



# Dox Thrash

and the "Poetry of the Artist's Own People"

Matthew F. Singer

A son of sharecroppers, Dox Thrash was born in 1893 and raised in a former slave cabin outside the town of Griffin in rural Georgia. The second of four children, he was raised primarily, perhaps solely, by his beloved mother, Ophelia. Throughout her adult life, Ophelia Thrash worked six to seven days a week as a housekeeper and cook for a white family named Taylor while providing materially and spiritually for her own children.

In an unpublished autobiography Thrash wrote in 1960, he said of his childhood: “I liked to draw . . . also adventure in the woods mostly by myself. I was especially fond of kites and swimming. As an older boy, I did not have much schooling, but I learned what education I have from reading books, listening to conversation

and traveling.” Economic necessity required Thrash to leave school after the fourth grade and work to help support his family.

Thrash’s early life as a wage earner ranged from time spent as a farmhand in cotton fields to performing on vaudeville stages. All the while he studied art through correspondence courses. “I always wanted to be an artist, even when I was touring the plantation circuit in a dance-and-patter act with a fellow named Whistling Rufus,” Thrash wrote.

The straitened circumstances of Thrash’s youth are attributable to the infinite, unyielding restrictions that constrained him in the American South at the height of Jim Crow. Later, in the North, he was confronted by racism that, while

less legally codified, was also all-pervasive and punishing. Despite this, Thrash—driven

by talent and will—stayed the course over decades to forge an unequivocally successful path as an academically trained artist who garnered national acclaim.

Although his previous formal education ended well before high school, Thrash graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC). Later, he continued his studies, focusing on printmaking at the Graphic Sketch Club in South Philadelphia, now the Fleisher Art Memorial.

For Thrash, like most other African Americans born into the exploitations of sharecropping and the strictures of Jim Crow, life in the southern countryside was an impoverished and imperiled existence in which comfort and meaning were found within the Black church, home and community. Long after moving north and establishing himself as an artist, Thrash’s memories of his childhood served as creative inspiration. There is a sense of

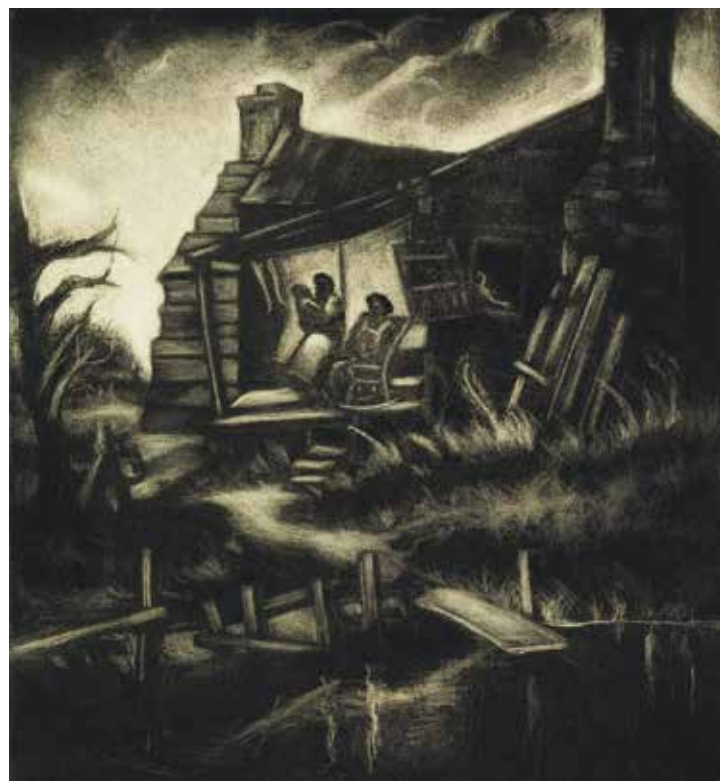


*Sunday Morning* (c.1939, etching) is believed to depict Thrash’s beloved mother, Ophelia. Despite working as many as seven days a week keeping house and cooking for a white family, Ophelia insisted on church on Sundays for herself and her children.

Philadelphia Museum of Art (Purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund, 1941)

*Opposite*, Dox Thrash was a celebrated oil painter and watercolorist, but he is best known as a master printmaker who coined the carborundum mezzotint process. He achieved this breakthrough while working at the Philadelphia Fine Print Workshop, an initiative of the New Deal Federal Art Project.

Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell, Philadelphia



*Cabin Days* (c.1938-39, carborundum mezzotint and etching) reflects Thrash’s childhood home—a former slaves’ cabin—in rural Griffin, Georgia, which he left at age 15. He led an itinerant existence for many years and may have returned to Griffin, but no such visits are documented. Nonetheless, memories of Georgia inspired Thrash throughout his career.

Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell, Philadelphia



appreciative, even nostalgic, affection in memories of the South that Thrash made material, but they are not idealized. Poverty is imprinted in his images of sagging cabins and the exhausting rigors of endless work in the fields and at home.

Thrash remembered and showed that life for African Americans in the South was, as well, a life permeated by incessant threat and near-constant violence. Between 1908 and 1911—the years in which Thrash, though only a teenager, transformed himself from a child living at home to a self-supporting man on his own nearly 800 miles away—225 African Americans were lynched by their white neighbors.

### The Open Road, Chicago and World War I

Thrash left home in 1908 at age 15 and, in keeping with his childhood penchant for adventure and solitude, journeyed into what seems to be an intentionally itinerant existence. He arrived in Chicago in 1911, drawn to the city by his “ambition to be an artist.” He continued his correspondence courses, studied with private tutors, and eventually began part-time education at AIC. Work as an elevator operator for the American Bank Note Engraving Co. financed his life and studies.

The United States entered World War I in 1917 and Thrash enlisted in the U.S. Army in September of that year. He fought on the frontlines in France as a private in the all-Black 92nd Division, 183rd Brigade, 365th Infantry Regiment. Thrash was gassed and wounded in the final hours of the Great War, causing shell shock. During



*Monday Morning Wash* (c.1938–39, color carborundum mezzotint), inspired by Thrash’s childhood memories, evokes daily life for African American sharecroppers in Griffin and throughout the rural South—an existence marked by grueling work in the fields and the constant demands of time-consuming chores necessary to maintain home, hearth and family.

Philadelphia Museum of Art (Purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund, 1941)

his recovery at a military hospital in France, he revived his vaudeville act for the sake of entertaining the troops.

Thrash continued in vaudeville after returning to the U.S. in spring 1919, performing on the Plantation Circuit before resuming his studies at AIC in the 1920s. His Army pension allowed him to enroll as a full-time student.

Adventure called to Thrash once more after graduating from AIC: “I was lured back to the open road, hobo-ing, working

part the time on odd jobs. Such as, bell boy, dining car waiter, private car porter, massager in bathhouses, black face comedian in carnivals, small town circuses, and vaudevilles. With the idea of observing, drawing and painting the people of America, especially the ‘Negro.’”

Thrash lived for periods in Boston and New York City’s Harlem neighborhood, then blooming into the cultural capital of Black America. In 1926 the peripatetic nature of his life came to a sudden end, one that Thrash seemed to not fully expect or intend: “[I] departed from New York, for another cross-country journey but didn’t get any further than Philadelphia, and have remained here ever since.” He worked in a bathhouse and began studies at the Graphic Sketch Club.



*After the Lynching* (late 1930s, carborundum mezzotint) shows Thrash’s use of dramatic Old Masters-inspired composition and lighting to create a parallel between the lynching’s victims and the crucifixion of Jesus. In the century-long era of Jim Crow in the South following the Civil War, African Americans were deprived of the right to vote and were restricted in how and where they could learn, work and live. Lynching was the era’s ultimate oppression and an ever-present threat.

Philadelphia Museum of Art (Gift of Fern and Hersh Cohen, 2015)



In 1937 Thrash wrote of his experience working in the Federal Art Project's Fine Print Workshop: "My work in this department has been shown every consideration, and I am writing this letter in appreciation for the aid given and beneficial results I have obtained therefrom." In this circa 1940 photograph by Myron "Mike" Krasney, Thrash is shown working with his colleague Claude Clark.

Philadelphia Museum of Art

### **Making a Home and a Name in Philadelphia**

Thrash lived and worked in Philadelphia from 1926 onward. A 1929 Philadelphia directory listed him at 2409 Columbia Avenue (now Cecil B. Moore Avenue) in the Sharswood neighborhood (comprising Brewerytown, Fairmount and Strawberry Mansion) of North Philadelphia and working as a janitor. A poster Thrash designed in spring 1930 for the Second Annual National Negro Music Festival, held at Philadelphia's iconic Academy of Music, is evidence of his growing success as a commercial artist and his emerging presence in Philadelphia's African American arts and cultural community.

In October 1931, at age 38—nearly 20 years after beginning his formal studies in

Chicago—Thrash made his Philadelphia debut as a fine artist in a two-day exhibition at the Southwest Branch of the YWCA. Evelyn Reynolds, a friend of Thrash's and a society reporter for the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Philadelphia's leading African American newspaper, reviewed the show, writing that Thrash "is certainly deserving of commendable mention, for his work showed keen talent and versatility. . . . Many of the city's smarter set were seen sipping tea and enjoying this young artist's works in oil and water paints at his recent exhibit."

Thrash emerged as a particularly bright light in a momentous era of cultural activity for Philadelphia's long-established and then-burgeoning Black community,

which grew dramatically at the end of World War I and continued through the 1960s. This was the era of the Great Migration of African Americans—from the rural South to northern cities—searching for greater economic opportunities and escaping from rampant violence, persecution and disenfranchisement.

By the mid-1930s Thrash had established his own sign-painting business at the nearby funeral home operated by Evelyn Reynolds and her husband, Hobson. Thrash lost his mother, Ophelia, in 1936. That same year, a friend introduced him to Edna McAllister, a talented dressmaker whom Thrash married in 1940 after a four-year courtship.

In 1935, at the depth of the Great Depression, Thrash was hired as a printmaker in the newly established Federal Art Project (FAP), a New Deal program sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to keep artists employed. It was in FAP's integrated and progressive Fine Print Workshop that Thrash and fellow artists Hugh Mesibov (1916–2016) and Michael Gallagher (1898–1965)—of Eastern European Jewish and Irish descent, respectively—invented a new printmaking technique called the carborundum mezzotint process. It was the first new printmaking technique invented since the German playwright Alois Senefelder introduced lithography in 1796.

**“The Beauty Which Prejudice and Caricature Have Overlaid”**

Of the carborundum technique, Thrash wrote, “no other medium will allow an

artist to so clearly reproduce actual textures of skin coloring or permit him to impart so great a luminosity to his finished print.” Ron Rumford, the current director of Philadelphia’s Dolan/Maxwell Gallery, which has collected and represented Thrash’s work since the 1980s, notes that the “prints made with the carborundum mezzotint technique are softly modeled with a smoky, velvety texture. Scraping and burnishing the plate draws forth the defining light that heightens form. The density of the blacks Thrash established in his prints feels literally and metaphorically a perfect means to express the way he saw the American landscape and its people.” The process fit and furthered Thrash’s commitment to “observing, drawing and painting . . . the ‘Negro.’”—to depict Black Americans with dignity, physical honesty and emotional acuity.

There is a stillness to Thrash’s subjects, as if they experienced the rare instance of being seen as an opportunity to conserve and restore the personal energy otherwise sapped by their daily lives. Their faces are those of people alert but reserved and introspective. Their aspects convey melancholy, wariness, fatigue—yet they are resolute. Imbued with the artist’s empathy, Thrash’s images are powerfully expressive and redolent of the specifics of individual lives and communal experience. Samuel Putnam, a writer for the *Daily Worker*, observed in 1945, “*Saturday Night*, depicting a Negro girl curling her hair beside the cook-stove . . . is as strong in drawing and composition as any of the great moderns and in addition is filled with the poetry of the artist’s own people.”

Thrash’s body of work testifies to his interest in depicting Black women with honor, respect and care. In her essay in the



*Pensive Woman* (1940s–1950s, watercolor on beige watercolor paper) is one of the many portraits Thrash created during his career. As art historian Kymberly Pinder has written, “Thrash is deservedly well known for the striking portrait heads he made, which bestow individuality and dignity on his sitters. He would have been aware of the need to counteract the negative representations of African Americans.”

Philadelphia Museum of Art (Purchased with the Gertrude Schemm Binder Fund, 1996)



*Second Thoughts* (c.1939, aquatint and etching) reflects Thrash’s overarching commitment to depicting Black life fully and truthfully. He had a pronounced gift for capturing his sitters’ complicated interior lives as conveyed through facial expressions. The subject of this moody study is thought to be one of his neighbors.

Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell, Philadelphia



catalog that accompanied the 2001 Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibition *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, art historian, curator and university administrator Kymberly N. Pinder wrote, “Thrash’s sensitivity to issues concerning African American women . . . is also present in his many nudes. . . . The virtual absence of the black nude in American art before the 1970s makes Thrash’s work extremely important. His repertoire of nudes is greater than those of the few other African American artists who dared to tackle the exposed black body.”

Whether working in print, watercolor or paint, Thrash depicted the faces and bodies of Black women and men and plumbed their material circumstances, psychological depth, cultural breadth, and sociological, economic and political realities, as well as their communities, as he

witnessed them in Philadelphia and remembered them from his Georgia childhood. He conveyed the individual character of present and past family, friends and neighbors and the built and natural environments—the neighborhoods and surroundings—that they shaped and which, in turn, shaped them.

#### Critical Acclaim, National Reputation

Thrash’s achievements were celebrated by luminaries such as the Philadelphia-bred, Harvard-educated writer, philosopher and art patron Alain Locke (1885–1954), who taught philosophy at Howard University from 1912 to 1953. Thrash had copies of Locke’s books and came to correspond with him. In his profoundly influential 1925 book *The New Negro*, Locke declared an imperative need—“art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid”—that Thrash

identified as his artistic *raison d’être* and *modus operandi* from the inception of his career. In 1939 Locke described Thrash as “one of our most skillful technicians” in printmaking.

In 1941 Locke organized *We Too Look at America: A National Exhibition of Negro Art* as the inaugural exhibition of the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago. Locke included nine works by Thrash in the show, more than any other artist.

In the final chapter of his seminal *Modern Negro Art*, published in 1943, Howard University professor and African American art historian James A. Porter (1905–70), states that he “purposely reserved until the last . . . the exceptional art of Dox Thrash of Philadelphia.” He goes on to write that “the sporadic efforts of the Negro artist in the graphic arts have borne extraordinary fruit at last in the remarkable work of Dox Thrash.”



*Woman in Blue, Waiting* (1940s, watercolor) may be a companion piece to *Saturday Night*. Here a young woman—stylishly dressed and coiffed for a night out—awaits her evening’s company. Her face is placid but her upturned left foot suggests tension—maybe that of impatience.

Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell, Philadelphia



*Saturday Night* (c.1942–45, etching) is, according to John Ittmann, the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s longtime curator of prints, “a charming vignette . . . [that] shows a hairdresser curling her own hair late at night after the last customer has left.”

Philadelphia Museum of Art (Purchased with the Katharine Levin Farrell Fund, 1997)

Given Locke and Porter’s involvement with the school, Howard University fittingly presented the largest exhibition of Thrash’s career. *Exhibition of Graphic Arts by Dox Thrash: Etchings, Aquatints, Lithographs, and Carborundum Prints* presented 30 works making clear his mastery of wide-ranging mediums.

**The Sharswood Renaissance, the Pyramid Club and a New Residence**

Dox and Edna Thrash were active figures in the dynamic cultural awakening of Philadelphia’s African American community, a renaissance centered in North Philadelphia’s Sharswood neighborhood. Thrash established himself in Sharswood in his earliest years in the city and remained there for the rest of his life. What we might call the “Sharswood Renaissance” of the 1920s through the 1940s paralleled, and in some ways exceeded, the celebrated Harlem Renaissance of African American literature, theater, visual art, music—jazz was the soundtrack of this renaissance and Sharswood was hopping with jazz clubs—and all forms of creative and intellectual expression.

At the center of this rebirth was the Pyramid Club, founded in 1937 with a mission to uplift individual African American lives and the entirety of

Philadelphia’s Black community by serving and promoting critical economic, social and cultural needs. The names given to the club and its rooms—including the Alexandrian Court, Cleopatra’s Boudoir, Suez Salon, Pharaoh’s Temple Gallery, and Oasis Gallery—evoked ancient Egypt and the achievements, contributions and potential of African and African Diaspora civilizations.

The Pyramid Club quickly became the leading gathering place for Philadelphia’s Black professionals. So great and immediate was its success that it reopened in December 1940 in a spacious mansion at 1517 West Girard Avenue. Having studied design and mural painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, Thrash created decorative schemes for the club’s elegant interior spaces and produced its graphics.

The Pyramid Club grew rapidly into the preeminent nexus for showcasing and engaging with leading currents in the city’s cultural and creative communities. It was home to Philadelphia’s only Black-owned and -operated public spaces for art. Its exhibitions featured work by both African American and white artists. Humbert Howard, the Pyramid Club’s art director, said of this approach: “It was an idea of integration. It was the growth of living together. . . . You didn’t have to make any

excuses, you just painted well and you were selected.”

Thrash was the first artist invited to join the Pyramid Club, an invitation he accepted with characteristic enthusiasm and intensity. His close, hands-on involvement with the club continued unabated through the late 1950s. The Pyramid Club nurtured Thrash’s career, offering a venue where his work was regularly exhibited, where he met other artists and curators as well as critics, scholars and influential civic leaders. The Pyramid Club’s middle- and upper-class membership would acquire and otherwise support Thrash’s art.

The May 1944 issue of *The Crisis*—the magazine of the NAACP, founded by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1910—focused on and celebrated Philadelphia’s Black community and its cultural contributions, saying, “many of them out-rival the oft-touted achievements of Harlem.” In a roll call of the city’s creative luminaries, Thrash was singled out with particular commendation for having “won an international reputation.”

Also, in 1944 Dox and Edna Thrash purchased 2340 Columbia (now Cecil B. Moore) Avenue, a house with a storefront on the first floor in which the previous owners operated a dry-goods shop. Thrash maintained ownership of his previous home, using it as a studio.

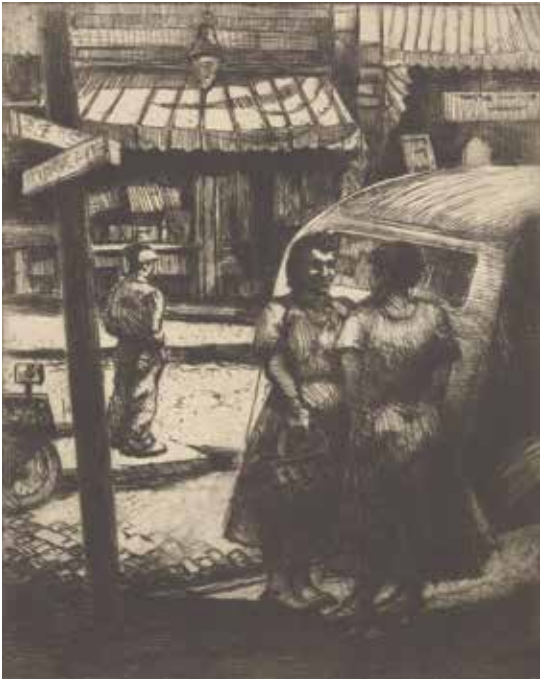


*Nude Model, Seated, First Version* (c.1946, etching), like Thrash’s many portraits of women, suggests close, careful study and respectfulness in representation. He was one of few artists at the time who identified the Black female nude as a subject worthy of depiction.  
Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell, Philadelphia (Lent from a Private Collection)



*Glory Be* (c.1941-42, carborundum mezzotint and etching) uses dramatic light and shade akin to the work of European Old Masters. Here, Thrash captured a memory from his rural Southern childhood of a prayer service vibrant with impassioned expressions of love and praise for the divine.  
Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell, Philadelphia





*Twenty-Fourth Street and Ridge Avenue* (c.1937-39, etching) captures a moment of street life from Thrash's neighborhood, showing two women catching up companionably amid awninged storefronts.  
Federal Works Agency, Works Projects Administration, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

## World War II

With the entry of the U.S. into World War II late in 1941, the Federal Arts Project directed its artists to devote their talents to the war effort. A World War I veteran and “super patriot” (as described by his colleague Claude Clark Sr.), Thrash was among the first to answer this call, including documenting the contributions of African Americans working in war-time industries on the home front, in addition to designing pamphlets and printed materials.

Thrash himself pursued such work, attempting to apply for a job as an insignia painter in the airplane department of the Philadelphia Navy Yard in May 1942 after leaving the Fine Arts Workshop, which was winding down its activities (with the war effort sparking massive growth in employment that rendered the WPA unnecessary, the Federal Art Project was abolished in December 1942). Thrash's application was refused before he could submit it. In a complaint sent by Thrash to the Fair Employment Practice Committee in Washington, D.C., he wrote of his treatment, “I was informed that this job was not available for members of my race. . . . It was also stated to me that it made no difference whether I was a veteran or not. . . . [I] am

writing you this to say that I am vitally interested in the outcome of this war. . . . I want to serve in the capacity for which I am best fitted. . . . I shall expect to at least be given a chance to compete with others for this job.”

Despite this protest, and Thrash's deeply felt commitment to his country and professional capabilities, he was not given a chance. Nevertheless, he succeeded in contributing to the national cause with work at a Delaware shipyard.

### Thrash Retires, North Philadelphia Struggles

After the war, Thrash worked as a house-painter for the Philadelphia Housing Authority. In 1951 he returned to France for the first time since World War I, immersing himself in contemporary European art. Thrash retired from his job with the Philadelphia Housing Authority in 1958. In 1959 he and Edna sold their



*Houses* (c.1950, ink and acrylic on cardboard) was created many miles and years from the humble homes of Thrash's native town of Griffin. He nevertheless echoes his renderings of the rural Georgia cabins. The buildings in this decidedly Northern urban setting appear to lean into one another like weary friends sharing mutual support.  
Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell, Philadelphia

home to Muhammad Ali Hasan, an activist and minister of the National Muslim Improvement Association of America. Sharswood and all of North Philadelphia were growing into centers for the Civil Rights movement.

Edna and Dox moved to Flamingo Apartments, a high-rise building at 1220 North Broad Street, around the corner from the Pyramid Club. In the earliest years of the 1960s a rift developed between the Pyramid Club's founding generation and newer members. The club also began to face challenges in collecting membership dues. In April 1963 the IRS padlocked the Pyramid Club for failure to pay some of its taxes.

In late August 1964 riots erupted in North Philadelphia following incidents of police brutality. Journalists and the overwhelmingly white Philadelphia Police Department escalated their rhetoric asso-



ciating North Philadelphia with crime and violence. Government subsidies preferential to whites facilitated their flight to the suburbs. Formal covenants barred African Americans from moving outside historically Black neighborhoods, while “redlining” practices blocked lending in African American neighborhoods, placing a stranglehold on investment in sections like Sharswood, which grew increasingly impoverished.

On April 19, 1965, Dox Thrash died of a heart attack. Committed to art and community to the end, he was in a taxi, coming home after judging a poster competition at an elementary school. Services were arranged at the funeral home owned by his longtime friend Hobson Reynolds. Thrash is buried in the United States National Cemetery in Beverly, New Jersey.

### A Legacy Lost and Rediscovered

During his lifetime, Thrash’s work was featured in solo exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History and Howard University in Washington, DC;

and in Philadelphia at the Graphic Sketch Club/Fleisher Art Memorial and Philadelphia Art Alliance. He was represented well in group survey exhibitions—mostly focused on work created by the Federal Art Project or the latest developments by African Americans in art or printmaking—at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) in Philadelphia; Baltimore Museum of Art; M. H. De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; Library of Congress, Washington, DC; and the Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City. His hometown Free Library of Philadelphia and Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library of Congress, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Baltimore Museum of Art acquired Thrash’s work, often including extensive representative selections of his prints.

Despite critical acclaim and being widely exhibited and collected, Thrash’s public profile began to dim during the final decade of his life. Some of this can be attributed to changes in sensibilities in the world of art. Although distinguished, even

unique, in subject matter and emotional resonance, Thrash’s work fit comfortably within Social Realism and Regionalism, the prevailing currents in American art in the 1930s, which post-World War II innovations such as Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art rendered out of fashion among critics, galleries and collectors. Certainly, however, the lack of Black representation in the mainstream of American art contributed to the eclipse of Dox Thrash. After his death, Edna Thrash

endeavored, not always successfully, to place her husband’s work at museums, schools, and other public educational and cultural institutions, or even with friends and family.

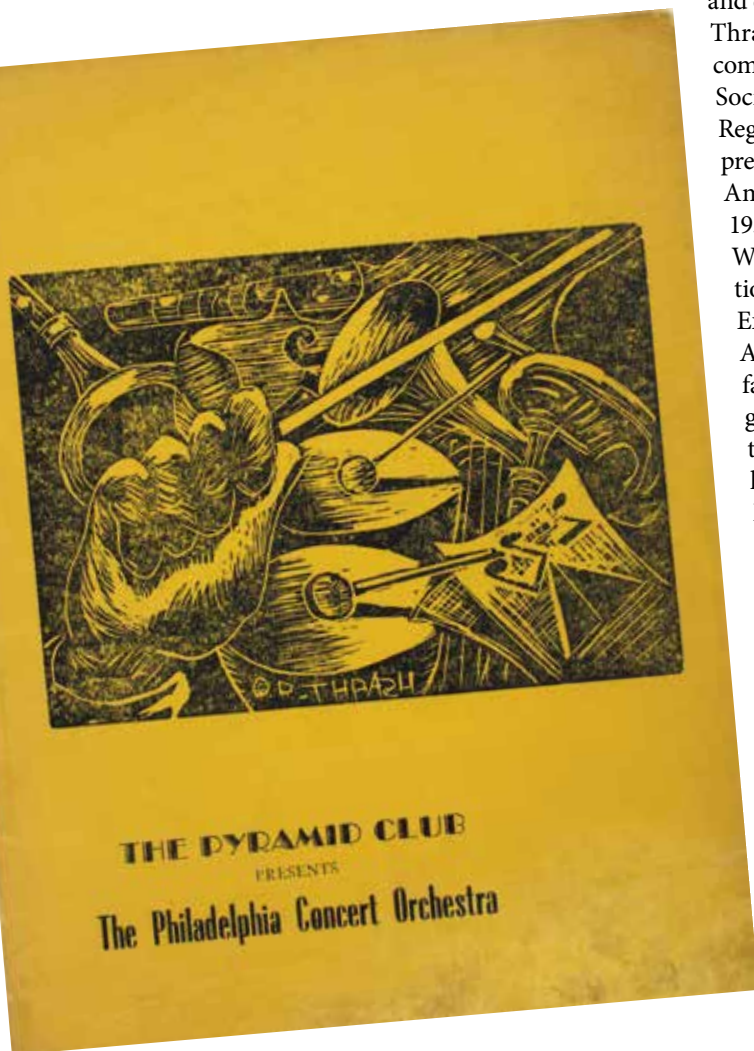
This oversight of Thrash’s legacy first came to be rectified in the 1980s, as a group of scholars and curators at galleries such as Dolan/Maxwell and the Philadelphia Museum of Art began new investigation and appreciation of his work.

In 2001 the Philadelphia Museum of Art—in an effort spearheaded by John Ittmann, its longtime curator of prints—organized the retrospective exhibition *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, which traveled to the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago and was accompanied by a book that continues to stand as the most in-depth monograph devoted to Thrash’s life and art and the catalogue raisonné of his prints. The museum’s website ([philamuseum.org](http://philamuseum.org)) is home to the wonderfully informative and illustrated online resource *Dox Thrash: Revealed*.

Most recently, the exhibition *Dox Thrash: An American Journey* was co-organized by Georgia College Museum of Art and Dolan/Maxwell in 2014 and traveled to the Asheville Art Museum in North Carolina that same year and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, in 2015. Another exhibition, *Dox Thrash, Black Life, and the Carborundum Mezzotint*, was presented in 2018 at the Palmer Museum of Art, Penn State University; in 2019 at Syracuse University and Fort Wayne Museum of Art; and in 2020 at the Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, New York (also online at [hydecollection.org/exhibition/january-19-march-22-dox-thrash](http://hydecollection.org/exhibition/january-19-march-22-dox-thrash)).

Looking forward, the African American Museum in Philadelphia is scheduled to present an exhibition of more than 60 works by Thrash from September 2023 to January 2024.

The Dox Thrash House at 2340 Cecil B. Moore Avenue was nominated in 2013 by the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia as a historic landmark regis-



Thrash worked in the applied arts of graphic design and illustration as well as the fine arts of painting and printmaking. This lively woodcut titled *Arrangement of Musical Instruments (Horns and Drums)* illustrates a program for the Philadelphia Concert Orchestra at the Pyramid Club (c.1952), testifying to the centrality of music in the vibrant Black cultural life that bloomed in Northern cities generally—and Philadelphia, specifically—in the first half of the 20th century.

Philadelphia Museum of Art (Gift of Ron Rufford, 1999)



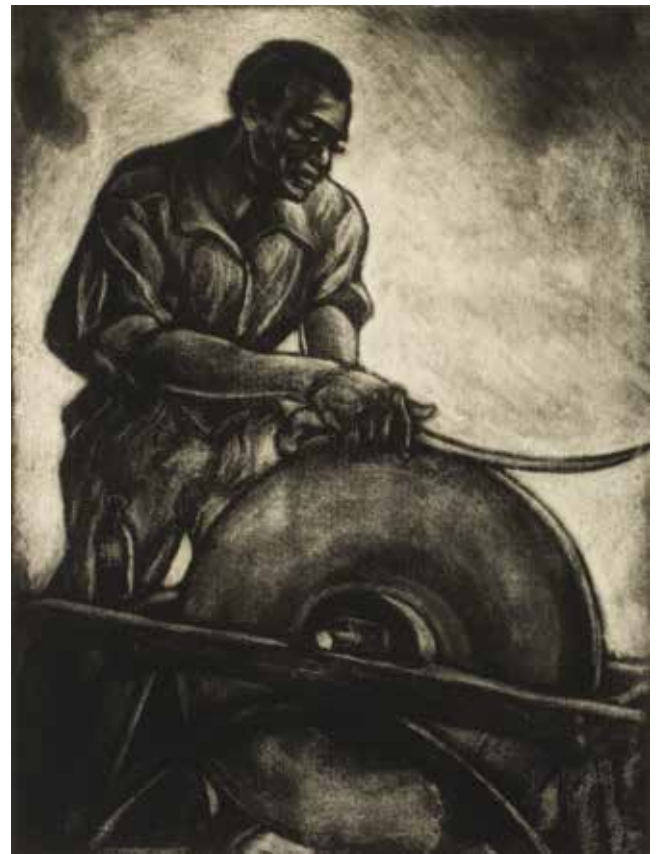
The Dox Thrash House at 2340 Cecil B. Moore Avenue in Philadelphia is today the last element in the “built environment” testifying to Thrash’s life and legacy.

*Photo by Michael Bixler*

tered by the City of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The house had been vacant since the 1990s and fell into disrepair because of neglect and more overt action. In 2016 University of Pennsylvania historic preservation graduate students Maya Thomas, Dana Rice and Chris Mulford, who were studying the Philadelphia Housing Authority’s plans to renew Sharswood as a mixed-income neighborhood, launched the Dox Thrash House Project ([doxthrashhouse.wordpress.com](http://doxthrashhouse.wordpress.com)). Its mission is to save and restore the house and repurpose it as an arts-based community center for a once-vibrant neighborhood now without any venue for cultural offerings. Thomas, Rice and Mulford, their colleagues, and hundreds of supporters have made important strides in that effort. Through a crowd-sourced campaign, the project has raised the funds needed to purchase the house. In April 2021 the City of Philadelphia and

Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency awarded nearly \$600,000 in grants to the Thrash House project, which is expected to cover three-quarters of the cost to restore and remake it into a mixed-use community anchor.

The Dox Thrash House—and of course Thrash’s art—testify to the flowering of African American arts and culture that bloomed and spread outward from Sharswood from the 1920s through the 1940s and the Civil Rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s. Fortunately, visionary individuals and organizations are stepping forward to secure and promote the Thrash House, Sharswood and Dox Thrash’s legacy. Their work is promising—and will become more so as interested others join the causes. The lessons and inspirations represented by Thrash and all of Black life in Philadelphia from the first half of the



*Grinding, or Grinder* (c.1940, carborundum mezzotint) is an example of Thrash’s images that correspond to the Social Realist approach to art that emerged during the Great Depression and continued through World War II. Social Realist artists focused on the realities of working-class life, critiqued capitalism, and honored and celebrated the contributions of typically unsung laborers—as Thrash does here.

Philadelphia Museum of Art (Gift of James D. Crawford and Judith N. Dean, 1996)

20th century—the nation-changing era of the Great Migration, the Harlem and Sharswood renaissances, and the Civil Rights movement—warrant our attention.

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### Further Reading

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