

COMPOSING COLOR

Paintings by Alma Thomas

COMPOSING COLOR: PAINTINGS BY ALMA THOMAS

In the mid-1960s, Alma Thomas created a painting style distinctly her own, characterized by the dazzling interplay of pattern and vibrant color. In her work, color can be symbolic and multisensory, evoking sound, motion, temperature, even scent. Her abiding source of inspiration was nature—whether seen through her kitchen window or from outer space. Thomas once stated, “Art could be anything. It could be behavior—as long as it’s beautiful.” During a politically charged time in American life, she maintained belief in the recuperative power of beauty and dedicated herself to its cultivation.

Born in 1891 in Columbus, Georgia, Thomas moved to Washington, DC, with her family as a teenager. She was a vital figure in the art communities of Washington for decades. In 1924, she became Howard University’s first student to earn a degree in fine art. She went on to teach art in DC public schools for more than thirty years and served as vice-president of the Barnett Aden Gallery, one of the nation’s first racially integrated and Black-owned galleries. In 1972, at age eighty, Thomas achieved unprecedented recognition for an African American woman artist, presenting solo exhibitions at both the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum holds the most extensive collection of Thomas’s paintings on canvas. The museum acquired more than a dozen works during the artist’s lifetime and, upon her death, received thirteen paintings by bequest. *Composing Color* draws on these rich holdings. Organized around the artist’s favored themes of Space, Earth, and Music, this show invites you to see the world through Alma Thomas’s eyes.

Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support has been provided by:

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Object label, Intro Gallery:



Resurrection
1966
acrylic and graphite on canvas

White House Collection

Like a stained-glass window in a church, *Resurrection* offers a radiant focal point for contemplation and reverence. This painting is one of several by Thomas whose title references Christian ideas or imagery. The artist had a lifelong affiliation with St. Luke's Episcopal Church, located less than a block from her home in Washington, DC.

Resurrection appears here on loan from the White House. Its acquisition in 2015 made Thomas the first African American female artist to have work enter the art collection of the “people’s house.” Former First Lady Michelle Obama recalls, “We placed the painting directly in visitors’ line of sight [in the Old Family Dining Room]. . . so its warmth would greet you the moment you stepped into the room.”



Peter Souza, Passover seder in the Old Family Dining Room of the White House, 2015

GALLERY #1

Gallery Panel, Gallery #1

Space

“I love the change, I love the new. I live well with technology. I paint earth *and* space.”—
Alma Thomas

Thomas was born at the end of the nineteenth century—as she liked to say, in the “horse and buggy days.” She had no desire to remain there. Consciously oriented toward the future, she embraced the technological and social changes of the twentieth century. Her artistic evolution

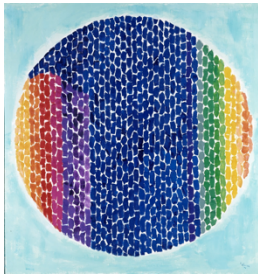
from academic painting to abstraction reflected this forward-facing attitude—her belief in the need for “a new art representing a new era.”

Thomas’s admiration for scientific and technological breakthroughs included NASA’s human spaceflight program. While some artists and intellectuals criticized the space race as a distraction from the Vietnam War and social injustice at home, Thomas was fascinated by the Apollo missions of 1968 to 1972. She created numerous paintings inspired by their televised events and the revelatory photographs of Earth taken from space. She imagined outer space as a place beyond human conflict: “I’d love to be on the moon to feel beauty, vastness, and purity. Nothing there that was destroyed by man, no war.”



Bill Anders, *Earthrise*, a view of the Earth seen from the Apollo 8 lunar module, December 24, 1968. NASA

Object labels, Gallery 1:



Snoopy—Early Sun Display on Earth
1970
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1976.140.1

In *Snoopy—Early Sun Display on Earth*, Thomas’s reverence for the beauty of living things expands to a planetary scale. Captivated by astronauts’ accounts of seeing Earth from outer space, Thomas portrayed a rainbow-hued planet pulsating with light and vitality.

“Snoopy” was the nickname for the Apollo 8 lunar module, a reference to the *Peanuts* comic strip character (who was also a NASA mascot) and the module’s job of flying around the moon to “snoop” for a promising landing site. Thomas would likely have seen the widely circulated photograph taken from “Snoopy” as it orbited the moon. Known as *Earthrise*, the image shows a partly illuminated, vibrant blue Earth as it rises above the surface of the moon.



Antares
1972
acrylic on canvas

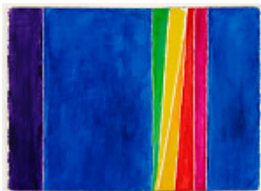
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.13

This densely patterned monochromatic canvas conjures the intensely hot surface of the star Antares. One of the brightest and most massive stars in the galaxy, Antares earned its name—meaning, in Greek, “rival of Mars”—due to its similar appearance to the red planet.



Atmospheric Effects I
1970
acrylic and pencil on paper

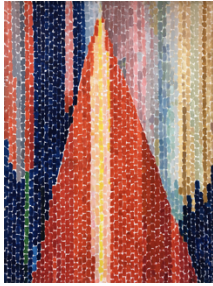
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1976.140.3



Atmospheric Effects II
1971
acrylic and pencil on paper

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1976.140.4

NOTE: *Atmospheric Effects I* and *Atmospheric Effects II* will rotate on view at SAAM.



Blast Off
1970
acrylic on canvas

On loan from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC

Thomas was enthralled by televised coverage of the Apollo missions. Writing in 1971, she expressed her delight that “through the medium of color television all can actually see and experience the thrill of these adventures.” *Blast Off* is one of two paintings now in the collection of the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum that allude to the launching of a spacecraft. Its fiery, upward-pointing triangle connotes the awesome power of a rocket ship achieving lift off.



The Eclipse
1970
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.3

The Eclipse was the last work Thomas created as part of her “Space” series. It was inspired by the total solar eclipse that occurred on March 7, 1970 and was visible from across the Eastern United States, including Washington, DC.

In a total eclipse, the moon blocks the view of the sun from Earth, appearing like a hole in the sky and allowing the sun’s corona, usually masked by bright light, to become visible. With its dark blue core and radiating rings of color, Thomas’s painting captures this rare moment of celestial alignment, its off-center composition suggesting the progressive movement of the moon across the sky.

GALLERY #2

Gallery Panel, Gallery 2:

Earth and the Seasons

“The seasons, the flowers, the sea—all of nature—have become a permanent part of my paintings.”—Alma Thomas

Thomas’s art shows her love of living things—how they grow, change, and renew themselves. Her deep connection to nature was formed during her childhood in the South, where she spent time wandering her grandfather’s property, witnessing “gorgeous sunsets. . . lovely fowl, every kind of fowl. . . and the most unusual wildflowers.”

Transplanted to Washington, DC, Thomas became a connoisseur of the gardens of the city, admiring the plantings at Dumbarton Oaks, the National Arboretum, the United States Botanic Garden, and other parks. She was an avid gardener who cultivated crepe myrtle trees and lush flower beds in her backyard. The abstract colors, lines, and forms of her garden were visible from the window of her kitchen studio. “I don’t want to be isolated when I paint,” Thomas said, “Here I can cook and always see the beautiful flowers.”

Thomas’s paintings reflect the shifting hues, sounds, and atmosphere of her surroundings across the seasons. They express the smell of fresh cut grass in spring, the warmth of sunny days, the fiery colors of fall, and the hush that follows a snowfall.



Unknown photographer, Alma Thomas’s backyard garden, not dated, Archives of American Art



Ida Jervis, Alma Thomas in her studio, 1968, Archives of American Art

Object labels, Gallery 2:

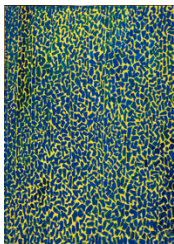


Light Blue Nursery
1968
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1970.324

With its neatly ordered rows of brushstrokes, *Light Blue Nursery* evokes the appearance of colorful plants lined up at a nursery. The variation of touch and direction with which Thomas applied the strokes of paint creates a sense of flickering movement. She once said, “My paintings of nurseries and flower gardens have been inspired by the forms or color patterns seen from airplanes speeding through space.”

Acquired in 1970, *Light Blue Nursery* was the first painting by Thomas to enter the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It was a favorite of the museum’s director at the time, Joshua Taylor, who hung it in his office. It also spent time on loan to the White House. Stephen Hess, the National Chairman of the White House Conference on Children and Youth, later wrote in a letter to the artist, “[it] cheered me up during many dark moments.”

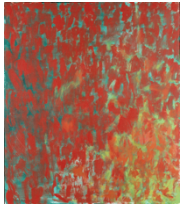


Aquatic Gardens
1973
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.7

Aquatic Gardens may have been inspired by a visit to Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, a national park in Washington, DC, devoted to the cultivation of water plants. The park features vast stretches of ponds filled with water lilies and lotuses.

Thomas did not paint outdoors, considering this to be an old-fashioned approach. She instead sought out sensory experiences she later translated into painting in her studio. She once explained that she visited gardens “not to paint but to get impressions. A friend of mine goes. . . and gets every leaf. I said I’d go crazy doing that. I told him, ‘Just go and look. It settles you, and then you don’t need to look at it anymore.’”



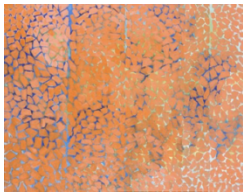
Fall Begins
1976
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.1



Spring Grass
1973
acrylic on canvas

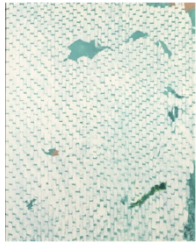
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.12



Autumn Leaves Fluttering in the Breeze
1973
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.9

Like many of Thomas's paintings, *Autumn Leaves Fluttering in the Breeze* suggests an experience of sensory immersion—it conveys not only the brilliant color of fall foliage, but also the movement and sound of branches and leaves dancing in the wind.



Snow Reflections on Pond
1973
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.10

Gallery #3

Gallery Panel, Gallery 3:

Music and Nature

“I would wade in the brook and when it rained you could hear music. I would fall on the grass and look at the poplar trees and the lovely yellow leaves would whistle.”—Alma Thomas

Thomas loved music and often listened to the radio or played albums and mixtapes as she worked. Her selections were eclectic, ranging from rhythm and blues to the soundtrack for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Well-versed in the theory of how colors interact, she was attentive to the interconnections between musical and visual art—how, in each, compositional elements are put in sequence and contrast to create harmony, melody, balance, and rhythm.

Thomas also spoke of music and nature as linked. In a 1966 letter to artist Gene Davis, she wrote, “Your paintings give not only the feeling of listening to an outstanding orchestra or symphony, but the joy of Nature’s World of Color.” Thomas often assigned titles to her own paintings that connect natural phenomena, like flowers or a sunset, with song. In her art, nature and music are treated as twin expressions of a fundamental life force or spirit.

Some of the works in this gallery are among the artist’s last. They are also among her boldest and freest. In the mid-1970s, Thomas moved beyond her signature stripes to create complex mosaiclike compositions using irregular shapes she described as her “hieroglyphs.” Facing declining physical ability, she continuously adapted her methods to create and innovate until the end of her life.



Frank Stewart, Alma Thomas, 1976, Columbus Museum of Art

Object labels, Gallery 3:



Untitled (Music Series)

1978

acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.5

Earlier in her career, Thomas used a straightedge or bands of elastic to guide the striped format of her compositions. In making this work, she painted more freely, creating patterns of wedges and glyphs that loosen from left to right, as if vibrating on the surface of a drum. Despite the health challenges she faced at this stage of her life, including being hospitalized for two months after breaking her hip in 1974, Thomas continued to create large paintings, sometimes propping herself up to do so.

With its simple yet dazzling red-and-white palette, *Untitled (Music Series)* closely relates to Thomas's largest work, the three-panel painting *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music*. See this work on view in SAAM's modern and contemporary art galleries on the third floor.



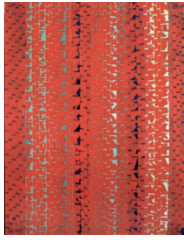
White Roses Sing and Sing

1976

acrylic on canvas

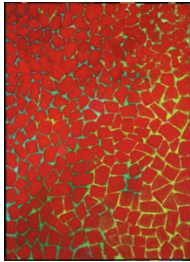
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.3

White Roses Sing and Sing is non-representational yet strongly evocative of the natural world. Translucent pale forms float over a background of shifting green and yellow—a luminous image perhaps related to Thomas's memories of her childhood home in Columbus, Georgia, in a neighborhood called Rose Hill. She once remarked that it “was rightly named because roses bloomed there almost the year round.” She also recalled that as a child exploring the outdoors she heard “singing [and] talking sounds in all things.”



Red Sunset, Old Pond Concerto
1972
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Woodward Foundation, 1977.48.5



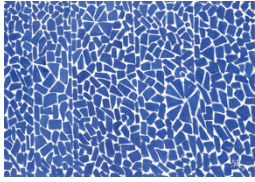
Delightful Song by Red Dahlia
1976
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.4



Grassy Melodic Chant
1976
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.5



Elysian Fields
1973
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.8

Wedge-like forms dance down the surface of *Elysian Fields*, united by a single strong color. Working with a pared-down palette, Thomas created a rhythmic composition that seems to extend beyond the edges of the canvas.

In Greek mythology, the Elysian Fields are a utopian afterlife reserved for virtuous souls. Thomas evidently felt that the reference suited the clarity and purity of this painting, composed in brilliant blue and bright white.