

Joseph Thompson Biography

Founding Director, MASS MoCA

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Joseph Thompson is the founding director of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), having guided the museum's development and arts programming since its inception in 1987. Opening with 200,000 square feet of renovated space in 1999, the arts complex has grown to over 550,000 square feet of galleries, stages, workshops, and commercial tenant space, including 130,000 square feet of new galleries and performing arts space that opened in May 2017, bringing the total space devoted to exhibitions and presentations to 250,000 SF.

One of the liveliest and largest centers in the world for making, showing, and enjoying new art, music, theater, dance, and film, MASS MoCA is renowned for its daring programs of large-scale exhibitions and performances that capitalize on the museum's vast 28-building, 16-acre site. It is also the home of the long-term retrospective of Sol LeWitt wall drawings, which Thompson co-organized with Jock Reynolds, director of the Yale University Art Gallery, and with the Williams College Museum of Art, and a long-term installation of the paintings and sculpture of Anselm Kiefer, realized in collaboration with the Hall Art Foundation. The recently opened Phase III of MASS MoCA's now three-decade long re-inhabitation of the historic 26-building campus added quasi-permanent exhibitions and changing programs with works of Jenny Holzer, Laurie Anderson, James Turrell, and the Louise Bourgeois Trust.

Raised in Oklahoma and 1981 graduate of Williams College, Thompson received an MA in Art History from the University of Pennsylvania, where he was awarded the prestigious Annenberg Fellowship, and holds an MBA from the Wharton School of Business, where he was named a Morgenthau Fellow for his work in public policy and management. Thompson has written widely on contemporary art, and has organized many exhibitions and performing arts events at MASS MoCA, including the first solo exhibition of the visual art of David Byrne; the *Clocktower Project*, a permanent sound art installation by Christina Kubisch; Robert Wilson's *14 Stations*; Tim

Hawkinson's *Überorgan*; Ann Hamilton's *corpus*; Cai Guo-Qiang's *Inopportune*; and Xu Bing: *Phoenix*. Thompson is a co-organizer of the annual **Bang on a Can Summer Music Festival** at MASS MoCA, and, with Jeff Tweedy and his band, Wilco, Thompson co-produces the biennial Solid **Sound Festival** of Music and Art at MASS MoCA. With Christopher Wadsworth, he helped conceive and organize **FreshGrass**, a festival of American roots and new bluegrass music that takes place at MASS MoCA every September. He recently oversaw the completion of a several new public parks and greenspace projects along the perimeter of MASS MoCA, including a long term installation of Martin Puryear's **Big Bling**, situated at the heart of the main downtown business district. In all, over 8,000 artists and performers have been hosted by MASS MoCA to date.

Thompson has served on many public agencies and boards, including 1Berkshire, the county's leading economic and tourism development organization. He serves on the boards of directors of Berkshire Health Systems, the region's largest employer, and MountainOne Bank.

For his work in the arts and regional economic development, Thompson has been awarded the Commonwealth Award (the highest award granted to private citizens by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts) and the Williams College Bicentennial Medal for outstanding achievement by a Williams College alumnus.

Under Thompson's tenure, MASS MoCA's visitation has grown from 60,000 in 1999 to some 300,000 yearly since 2017 (pre-COVID), about 18 times the population of its home city, North Adams, Massachusetts. The arts center is widely celebrated as an important catalyst for regional economic revitalization, supporting over 900 jobs and generating over \$50 million per year in economic impact to the region. MASS MoCA own commercial real estate venture, developed by Thompson with the support of Jack Wadsworth and others, leases some 130,000 of space to 39 tenants (pre-COVID), which generates 18% of the museum's annual operating and programming budget.