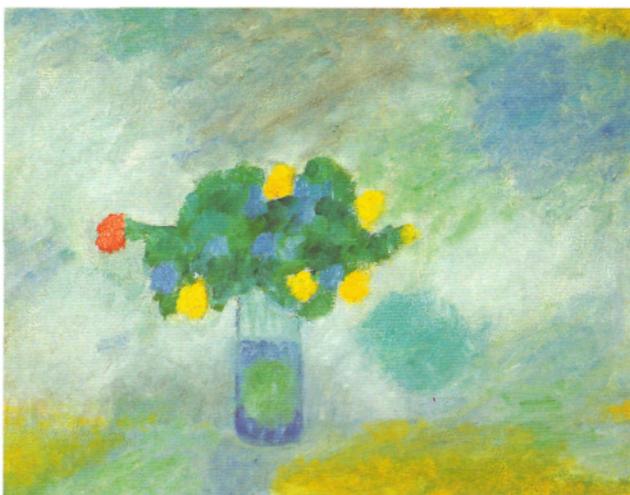
Bob Thompson was, if anything, even more fiercely driven than Müller, in his art as well as in his pursuit of life experiences. Seeing himself as the visual equivalent of the jazz musician, he lived that lifestyle while appropriating the musical form's techniques. But in the beginning, which happened in Provincetown in the summer of 1958 after Jan Müller died, Thompson found a passionate way out of art school abstraction in the expressionist figurative style Müller



Above: JAN MÜLLER *Grove, Autumn*, 1955.
Oil on wood, 11½ x 10½ in.



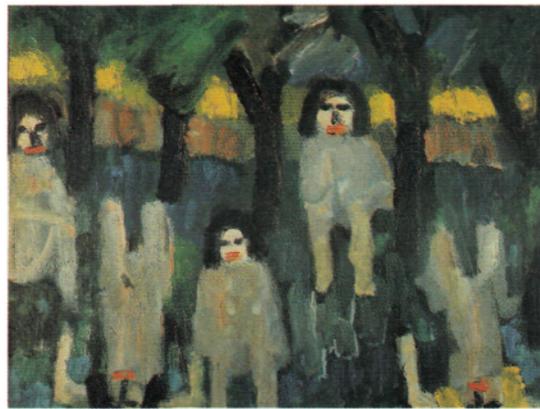
Above, right: BOB THOMPSON *Search for the Unicorn*, 1960. Mixed media, 25½ x 39½ in.



Right: JAN MÜLLER *Where the grey light meets the green air*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 22 x 28 in.



BOB THOMPSON *Rider*, 1958. Oil on canvasboard, 18 x 24 in.



JAN MÜLLER *Les Girls (Study for "Five Virgins")*, 1957. Oil on canvasboard, 7 1/4 x 9 1/2 in.

had forged there, in conjunction with those of Gandy Brodie and Lester Johnson who were also important participants in the local art scene. The somber darks of *Jan Müller's Funeral*, while appropriate to the subject, are reminiscent of both Brodie and Johnson. Hatted figures thickly painted in black are trademark Johnson, but Thompson makes them completely his own by 1960. Stand-ins for himself, they drift through the paintings, observing brightly colored bodies coupling. Brodie's influence can more readily be seen in *Search for the Unicorn*, 1960, with its misty grays.

In New York in the early 1960s, now thoroughly versed in Müller's work through his friendship with Jan's wife Dody, Thompson's style crystallized into flat, cookie-cutter shaped figuration acting out fantastical adventures on stages preset by the old masters. The paintings of Robert Beauchamp, who turned Provincetown parties into Walpurgis nights, and the imaginative hybridizations of Thompson's pal Jay Milder, both probably played a role in his development at this point as well, but heeding Dody Müller's advice to keep looking at the old masters had a profound affect. It allowed him to make visual jazz. A composition by Poussin or Seurat, Manet or Piero della Francesca was as familiar as a popular song, and therefore just as usable as a base from which to go off on his own riffs, jazz style, and then return to for the comfort of recognition, like a friendly face. *Untitled*

(after Seurat/Manet), c. 1960, utilizes at least the former's *Afternoon at the Grande Jatte* and the latter's *Luncheon on the Grass*, if not other paintings as well. Thompson could take all the liberties he wanted with his material because it was so strong and well worked out already.

Whereas violence was intimated in some Müller canvases, it is overt in many of Thompson's. Women flee, stretch their arms out in panic, are grabbed, even tackled in Thompson's bacchanales. Men on horseback swoop into a crowd of nudes and carry one off, dogs attack, and there is even a blue lion in one fray. The artist's nightmares of monsters and monster birds disturb the bucolic joys of life in Provincetown as it was vicariously or actually experienced. Massacres and mass rapes in the art of the past come into play as well, offering structures into which Thompson can insert his many colored figures.

Jan Müller (1922–1958) and Bob Thompson (1937–1966), a German immigrant and an African American from Kentucky, both died tragically young. They played hard, but they painted even harder, and as a result they were able to find their separate, though superficially similar, ways to retain the painterly gesture of Abstract Expressionism and give a new dissonantly modern sound to an old tradition: figure painting.



BOB THOMPSON *Jan Müller's Funeral*, 1958. Oil on board, 36 x 42 in.



PHOTO: TOM HANNAN

JAN MÜLLER

Selected Public Collections

The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
 The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
 Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY



PHOTO: CHARLES ROTMIL

BOB THOMPSON

Selected Public Collections

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
 Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
 Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
 The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
 Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
 National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
 The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

Search for the Unicorn

PAINTINGS BY

Jan Müller (1922–1958)

AND

Bob Thompson (1937–1966)

November 3, 1999 to January 8, 2000

Reception: Wednesday, November 17th, 6 to 8 p.m.

EXHIBITION HOURS: TUESDAY–SATURDAY 10:30 TO 5:30

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COVER:

JAN MÜLLER *Phantom Riders (Study for "Search for the Unicorn")*, Summer 1957.

Oil on canvasboard, 8½ x 11½ in.

BOB THOMPSON *Untitled (Nude and Dogs)*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 16 x 21 in.