

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



FRANCES EUPHEMIA THOMPSON (C. 1900-1992)

Artist and educator Frances Euphemia Thompson was born in Spring Hill, Tennessee, and studied in the United States and Europe. With a career spanning over five decades, she was named one of the "greatest influences on Tennessee African-American visual arts."¹ Thompson's education began at the Agricultural and Industrial Normal School (now Tennessee State University) where her instructor, Olive Giovanna Talieferro, encouraged her to continue her artistic training at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. After graduating with honors in 1923, Thompson returned to Nashville to begin her long career at Tennessee A&I teaching, creating art, and promoting art education. She served as the art department director, a professor of art beginning in 1944, and professor emeritus beginning in 1974.

In the 1930s, with an increasing interest in art as an educational tool, Thompson returned to the Massachusetts College of Art to study. In 1936, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Art Education. Following her return to school, Thompson applied for a Rosenwald Fellowship to continue her studies in art and art education in Czechoslovakia. These fellowships were available through the Julius Rosenwald Fund for both black and white southerners who wanted to research a topic related to the South and planned to work in the region following their fellowship. Thompson's application was accepted and she left for Prague, Czechoslovakia, in September 1937 to study the folk art of middle Europe at Charles University. Thompson visited Sweden, Denmark, Germany, England, and France. While in Prague, she stayed at a student dormitory run by the Protestant church, visited museums, learned Czech silver-smithing and lacemaking, lectured on art and art education, and performed recitals of African-American folk songs and spirituals. The German military action that preceded World War II forced Thompson to leave Europe earlier than anticipated; however, her fellow-

ship and study in Czechoslovakia remained a pivotal experience in her life.

Thompson returned to her teaching position at Tennessee A&I following her European fellowship. After three years, she enrolled at Radcliffe College in Boston to earn a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in education and fine arts and graduated in 1945. She once again returned to Nashville to accept a professor position and spent the rest of her career at Tennessee A&I, where she directed the art department and taught. In 1943 the Tennessee State Department of Education published her book, entitled *Art in the Elementary Schools, A Manual for Teachers*.

In addition to teaching, Thompson helped organize and participated in the "Faculty Breakfast Group," an intercollegiate group made up of faculty members from Tennessee A&I and the other historically black colleges in Nashville--Meharry Medical College and Fisk University. The cooperative organization held discussions and lectures on a variety of topics related to higher education and scholarly fields. Thompson was also a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the Gaiete de Coeur Art Club, and the National Art Education Association. Throughout her life, she remained an active club member, church member of First Baptist Capitol Hill, artist, teacher, speaker, and writer. Her speeches and writings combined her philosophy on art, religion, and education. She saw art as a media for expression. In 1974, she observed,

Education should aid the realization that art expression touches all of life's objective functions. It always has, and I believe it always shall. Art sometimes is not beautiful. According to known standards of beauty it is often ugly. But whichever it is accorded to be, it must be right. And right means order, harmony, proportion, balance, rhythm and emphasis.²

Thompson took private commissions for paintings and sculpture working in a variety of media, including oils, polymers, water colors, German pastels, gesso, gold silver, enamels, wood, bone, and plastics. She painted murals, portraits, and landscape scenes. She exhibited her work at TSU, the Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk, the Parthenon in Nashville, the Massachusetts College of Art, and Harvard University. Thompson also designed baptistry murals for many churches, including the Progressive Baptist Church in Nashville, the Ramsey Street Church of Christ in Nashville, her own First Baptist Church Capitol Hill, the Indianapolis Metropolitan Baptist Church, the Fairfield Baptist Church in Nashville, and the Antioch Baptist Church in Nashville. Her baptistry paintings in the Fredonia Baptist Church in Haywood County, First Baptist Church East Nashville, and the First Baptist Church in Gallatin depict scenes of flowing water in a natural landscape. Thompson also demonstrated her commitment to faith-based art by illustrating church literature for over fifty years for the Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board in Nashville.

Her commissions came from many prominent people in Tennessee and outside the South. Some of her portraits included attorney J. C. Napier, Meharry Medical College doctor C.W. Johnson and his staff, Dr. and Mrs. William Crump from Washington, D.C., Dr. and Mrs. Charles Nobles from Baton Rouge, and Dr. Elsie Lewis Makel of New York City. She designed two-dimensional sculptures on the facades of four Tennessee State University buildings--Memorial Library,

Educational Agriculture, Health, and Physical Education--for the Nashville architectural firm of McKissack and McKissack. Her other work with the firm for the college included mosaic floor designs for the library and Physical Education buildings.

In the 1970s, the Alumnae Association of her alma mater, Massachusetts College of Art, named the college's art gallery and a minority scholarship after her. Unfortunately, when the school moved the gallery in 1986, her name was not retained on the gallery. The scholarship has since been absorbed by a more general one.

Thompson was a contemporary and friend of the prominent Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas (1898-1979). From New York, Douglas came to Nashville in 1940 to start an art department at Fisk University, where he taught for almost thirty years. Both Thompson and Douglas represent the increasing stature of African-American visual artists within the art community. Whereas Douglas has received national recognition for his paintings and his role in providing blacks with art education opportunities, Thompson's work is relatively unknown as an artist and art educator. More research is needed to fully document her career. However, her legacy can still be seen in her public art in churches and on the TSU campus, which includes the current school seal that she designed for Tennessee A&I in 1922.

--Leslie N. Sharp

¹ Aaron Douglas, Thompson's friend and contemporary, was also named by George Ridley, Jr., in "Visions of My People," *Contemporaria Magazine* (31 January 1998): 12. Additional information for this Profile was obtained from the Tennessee State University archives.

² In 1974, the Tennessee State University Women's Club sponsored an exhibit of Thompson's work. As a part of the opening, Thompson spoke on her philosophy of art. Frances E. Thompson papers, Tennessee State University archives, Nashville, Tennessee.