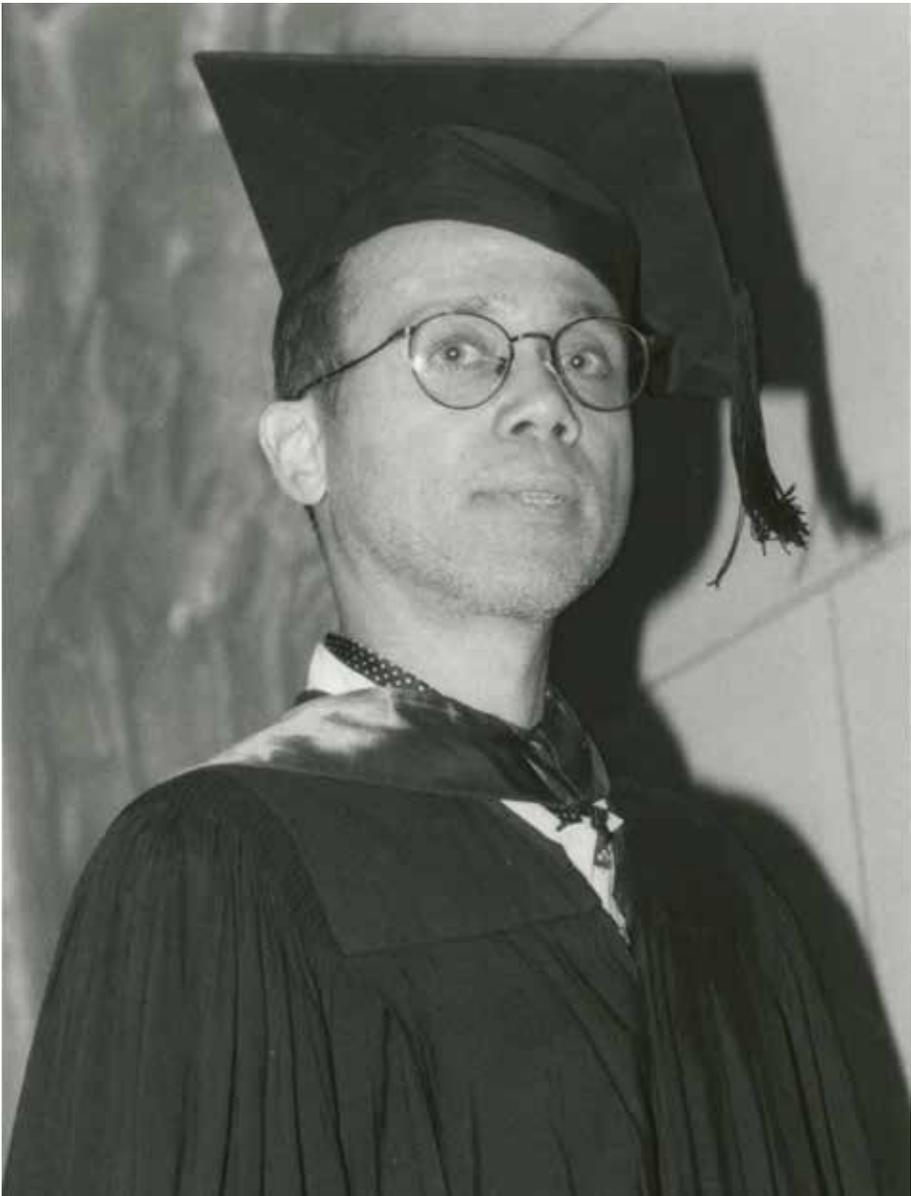


In the Library

The Evans-Tibbs Archive of
African American Art

January 21 – April 12, 2019

National Gallery of Art



The Evans-Tibbs Archive of African American Art

In the Library: The Evans-Tibbs Archive of African American Art features reference materials compiled by art appraiser, broker, collector, and dealer Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. The items in this exhibition represent a small sample of the archive Tibbs began building in the late 1970s upon opening his eponymous gallery in Washington, DC. As a gallerist and advocate for African American art in Washington, Tibbs worked to create opportunities while also fortifying a network for a growing community of artists and collectors. For two decades he organized exhibitions featuring both internationally renowned and local African American artists. To support his research, Tibbs amassed more than a thousand reference files comprising more than seventy boxes of material documenting art of the African diaspora as well as the social history of African Americans and racism in the United States. Tibbs opened up his reference collection, now commonly known as the Evans-Tibbs Archive, to artists, students, and scholars. The Evans-Tibbs Archive arrived at the National Gallery of Art Library in 2015 following the dissolution of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, its previous repository. The archive includes clippings, correspondence, gallery records, insurance appraisals, photographs, slides, posters, pamphlets, and other ephemera. *In the Library: The Evans-Tibbs Archive of African American Art* documents Thurlow Evans Tibbs's legacy as a Washingtonian, art collector, and de facto librarian.

Tibbs was the son of Thurlow Evans Tibbs Sr. and Elizabeth (Moore) Tibbs, and the grandson of opera singer Annie Lillian Evans Tibbs, known professionally as Madame Lillian Evanti. He spent his formative years living with his parents and his grandmother in Lillian Evanti's childhood home at 1910 Vermont Avenue NW.

Situated in Washington, DC's historic U Street Corridor, the Victorian row house was built in 1894 and purchased by the Evans family in 1904. During the 1920s and 1930s, Madame Evanti transformed her home into an informal salon and gallery to showcase her ever-expanding collection of art. She was personally acquainted with several of the artists whose work she acquired, including Henry Ossawa Tanner, whom she met while she was performing in Paris.

Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. returned to the family residence after earning a bachelor's degree in the history of art from Dartmouth College in 1974 and a master's degree in urban planning from Harvard University in 1976. Following his grandmother's lead, he acquired more than six hundred works of art during the 1970s and once again transformed the house on Vermont Avenue into a gallery for the Evans-Tibbs Collection. Around the same time, Tibbs began collecting articles, books, clippings, exhibition catalogs, and other resources that would form the archives of the Evans-Tibbs Collection.

Tibbs's mission was twofold: to engage the Washington community in the arts and to secure a prominent place for art of the African diaspora within the canon of Western art history.

"I want to provide options for art historians and writers when they start their revisionary studies. And they will. In the 1990s all the periods of American art are going to be reanalyzed and recalculated. There needs to be material so that they can say, 'Oh here's an artist who was working in the 1960s. He wasn't covered before but he's pretty good. Maybe we should put him in our anthology this time.'"¹

Tibbs's initial focus when building the archive was to collect materials pertaining to individual artists. Exhibition brochures, catalogs, and magazine and newspaper articles were placed in each artist's file; artists' resumes, correspondence, photographs, and slides were also included. In addition, Tibbs collected an astonishing amount of material documenting exhibitions and institutions featuring African American art in the United States. The scope of the archive expanded to include dissertations and periodicals about the history of art and American history, as well as posters depicting art, cultural events, exhibitions, and poetry. The archive also served as the repository for correspondence concerning the Evans-Tibbs Collection and records of Tibbs's work as an art appraiser and collector.

Surrealism and the Afro-American Artist (1983) was the first widely reviewed and well-received Evans-Tibbs Collection exhibition. The show highlighted Tibbs's ingenuity by juxtaposing pieces from artists working earlier in the twentieth century — such as Hector Hyppolite, Hughie Lee-Smith, and Archibald John Motley Jr. — alongside works by Gail Shaw Clemons and Yvonne and Curtis Tucker as examples of a new generation of artists reshaping surrealist art. Equally revolutionary, in the 1980s the Evans-Tibbs Collection held exhibitions exclusively featuring the work of African American women artists. These exhibitions encompassed a range of styles and media, from the paintings of Margaret Burroughs to the etchings of Sharon Sutton.

By 1989 the Evans-Tibbs Collection had garnered national recognition. The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) partnered with the Expansion Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the District of Columbia Humanities Council to present *African American Artists 1880–1987: Selections from the Evans-Tibbs Collection*. The exhibition traveled to twenty museums in the United States over three years (1989–1992) and featured the work of fifty-five artists, including Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Hughie Lee-Smith, Betye Saar, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and James Van Der Zee.

1 Jane Addams Allen, "ThurLOW Tibbs: A Man with a Mission," *Washington Times*, July 30, 1985.

Tibbs was remarkably successful, forging professional and personal relationships with artists, fellow collectors, libraries, museums, and universities. Principal among them were David C. Driskell, Dr. Harmon Kelley and Harriet O'Banion Kelley, Guy McElroy, Howardena Pindell, the Anacostia Community Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the DuSable Museum, and Howard University. As a sought-after art professional, Tibbs received numerous letters of introduction, resumes, reference requests, and samples of work from African American artists throughout the United States. Tibbs spent the whole of his career engaging with the arts community as both consultant and confidant, while simultaneously building his important art collection and archive.

In 1996, Tibbs bequeathed thirty-three works of art, including paintings, drawings, photography, mixed media, sculpture, and the archive, to the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The gift succeeded in preserving the legacy of the Evans and Tibbs families and ensured that part of the Evans-Tibbs Collection would remain permanently in Washington. Upon receiving the gift, the Corcoran Gallery presented Tibbs with the Corcoran Medal of Honor. This prestigious award recognized the donation, as well as Tibbs's own dedication and achievements on behalf of African American art and artists spanning nearly three decades. The following year, Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. passed away unexpectedly at the age of forty-four.

All objects are from the National Gallery of Art Library, Evans-Tibbs Collection, Gift of Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr.

Checklist



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1 *Washington Star Pictorial Magazine*, newspaper clipping, May 2, 1954

This clipping features Elizabeth Moore Tibbs, mother of Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., attending a tenth-anniversary celebration of the Barnett-Aden Gallery. Elizabeth Tibbs was a librarian as well as an avid art collector.

2 Evans-Tibbs Collection, exhibition flyers and catalogs, 1981–1985

Schroeder Cherry, acrylic paintings, and *Julee Dickerson*, foam rubber collage (March 19, 1981); *Louis Delsarte: Dreams and Fantasies* (April 5–May 3, 1981); *Margaret Burroughs, Marion Perkins: A Retrospective* (September 18–November 30, 1982); *Lev Mills: Master Printmaker, Constructionist* (September 28–October 31, 1984); *The Art of Collage* (Fall 1985)

3 Evans-Tibbs Collection, advertisement in *Art in America*, date unknown

This advertisement promotes the three main functions of the Evans-Tibbs Collection: commercial gallery, nonprofit museum, and research library. In addition to his work as a gallerist, Tibbs painstakingly compiled a collection of (often obscure) reference materials which now comprise the Evans-Tibbs Archive.

4 Evans-Tibbs Collection, *Surrealism and the Afro-American Artist*, exhibition catalog, 1983

This catalog represents the first critically acclaimed Evans-Tibbs Collection exhibition featuring African American and African Caribbean artists. Tibbs juxtaposed mediums and styles from throughout the twentieth century.



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5 Guy C. McElroy, *African-American Artists, 1880 – 1987: Selections from the Evans-Tibbs Collection*, exhibition catalog, 1989

This publication advertises an exhibition sponsored by SITES that traveled to twenty museums in the United States over three years (1989 – 1992) and featured the work of fifty-five artists, including Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Hughie Lee-Smith, Betye Saar, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and James Van Der Zee.

6 Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial Museum, Black History Month, announcement, 1981; Office of the Mayor, *Ebony Impressions and Expressions: A Time Capsule*, announcement, 1981

These announcements for Black History Month celebrations in Washington, DC — both featuring local artists and works from the Barnett-Aden Collection — document the contributions of Barnett-Aden and other black-owned galleries to the Washington art community. Such announcements are a particular strength of the Evans-Tibbs Archive.

7 Paul Simon, correspondence with Thurlow E. Tibbs (personal letter), 1990

In this letter, Illinois senator Paul Simon solicits Tibbs's expert input on the recent legislation of the National African American Memorial Museum Act. The bill was one step in the long journey to build what is now the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

8 *Blacklight* (featuring articles by Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr.), magazine issues, 1981 – 1982

In the 1980s Tibbs served as arts editor of *Blacklight*, a Washington-based publication serving the local African American gay community. Tibbs frequently contributed articles on collecting African American art.

9 Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., “Famed artist, 89, dies in his native Chicago,” newspaper clipping, 1981; Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., draft of Archibald John Motley Jr. obituary, 1981

Tibbs wrote this obituary for Archibald John Motley Jr. for an unidentified newspaper. A scholar of Motley, Tibbs collected and exhibited a number of his works. The two men met in person the year before the artist's death.

10 Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., correspondence with Theresa Woodruff (personal letter), 1981; Theresa Woodruff, correspondence with Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. (personal letter), 1981

Correspondence between Tibbs and Theresa Woodruff discussing the work of her late husband, Hale A. Woodruff, and plans for an exhibition held by the Evans-Tibbs Collection.

11 Betye Saar, “Temple for Tomorrow,” *Smithsonian American Art Journal*, clipping, 1994; Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, *The Art of Betye Saar & John Outterbridge*, exhibition announcement, 1994; Maïca Sanconie, letter to Betye Saar, 1993; Nielsen Gallery, *Mildred Howard*, exhibition announcement, 1994; Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., correspondence with Alison Saar, letter, 1986; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Alison Saar: Fertile Ground: Art at the Edge*, exhibition announcement, 1994

Tibbs was an important link in a vibrant network of artists, collectors, and other art-world personalities. Not only was Betye Saar an artist Tibbs collected and exhibited, she also contributed items to the Evans-Tibbs Archive and encouraged other artists to send Tibbs material. Saar sent him copies of her own exhibition catalogs, information about programs of interest, and an article she wrote about James Hampton. At Saar's suggestion, the sculptor Mildred Howard mailed Tibbs an announcement for her show at the Nielsen Gallery in Boston.

At the encouragement of Betye Saar, Tibbs reached out to her daughter and fellow artist, Alison, in a relatively formal letter. By contrast, Alison Saar signed her announcement for her show at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts with a friendly “Yo, Thurlow, Happy New Year, Alison.”



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12 Howardena Pindell, artist file, mixed materials, 1980s

Artist Howardena Pindell spearheaded a mail campaign aimed at identifying and addressing the lack of diversity in gallery and museum collections. She wrote to Tibbs with some regularity, updating him on the project as it progressed. In addition to these personal letters and an exhaustive collection of ephemera from her own artistic career, Pindell's file contains a resource packet the artist compiled and sent to art institutions nationwide, listing the names and contact information of artists of color and the galleries representing their work.

13 Mr. Imagination, *Sample of Mr. Imagination Art Materials*, sandstone, bottle caps, paint brush, comb, postcard, 1994; Carl Hammer Gallery, *The Eye Stands for Mr. Imagination: New Works*, exhibition announcement, 1993

A self-taught artist from Chicago, Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack) earned international renown for the creations he made from pieces of industrial sandstone, bottle caps, paint brushes, and other salvaged items.² “Mr. I” visited Tibbs in Washington and gifted him a sample of these materials; he also included some of his tools, such as the plastic comb seen here.

² “Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack),” Smithsonian American Art Museum, americanart.si.edu/artist/mr-imagination-gregory-warmack-5849.

14 Leroy Person, *The Redbird Poems* by Robert Lynch, cover art, 1980s

Poet and folk-art collector Robert B. R. Lynch (born Larry O’Neal Lynch) gave Tibbs this volume of his poetry with original cover art by Leroy Person.³ A self-taught artist from North Carolina, Person is known in part for the crayon drawings he produced in his final three years (1982 – 1985).⁴

15 Edmonia Lewis, *How Edmonia Lewis Became an Artist*, pamphlet, c. 1870

A rare photogravure leaflet published by Lewis as a kind of press kit for the promotion of her sculpture. While brief, the eight-page advertisement continues to be a crucial source of biographical information about the artist.

16 William Fry, *Baltimore Directory for 1810* (Joshua Johnson entry), city directory, 1810

Rare Baltimore city directory containing data entry for famed portraitist Joshua Johnson (born c. 1763, active 1796 – 1824). A former slave, Johnson made a career as a limner and portrait painter — the earliest documented African American to do so professionally. Municipal records have been a key resource for biographers of the artist, about whom much remains unknown.

17 *Newsweek*, “The Negro in America” and “What the White Man Thinks of the Negro Revolt,” magazine issues, 1963

While Tibbs was primarily devoted to documenting African American art specifically, his collecting expanded to items related to American history more generally. Two full issues of *Newsweek* capture a shift in national conversations about race. In 1963, the magazine conducted two consecutive surveys of race relations in the United States. “The Negro in America” (July 29) was billed as the “first definitive national survey” of the attitudes and experiences of black Americans. A follow-up poll (October 21) addressed the opinions and biases of white Americans.

³ Guide to the Robert Lynch papers, 1963 – 1989, Cornell University Library Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, rnc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07320.html.

⁴ Paul Arnett, “Leroy Person: Chipping Away,” Souls Grown Deep Foundation, www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/leroy-person.



Checklist of the exhibition *In the Library: The Evans-Tibbs Archive of African American Art*, January 21 – April 12, 2019. © 2019 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Brochure text written by Vada D. Komistra and Anna C. Tomlinson.

For more information please visit nga.gov/exhibitions/2019/evans-tibbs-archive-of-african-american-art.html.

front cover *Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr.*, National Gallery of Art Library, The Evans-Tibbs Collection, Gift of Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr. **back cover** Evans-Tibbs Collection, exhibition flyers and catalogs (detail), 1981 – 1985

