

# Alma W. Thomas

## Everything Is Beautiful

Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891–1978) devoted herself to beauty. The artist is known for her dazzling paintings, but her drive to discover and cultivate beauty took her beyond the studio, from community service and classroom teaching to backyard gardening, dramatic performances, puppet making, and stylish dress. Thomas's beloved abstract paintings are presented here as one facet of a larger, ongoing experiment—a relentless search for transformation and uplift—that deepened her engagement with the world around her.

Born in Columbus, Georgia, Thomas spent most of her life in Washington, DC, where she taught art for thirty-five years at Shaw Junior High School and was active in the artistic circles around Howard University and American University. She was the first Black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and to have her art acquired by the White House Collection. One of her most significant exhibitions during her lifetime took place here in Nashville at Fisk University's Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery. For more on the artist's biography, see the timeline nearby.

By incorporating diverse artworks and archival materials that span the artist's long life, *Everything Is Beautiful* offers a fresh take on Thomas's journey from semirural Georgia to international acclaim. Unlike a traditional retrospective, this presentation is organized thematically around spaces where Thomas expressed her creativity. Highlighting Thomas's imaginative self-making as a woman, an African American, and an artist reveals how her commitment to beauty addressed the political, cultural, and environmental concerns of her day. When we look back at Alma Thomas's lifetime of achievements, the artist-teacher continues to inspire us to create a more beautiful world.



### **The Whitney, 1972**

Alma Thomas was the first Black woman to receive a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. The 1972 exhibition earned rave reviews and brought national attention to the eighty-year-old artist. The show has enjoyed legendary status ever since. Often described as Thomas's crowning achievement, it is celebrated as a triumph over racism, sexism, ageism, and provincialism.

This gallery partially restages the exhibition to highlight the artist's accomplishment and give it context. In 1971, Whitney officials responded to protests over the museum's limited representation of African Americans by agreeing to present a group show called *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, in which three of Thomas's paintings were on view, and a series of solo shows featuring Black artists. Thomas was the fifth of those artists to be given an exhibition, and like most who preceded her, her abstract work did not include openly political themes. Although called a retrospective, the project was relegated to a small gallery near the museum's lobby. The exhibition was based on one organized six months earlier by David C. Driskell at Fisk University's Carl Van

Vechten Art Gallery in Nashville. As letters reveal, Driskell, the chair of Fisk's art department and a widely respected artist, art historian, and curator, recommended that the Whitney honor Thomas with this one-person show.

Despite its modest scale and complex origins, Thomas's Whitney exhibition included some of her most ambitious paintings to date. A few belonged to her *Earth* series, which focused on flower gardens in her local community, but most came from her *Space* series, which was inspired by NASA's Apollo and Mariner missions. A close look at the exhibition—both its context and contents—helps reveal why it had and continues to have a recognizable effect on Thomas's life and legacy.



## **The Studio**

Alma Thomas's varied interests converged in her home studio—a work area she intentionally situated between her kitchen and backyard garden. She filled the space with watercolor and acrylic studies that she discussed with peers and mentors before embarking upon larger paintings. A handful of studies match finished canvases, highlighting how the artist carefully planned but always left room for improvisation. Thomas often returned to similar formal elements in her studies, generating countless variations to help break open new visual pathways.

While immersed in age-old studio practices and Western art history, Thomas was driven toward the future, embodying the notion of modernism as the fruitful synthesis of past and present, old and new. To deepen her familiarity with contemporary art, Thomas took art history courses, visited galleries, read widely, and studied color theories. In 1952, she began enrolling in classes at American University to pursue what she called "creative painting." Thomas started with still lifes, landscapes, and figurative work, drawing on the classical art training she received at Howard University in the 1920s. She then explored abstract forms and the type of expressionist compositions fashionable in the 1950s.

Around 1965, Thomas changed her paint medium from oil to acrylic emulsion and developed something completely new—the colorful accumulations of paint pats for which she is best known.



## **"Everything Is Beautiful in Its Own Way"**

Alma Thomas's lifelong curiosity about human cultures and the natural world converged in her home, which she furnished with objects that represented her diverse interests. Leafy houseplants, family heirlooms, and contemporary design filled her living areas. Her fascination with color theory showed in her choice of red-orange womb chairs designed by Eero Saarinen, walls painted light blue-green, and a multicolor mobile she made to spin overhead. She hung her own paintings next to works by Jacob Kainen and Laura Wheeler Waring, among others. She subscribed to art magazines,

purchased books and records, and displayed her own sculpture and marionettes alongside memorabilia from her travels. Alma's younger sister John Maurice was a librarian and archivist and preserved these items after the artist's death. The sisters lived together in the same two-story red brick row house near Logan Circle that their parents bought when the family moved to Washington, DC, in 1907.

Thomas respected the past while embracing innovations. "I keep up with what's going on," she once said. "I like myself to feel part of this day in time." Her wide-ranging pursuits—from theater and gardening to astronomy and clothing design—informed her activities in the studio and ultimately found form in her colorful abstract paintings.



## **The Garden**

Thomas grew up in the Columbus, Georgia, neighborhood of Rose Hill, which she noted was "rightly named because roses bloomed there almost year round." Throughout her life, she recalled memories of her grandfather's plantation in Alabama and gardens around Columbus.

After moving to Washington, DC, Thomas explored the city's many green spaces, experiencing a great variety of trees and plants in parks and sites such as Dumbarton Oaks, the U.S. Botanical Garden, and the U.S. National Arboretum. She witnessed the placement of thousands of cherry trees along the Tidal Basin in the 1910s and the citywide beautification efforts led by Lady Bird Johnson during the 1960s. All the while, Thomas observed how redlining, restrictive housing practices, and urban renewal transformed her neighborhood into what she called "the heart of the ghetto." In her own backyard, the artist devoted hours to creating, maintaining, and enjoying an informal garden with colorful trees, shrubs, and flowers.

Thomas's longstanding engagement with gardening took place on literal and metaphorical levels. She planted and nurtured plants much as she cultivated relationships with students and fellow artists. Her garden was a site of connection, a place for respite, relaxation, and entertaining. Parks and gardens are spaces of negotiation and exchange, and Thomas possessed a deep understanding of how to parlay floral bouquets and her nature-inspired paintings into the creation and maintenance of a social network across racial boundaries.



## **The Public Sphere**

"People always want to cite me for my color paintings," Alma Thomas once said. "But I would much rather be remembered for helping to lay the foundation of children's lives. I tried to develop them culturally and expand their perspectives."

Thomas was reared in a home that valued education as a way to better oneself while also uplifting the entire community, and she dedicated much of her life to serving others. As a professional

educator, she developed an innovative curriculum, drawing on her knowledge of art and African American culture to extend her lessons far beyond the classroom. Assignments like marionette performances, holiday card making, and student exhibitions taught specific skills while building character and commitment to the community. Thomas also devoted time to volunteer work, frequently at St. Luke's Episcopal Church near her home. The parish offered opportunities for worship and fellowship, and it served as a gathering place for neighborhood youth through extracurricular programs that Thomas organized. While she joined the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Thomas rarely participated in direct political action. She lived large every day, however, ignoring racist restrictions, claiming space, investing in her community, and spreading beauty.

Thomas once described "living in the heart of the ghetto and seeing a form of beauty that only the angels could see." Through community service, teaching, and her art, she strove to share this vision widely, making better angels of everyone she encountered.



## **The Classroom**

The importance of education was modeled for Alma Thomas by her grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles. Her family's move from Columbus, Georgia, to Washington, DC, enabled her and her sisters to attend school beyond the eighth grade, an opportunity denied them in the Deep South. In Washington, Thomas attended Armstrong Manual Training School, an all-Black high school, where she took the art courses that she credited with laying the foundation for her life. She subsequently trained to be a teacher at Miner Normal School, earned a bachelor of science degree in fine arts from Howard University, and took graduate-level art courses at American University. She also earned a master's in art education from Columbia University in New York.

Thomas taught in the classroom for four full decades, including thirty-five years at Shaw Junior High School near her home in Washington. She offered her students an adventurous curriculum that interwove technical art skills with community service and moral uplift. Thomas converted her classroom into a sacred space, covering over the windows with paper that her students decorated to resemble stained glass, once saying, "Don't look out there on 6th street. Your future is in here and what you learn here." She also incorporated lessons about Black history that were omitted from the official curriculum and initiated the recognition of Negro History Week (now Black History Month) in DC public schools. Card-making projects, fundraising dances, marionette performances, and gallery visits extended her lessons beyond the classroom, as Thomas compelled students to get involved in neighborhood activities and explore Washington's cultural sites. She made her commitment to these broader lessons clear when she announced that she would defy a school board directive to focus on vocational drawing: "I was not teaching their children how to draw. I am teaching them the greatest art in the world, that is, the art of living. We all must develop an appreciation for the love of beauty."



## The Stage

Alma Thomas was active in the theater her entire life. She was recruited into Howard University's art department based on the strength of her costume designs and was deeply involved with Howard's thespian troupe; later, she wrote about marionettes for her master's thesis and studied under "America's Puppet Master" Tony Sarg. In addition, she collaborated on theatrical productions with Shaw Junior High School students, and she frequently attended performances at the National Theatre in Washington.

This section assembles many little-known aspects of Thomas's theatrical output, including several stringed puppets from the 1930s, detailed plans for a collapsible stage and marionettes, drawings and photographs of costume designs, and an exuberant portrait of Pearl Bailey in the title role of *Hello, Dolly!* While Thomas's passion for the stage warrants attention, her theatrical interest also invites a deeper examination of how she performed various aspects of her life, from elegant self-fashioning and media appearances to her presentation of a holistic classroom curriculum focused on student theater. The daughter of a dressmaker, Thomas was deliberately attentive to how she presented herself every time she stepped out, and she even had clothing designed to complement her paintings. Thomas's fashion and theatrical awareness draw attention to her imaginative self-making as a woman, an African American, and an artist.



## The Field

By the 1940s, Alma Thomas had emerged in the Washington, DC, scene as an integral member of several collaborative and sometimes competitive artistic groups. Moving seamlessly among distinct and often segregated art worlds, she also helped interweave them, believing that beauty laid a path toward the future. As Thomas recalled near the end of her life: "When I came to Washington, that was segregated. And New York—that was segregated. But I always thought the reason was ignorance. I thought myself superior and kept on going. Culture is sensitivity to beauty. And a cultured person is the highest stage of the human being. If everybody were cultured, we would have no wars or disturbance. There would be peace in the world."

This section situates Thomas's work among that of her peers, highlighting Washington's rich cultural communities and the arts networks that stimulated Thomas's quest for beauty. Canvases by Lois Mailou Jones, Delilah Pierce, John N. Robinson, and Céline Tabary connect Thomas to a wide-ranging, integrated network of educators and artists who convened at art salons and the Black-owned, socially progressive Barnett Aden Gallery. The Phillips Collection served as a nexus for several artistic circles and an incubator for new ideas, as did American University, where Thomas developed relationships with Robert Franklin Gates and Jacob Kainen. Though Thomas would become associated with the Washington Color School, the differences between her works and theirs are often more revelatory than their similarities.



## The Washington Color School

Alma Thomas is often associated with the artists of the Washington Color School, but close looking at her colors, forms, and techniques reveals as many differences as similarities. Here, works by several artists affiliated with the group appear opposite Thomas's paintings. The term "Washington Color School" originated in a 1965 exhibition at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art. Thomas was not included in that show, which featured the work of six white men. Like Thomas, those artists created eye-filling canvases that abandoned the bold, gestural marks of earlier abstract paintings, but Thomas's color combinations, layered paint application, and visible brushwork made her work distinct.

Thomas connected with many of these artists nonetheless. For example, Gene Davis visited Thomas's studio in 1966, and though she was about thirty years his senior, Thomas recognized Davis's art-world success and took the opportunity to dialogue with him. She also earmarked art magazine pages with reproductions of his works, a practice that attested to her abiding interest in Davis's color combinations and compositional choices.

Even as Thomas admired this younger generation, she commanded their respect as an art-world pioneer who helped make their success possible. Sam Gilliam remembers how Kenneth Noland, at an opening for his own show, "suddenly ran through the crowd because he had to say hello to Alma." Noland wanted to show his gratitude because "in the early days, when things were getting started, the people who actually helped those [Washington Color School] guys make that move were the black gallery, Barnett Aden."



## Late Work

The six years between Alma Thomas's one-person show at the Whitney and her death were filled with accolades, including a retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, an Alumni Achievement Award from Howard University, an exhibition at a major commercial gallery in New York, and an invitation to the White House. "Just look at me now," she proclaimed in 1972, noting the many barriers she had overcome on her path to recognition.

During the last years of her life, Thomas suffered from arthritis, a broken hip, and a degenerative heart ailment. Images of the artist at public events show her in a wheelchair or supported by a walker. Physical impairments neither dulled her mind nor dampened her resolve, however. She continued to adjust her methods and materials, exploring novel themes and inventing new formats into the late 1970s. Her paintings became looser in structure and more monochromatic. She remained prolific. The bold, minimal works seen nearby demonstrate the painter's unflagging creativity and relentless pursuit of beauty. Tenacious until the end, she reportedly took art supplies with her on her final trip to the hospital.

Thomas's friend Jacob Kainen vividly remembered her persistence: "She used to paint with the paintings on her lap because she couldn't stand up long. . . . At the very end, she had herself wedged in, to be able to stand up to paint, she was so weak. She said her body was dying, if only she had a body. . . . You see it in the work." Thomas herself described this, but with her characteristic optimism. "Do you see that painting? Look at it move. That's energy and I'm the one who put it there," she said. "I transform energy with these old limbs of mine."

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## Everything Is Beautiful

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