

## COMPOSING COLOR

Paintings by Alma Thomas

### COMPOSING COLOR: PAINTINGS BY ALMA THOMAS: TRAVELING EXHIBITION

**Intro text:**

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.

*Composing Color* draws on the extensive holdings of Thomas’s paintings at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. 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.

**Section One:**

Space and Sky

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

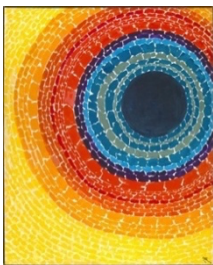
Thomas was born at the end of the nineteenth century—as she liked to say, in the “horse and buggy days.” She had no desire to remain there. Consciously oriented toward the future, she embraced the technological and social changes of the twentieth century. Her artistic evolution from academic painting 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 Apollo 8 lunar module, December 24, 1968. NASA

**Object labels:**

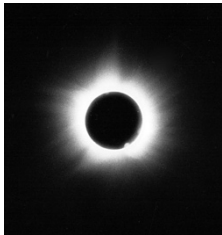


*The Eclipse*  
1970  
acrylic on canvas

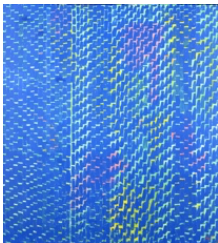
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.3

*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.

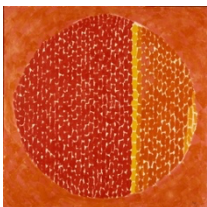


A view of the total solar eclipse showing the flare of the sun’s corona, or outer atmosphere, around the edges of the moon, March 7, 1970. Courtesy of NASA.



*Celestial Fantasy*  
1973  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.11



*Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset*  
1970  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.4

In *Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset*, 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 our planet enlivened by the reflected light of the sun.

"Snoopy" was the nickname for the Apollo 10 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 Earth as it rises above the surface of the moon.



*Antares*  
1972  
acrylic on canvas

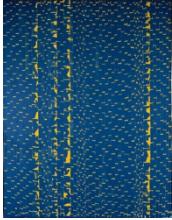
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.13

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.



*Gray Night*  
1972  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1972.147



*Grey Night Phenomenon*

1972

acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1975.92.1

**Section Two:**

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.



Alma Thomas’s backyard garden, not dated, Alma Thomas Papers, ca. 1894-2001, Archives of American Art

**Object labels:**



*Red Abstraction*  
1959  
oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.2



*Red Abstraction*  
1960  
oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.1

Thomas began shifting from representation to abstraction in the late 1950s. She developed her signature style, using “stripes” of bright color, in the mid-1960s. *Red Abstraction* represents a moment in this evolution, before the artist moved into high-key color and acrylic paint. Rendered in oil paint, the painting testifies to Thomas’s persistent interest in the abstract forms and colors of nature. Its oranges and reds evoke the vibrant foliage of fall, while vertical swipes of black suggest the directional growth of trees.



*Fall Begins*  
1976  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.1

Like many of Thomas's paintings, *Fall Begins* 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.



*Spring Grass*  
1973  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.12



*Snow Reflections on Pond*  
1973  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.10

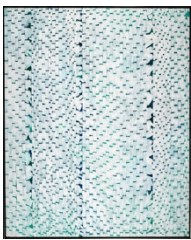




*Light Blue Nursery*  
1968  
acrylic on canvas

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.”



*Arboretum Presents White Dogwood*  
1972  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.6

Living in a region with four distinct seasons, Thomas was attuned to the progressive changes of color in her natural surroundings. *Arboretum Presents White Dogwood* was likely inspired by an early springtime visit to the US National Arboretum, a sprawling botanical garden in northeast Washington, DC.

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 went to the National Arboretum “not to paint but to get impressions. A friend of mine goes there 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.’”

### **Section Three:**

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.

**Object labels:**



*Untitled (Music Series)*

1978

acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.5

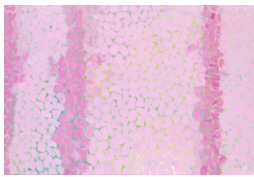
Earlier in her career, Thomas used a straightedge or bands of elastic to guide the striped format of her compositions. In making this work, she painted more freely, creating patterns of wedges and glyphs that loosen from left to right, as if vibrating on the surface of a drum. Despite the health challenges 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.



*White Roses Sing and Sing*  
1976  
acrylic on canvas

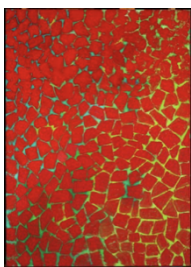
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.3

*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.”



*Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto*  
1973  
acrylic on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1975.92.2



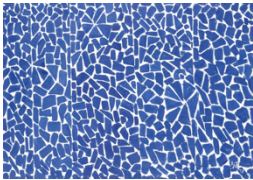
*Delightful Song by Red Dahlia*  
1976  
acrylic on canvas

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.