



Alma W. Thomas

Everything Is Beautiful

Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful provides a new interpretation of the artist's long, dynamic life (1891–1978) and multifaceted career that was defined by constant creativity. This major retrospective traces Thomas's journey from Columbus, Georgia, to Washington, DC, and ultimately to the art-world fame she achieved late in life after retiring from teaching. In 1972, when she was eighty years old, Thomas became the first Black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

With more than 150 works, *Everything Is Beautiful* is the largest Alma Thomas exhibition to date. On view are an unprecedented number of Thomas's colorful abstract paintings, the titles and forms of which express her wide-ranging interests in nature, music, space travel, and spirituality.



fig. 1

In addition to her signature canvases drawn from public and private collections, the exhibition comprises lesser-known and rarely seen artworks, as well as archival material gifted to The Columbus Museum after the artist's death by her younger sister John Maurice Thomas. They include books, letters, photographs, costume designs, marionettes, sculptures, watercolors, and furnishings formerly in Thomas's DC home. The artist's presence is also invoked through her paints and paintbrushes; re-creations of her distinctive dresses with bold, geometric patterns; and a new documentary about her life and career. Her paintings can be viewed side by side with those of her peers, including Sam Gilliam, Lois Mailou Jones, and Morris Louis. The show culminates with Thomas's *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music*, an enormous red-and-white triptych created while the artist was suffering from declining health at the end her life.

The exhibition focuses on Thomas's persistent search for beauty, not only to provide a more complex understanding of the artist but also to offer an inspiring example of how to lead a creative life today. After beginning with a partial recreation of Thomas's 1972 Whitney exhibition, *Everything Is Beautiful* is organized thematically. Visitors encounter the archetypal spaces where Thomas moved and worked, including the studio, the garden, the theater, community sites such as schools and churches, universities, and the art scene in New York and DC. Thomas often listened to music as she painted; a Spotify playlist accessible at the start of the exhibition allows visitors to hear her favorite songs, including Ray Stevens's 1970 hit "Everything Is Beautiful," which was recorded in Nashville.

The epicenter of Thomas's world was her family's two-story brick townhome in the Shaw neighborhood near Dupont Circle in Washington. Her immediate surroundings often lent inspirations for her paintings, such as how wind and sunlight moved through the holly tree outside her bay window or the way grass grew around the pavement stones in her backyard. Photographs record how Thomas's house was filled with her canvases and studies on paper. Her kitchen doubled as her studio, and its table and walls were sites of exploration. As exemplified by an untitled study from 1968 (fig. 1), she often cut, stapled, and taped strips of paper together as she worked through ideas for her color juxtapositions.

The Frist is one of four museums presenting this tribute to Alma Thomas, and here special attention is given to her 1971 exhibition in Nashville at Fisk University's Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery. That exhibition featured her *Earth* series, which focuses on flower gardens in her local community and includes *Spring Flowers Near Jefferson Memorial* (cover), and her *Space* series, which relates to NASA's missions to the moon and Mars during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Photographs, including one taken of Thomas standing before Cravath Hall (fig. 2), document the artist's joyful visit to Fisk's campus for her opening in the fall of 1971. The head of Fisk's art department, David C. Driskell, organized the show and, as letters reveal, he was also responsible for recommending that the Whitney similarly honor Thomas in the spring of 1972. Throughout her career, the art departments and galleries of historically Black colleges and universities provided Thomas with vital support. Her closest connections were with Howard University, her alma mater and the place where she debuted her abstract style—what she called “Alma stripes”—in 1966. That exhibition marked the beginning of her meteoric rise in the art world.



fig. 2

Thomas was both commercially and critically successful as a painter but considered teaching to be her greatest legacy. “I devoted my life to children, and they loved me,” she said. She spent thirty-five years within the same classroom of Shaw Junior High School, where she covered the windows with painted paper to focus her students’ attention on beauty and away from the urban decay all around them. The Frist is highlighting Thomas’s vocation as an educator by staging an exhibition that celebrates the extraordinary talent of art teachers in our own schools. *Nashville Art Teachers: Beyond the Classroom* will be on view in our Conte Community Arts Gallery from March 4 through August 28, 2022.

Half a century after Alma Thomas’s exhibition at Fisk University, this retrospective gives Nashvillians a new opportunity to revel in all the beauty that Thomas recognized in our imperfect world and left behind.

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Everything Is Beautiful

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FRONT: *Spring Flowers Near Jefferson Memorial*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50 in. Fisk University Galleries, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, 1991.21116. Photo: Jerry Atnip

Fig. 1. *Untitled*, 1968. Acrylic on cut, stapled, and taped paper, 18 1/2 x 34 in. Steve and Lesley Testan collection, as curated by Emily Friedman Fine Art

Fig. 2. Photographer unknown. Alma Thomas at Fisk University, 1971. Color photograph, 3 1/2 x 5 in. The Columbus Museum, Gift of Charles Thomas Lewis, G.2020.18.7

**Frist Art
Museum**

919 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203
FristArtMuseum.org
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