

NO.54 WINTER 2000
BENE LEGERE
 NEWSLETTER OF THE
 LIBRARY ASSOCIATES

- [Bay Area Women Mystery Writers](#)
- [Researching "SETI" Using the Digital Library](#)
- [SF News-Call Bulletin Photo Archive](#)
- [Ted Joans Papers Come to Bancroft](#)
- [Capital Campaign Update](#)
- [Calendar of Exhibits](#)

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NEWS FROM THE BANCROFT LIBRARY

TED JOANS PAPERS COME TO BANCROFT

Anthony Bliss, Rare Book Librarian, The Bancroft Library

It was about eighteen months ago when Ted Joans came to visit Bancroft. Ted's literary, artistic, and surrealist career dates back to the 1950s hip scene in Greenwich Village, where he was mentored by Langston Hughes and encouraged by Allan Ginsberg. Recently, we sat down in the Norman Strouse Seminar Room in Bancroft Library to discuss his literary archive, but mostly we discussed...rhinoceroses.

In a tense, two-hour conversation, we finally agreed that the world's foremost rhino fanciers included Ted, Salvador Dali, Albrecht Durer, and myself. Once that crucial point was settled, we got down to the business of bringing the Ted Joans papers to Bancroft.

Ted Joans is described by the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* as "...curiously neglected by many standard anthologies of both American and Afro-American literature." Perhaps this is because Ted is not concerned with self-aggrandizement or literary career building. When he has something to say, in art, jazz, or words, he says it and pulls no punches. Yes, he has an African-American perspective, but he is above all human, speaking to our common fears as well as to our common joys.

His writing tends to be short and pointed, with a mix of surrealist humor that makes the message more memorable. From my point of view, Ted has neither written enough nor published enough, but he is wonderfully unconcerned. He travels the world for the sheer joy of it with a pocketful of garlic cloves ("powerful preventive medicine"). The garlic works: he is the youngest, most vigorous septuagenarian that I know. At a reading he gave here a few months ago, it was clear that he had mellowed somewhat and felt entitled (as he is) to advise the assembled students on the value of truth, honesty with oneself, and personal effort. He has a kind way of making his points without a hint of preaching.

We arranged the purchase of the Ted Joans papers with the help of the *Richard Henry Chabot Dieckman Fund*. What we received and will soon begin to process is a wonderful panoply of writings dating back to the early 1960s, some



published, some unpublished. There are collages; writings in English, French, and German; articles; poems; essays; notes; ephemera; magazine appearances; reviews; a draft of his guidebook, *A Black Man Guides All Y'allo Africa*; a draft autobiography; and other works that defy classification. It is bewildering and delightful: five large cartons of material that is original, novel, and not well known.

There is strong interest in this archive in the African Studies Department as well as the English Department, and, if we can secure the funding, we have a student anxious to go to work on the processing of the collection this summer. In the meantime, Ted Joans continues to globetrot, sending me terse reports from various destinations (Timbuktu, Paris, Seattle, among others). Every Ted Joans missive presents its own challenges: where to start reading, where to stop, how to interpret the enclosures? All of them are covered with rhinoceros stamps. I try to respond in kind, but Ted is unbeatable.

[\[top\]](#) [\[prev\]](#) [\[next\]](#)

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