

TENNESSEAN.COM | SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2022 | 5C

Frist showcases beauty through the life and works of Alma Thomas

SUNDAY PLUS

Melinda BakerSpecial to Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

"Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful," on view at the Frist through June 5, is a welcome balm to our weary souls. And this is no accident. Thomas was a revolutionary artist and educator who cultivated beauty and creativity in all aspects of her long life. And she was dedicated to bringing that same energy into the lives of others, as well.

"Alma Thomas really wanted her art to do something for people," said Seth Feman, co-curator of the show and deputy director for art and interpretation and curator of photography at the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Va. "She often used the term 'beautify,' which to her didn't just mean to make something pretty or nice; it had more gravity than that."

Feman, who will soon step down from his position at the Chrysler Museum to become the Frist's new executive director and CEO in April, co-curated the show with Jonathan Frederick Walz, director of curatorial affairs and curator of American art at the Columbus Museum in Columbus, Ga. They wanted the exhibition to showcase not only the larger narrative of Thomas' life, but also the tenacious spirit of creativity and service she brought to everything she did.

"Creating beauty was a weighty, world-changing mission to her," Feman said. "She believed that beauty could provide a way for anyone to transcend or improve their life circumstances. This comes through in her work and life and hits home for so many people right now."

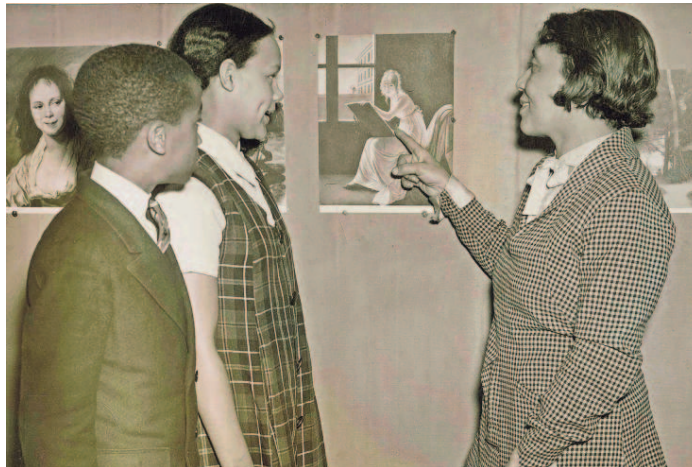
Thomas is best known for her colorful, shimmering abstract paintings that resemble mosaics or stained glass. She started making them in the 1960s after 38 years of teaching art in Washington, D.C., schools. In 1972, at 81, she became the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Before that, she was the first graduate from Howard University's fine arts program in 1924. Later in 2015, she became the first Black woman to have a work of art featured in the White House Collection.

But as the exhibition at the Frist emphasizes, there is a lot more to Thomas' story. The show features more than 160 works, including selections of her famous abstract paintings plus rarely seen works, letters, photographs, costume designs, marionettes, sculptures and furnishings. The show also includes recreations of Thomas's distinctive graphic dresses and a new documentary about her life and career.

"This is the largest gathering of Alma Thomas material on public view since



Untitled art by Alma W. Thomas, ca. 1968, acrylic on cut, stapled and taped paper. STEVE AND LESLEY TESTAN COLLECTION, AS CURATED BY EMILY FRIEDMAN FINE ART



Alma Thomas with students at Howard University Art Gallery. THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM

she passed away in 1978," Walz said. "Previous Alma Thomas shows have been about half the size of the Frist's and have more or less focused on her most famous late period. Our show traces a much longer arc of her life and artistic pursuits. It's probably a once-in-a-generation kind of exhibition."

"She has so many interests, from gardening, music, and theater to puppetry and fashion," Feman said. "She interweaved them in an interdisciplinary way that can cross-pollinate and appeal to lots of different people. She's so approachable, but you can always discover something new in and through her."

One landmark show was at Fisk

The exhibition also highlights the landmark exhibition Thomas had at Fisk University's Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery in Nashville in 1971. Organized by

David C. Driskell, the legendary African American artist and art historian who was the chair of the art department and director of the art gallery at Fisk from 1966-1977, the show paved the way for her rise in the art world. Driskell wrote letters to the Whitney Museum urging them to show Thomas' work.

"Her Fisk show was major, even more so than the Whitney in a way, because of its scale and the careful attention Driskell gave to it," Feman said. "It's a testament to Driskell and Thomas' longtime friendship."

Despite Thomas' successful art career, she considered teaching to be her greatest legacy. To highlight her 35-year tenure at Shaw Junior High in Washington, D.C., and to celebrate art teachers in our own community, the Frist organized the companion exhibition, "Nashville Art Teachers: Beyond the Classroom." The show features an array of work by

If you go

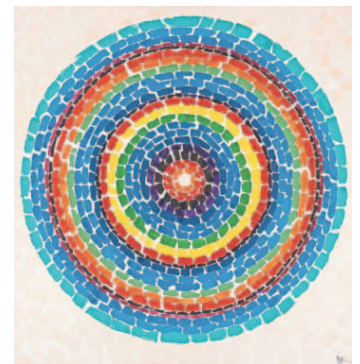
What: "Alma Thomas: Everything is Beautiful"

Where: Frist Art Museum at 919 Broadway, Nashville

When: Through June 5; hours are 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and 1-5:30 p.m. Sundays

Tickets: \$15; \$10 for seniors and college students; \$8 for military; free for members and those 18 and younger

More info: <https://fristartmuseum.org>



"Wind Dancing with Spring Flowers," 1969, by Alma Thomas; acrylic on canvas. HOOD MUSEUM, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

elementary, middle and high school art teachers in Nashville who have gone above and beyond to get themselves and their students through the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be on view through Aug. 28 in the Conte Community Arts Gallery.

The Frist's other current exhibitions include "On the Horizon: Contemporary Cuban Art from the Pérez Art Museum Miami," on view through May 1. It features around 70 works by 50 Cuban artists of multiple generations, including María Magdalena Campos-Pons, professor of fine arts at Vanderbilt University; Yoan Capote; Los Carpinteros; Teresita Fernández; and Zilia Sánchez. The work on display was drawn from one of the largest public collections of Cuban art in the U.S. and explores the physical, social and political landscape of the island and its diaspora.

Also on view is "LeXander Bryant: Forget Me Nots" through May 1, a multimedia exhibition by the Nashville-based artist that explores themes of perseverance amid adversity, family structures and bonds, economic inequality, community activism and more.