

## **ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS**

(b. 1891 Columbus, Georgia d. 1978 Washington, D.C.)

### Education

Miner Teachers Normal School, Washington, D.C.  
Howard University, Washington, D.C.  
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York  
New York University School of Education

### Solo Exhibitions (partial list)

- 1959 "Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings by Alma W. Thomas," sponsored by College Arts Service, Washington, D. C., circulated to Bennett College, Greensboro, North Carolina, included 15 paintings
- 1960 "Watercolors by Alma Thomas," Dupont Theatre Art Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1961 Dupont Theatre Art Gallery
- 1962 Dupont Theatre Art Gallery
- 1966 "Alma W. Thomas, A Retrospective Exhibition (1959-1966)," Gallery of Art, Howard University, Washington, D.C., included 29 paintings and 5 watercolors
- 1967 Margaret Dickey Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1968 September 3 - 21, "Alma Thomas, Recent Paintings," Franz Bader Gallery, Washington D.C.
- 1970 October 21 - November 7, "Alma Thomas, Earth and Space Paintings," Franz Bader Gallery
- 1971 October 10 - November 12, "Recent Paintings by Alma W. Thomas Earth and Space Series 1961 - 1971," Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, Fisk University, Nashville, included 20 paintings and 14 watercolors
- 1972 April 25 - May 28, "Alma W. Thomas," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, included 13 paintings and 6 works on paper
- 1973 October 10 - November 3, "Alma Thomas," Martha Jackson Gallery, New York
- 1974 October 23 - November 9, "Alma Thomas," Franz Bader Gallery
- 1975 October 22 - November 14, "Alma W. Thomas, Recent Paintings," Gallery of Art, Howard University, included 17 paintings from 1972 and 1973
- 1976 October 6 - 29, "Alma W. Thomas, Recent Paintings 1975 - 1976," Martha Jackson West Gallery, New York, included 17 paintings and 3 works on paper.

### Selected Group Exhibitions

From 1951 on Alma W. Thomas exhibited frequently in Washington, D.C. at the Dupont Theatre Art Gallery and the Barnett-Aden Gallery as well as in various exhibitions organized by the Society of Washington Artists, the District of Columbia Public Library, and other local groups.

- 1951 May 6-26, "First Annual Exhibition of the Lois Jones and Celine Tabary Studio Group," Inspiration House, Washington, D.C. (*Reclining Nude, Girl in White, Femme a la Bouteille*).
- 1952 March 30-April 26, "Eleventh Annual Exhibition: Paintings, Sculpture, Prints by Negro Artists," Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University (*Street Scene in Georgetown*).
- 1953 May-June 14, "Twenty Paintings from the Barnett-Aden Gallery," Dupont Theatre Art Gallery, Washington, D.C. (*Georgetown*).
- 1954 February 7-March 30, "Six Washington Painters," Barnett-Aden Gallery, Washington, D.C., (*The Orange Jug, Peonies and Fruit, Street Scene*).
- 1955 December 4- February 5, 1956, "The Tenth Annual Area Exhibition of Work by Artists of Washington and Vicinity," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (*Still Life*).
- 1956 October 7-28, "Sixty-Fourth Annual Exhibition of the Society of Washington Artists," National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution (*Still Life*).
- 1957 October 12-December 31, "Fourteenth Anniversary Exhibition: Contemporary American Art," Barnett-Aden Gallery (*Sumptuous Feast*).
- 1958 January, "Art Teachers Exhibition," Washington, D.C.
- 1959 April 5-26, "Hilda Shapiro Paintings and Sculpture and Alma Thomas Paintings," Watkins Gallery of Art, The American University, Washington, D.C.
- 1960 October 19-November 7, "Water Color Paintings Featuring Washington Artists," sponsored by College Art Services; circulated to Gallery of Art, Howard University (four works entitled *Abstraction*).
- 1961 June 3-25, "Washington Religious Art Exhibition," sponsored by National Conference of Christians and Jews, held at National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, (*St. Catherine, Silent Night*).

- 1962 March 11-29, "Sixty-Fifth Annual Exhibition of Watercolor Association," U.S. National Museum, Smithsonian Institution (*Nocturnal Space*).
- 1963 May 23-29, "Artists for CORE Exhibition and Sale," Martha Jackson Gallery, New York (*Lyric Study*).
- 1964 April 5-May 2, "Twenty-Third Annual Exhibition: Paintings, Sculpture and Prints by Negro Artists," Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University (*Blue Abstraction, Freedom March*).
- 1965 August 26-September 8, "Sixth Annual Washington Area Religious Art Exhibition," Washington, D.C. Gas Light Company (*St. Cecilia at the Organ*).
- 1966 October 1 – December 31, "Selections from the Permanent Collection of the Gallery of Art," Gallery of Art, Howard University (*Blue Abstraction*).
- 1969 August 1– October 6, "Contemporary American Black Artists," Art and Industries Building, Smithsonian Institution, circulated in 1970 by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.
- 1970 May 19-June 23, "Afro-American Artists, New York and Boston," jointly organized by the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, The Museum of Fine Arts, and The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (*Azalea Spring Symphonies, Wind Dances with Flower Beds*).
- 1975 May 1-22, "Eleven in New York," Women's Interart Center Inc. New York.
- 1976 September 30-November 21, "Two Centuries of Black American Art," Los Angeles County Museum of Art (*Flowers at Jefferson Memorial, Red Rose Sonata, White Dogwood*). Circulated 1976-1977 to The High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas; and The Brooklyn Museum, New York.
- 1979 April 1-July 29, "Black Artists/South," Huntsville Museum of Art, Alabama (*Flowers at Jefferson Memorial*).
- 1981 January 30-February 22, "Forever Free: An Exhibit of Art by Afro-American Women 1862-1980," Center for The Visual Arts Gallery, Illinois State University, Normal (*Snoopy-Early Sun Display on Earth, Composition, Flowers Near Jefferson Memorial, Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto, It is Spring*); circulated 1981-82 to Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Alabama; Gibbes Art Gallery, Charleston; The Art Gallery, University of Maryland; and Indianapolis Museum of Art.

### Selected Bibliography

Atkinson, J. Edward, *Black Dimensions in Contemporary Art*. New York: New American Library, 1971.

Dover, Cedric. *American Negro Art*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Greenwich, Ct: New York Graphics Society, 1965.

Fine, Elsa Honig. *The Afro-American Artists: A Search for Identity*, New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1973.

Foresta, Merry A. *A Life in Art: Alma Thomas 1891-1978*. National Museum of American Art. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D. C. 1981. For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office. Stock number: 047-000-00381-4.

Frazier, E. Franklin. *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. New York: Collier Books, 1969.

Munro, Eleanor. *Originals: American Women Artists*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.

Vachtova, Ludmila. *Kupka: Pioneer of Abstract Art*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.

Born in Columbus, Georgia in 1891, Alma Woodsey Thomas was the eldest of four daughters. Her father, John Harris Thomas was a businessman, and her mother, Amelia Canteay Thomas, was a teacher. The Thomas family moved from Georgia to Washington, D.C. in 1907 in an effort to escape racial tensions and to seek better educational opportunities for the family.

Thomas was able to attend a high school in Washington, D. C. that offered art classes. She said, "When I entered the art room, it was like entering heaven." At Armstrong Technical High School she became known for her interest in architecture and excelled in mathematics and science. After graduating from high school, she continued her education in Washington, D. C. where she enrolled at the Miner Teachers Normal School. At Miner, she continued to spend time in the art room and to "make things." After graduation, Thomas took a position in Wilmington, Delaware at the Thomas Garrett Settlement House, where for six years she taught general arts and crafts to the younger children.

In 1921, Thomas returned to Washington, D. C. to attend Howard University. She moved back into the family residence on Fifteenth Street; that was to remain her permanent residence until her death in 1978. As a university student, she enrolled in the home economics department to major in costume design. Her first year at Howard, she met James V. Herring, a professor at the university, who was struggling to create a department of fine arts. Herring persuaded Thomas to become the first student to enroll in the fine arts curriculum.

Thomas graduated from Howard University in 1924 with the school's first degree in fine arts. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in fine arts, she accepted a position as art teacher at Shaw Junior High School where she remained until her retirement. During her years of teaching public school, Thomas's creativity surfaced in the activities she organized for the students: classes in arts and crafts and clay modeling; marionette plays; and lectures about art. The many activities and clubs she sponsored document her energy

and persistence as an educator. She spent much of her spare time working with African-American children in several District of Columbia neighborhoods cultivating their appreciation of art. In turn, teaching increased and matured her ability to communicate through her painting.

Thomas supplemented her teaching career by attending classes at Columbia University during the summers in the 1930s and at American University in the 1950s. While earning her living as a teacher and participating in art related activities, she constantly renewed her personal inspiration in the images of nature. She absorbed their visual patterns, forms, shapes, spaces, and colors.

In 1950, ten years before her retirement, Thomas enrolled at American University to study painting and art history. Although officially enrolled in only a few courses, she spent a great deal of time painting, drawing, and discussing art with her professors.

Alma Thomas began her formal study of art as a representational painter. Influenced by Joe Summerford, Robert Gates, and Jacob Kainen, all of whom taught at American University during the 1950s, Thomas steadily moved toward a more abstract idiom during this period of her life. Thomas was also capable of painting works close in style to those of the modern European masters. Thomas constantly challenged herself to explore new ways of expression. Throughout her career, she experimented with a variety of artistic styles. Her early works reflect an interest in figural representation and forays into costume and marionette design. Thomas also worked through the influence of Cubism and Abstract Expressionism until she achieved success with unique canvasses exploring color, nature, and abstraction.

After she retired in 1960, Thomas dedicated her energies full time to what she herself termed "serious painting." Now almost 70 years old, but gaining in confidence, she began to produce paintings more gloriously colored than ever before. In her search for personal expression during the early 1960s, she painted many watercolors, finding in this medium a freshness and spontaneity that matched her dynamism. The lightness of watercolor paint—its pure, bright colors, can be seen in the small works she painted during this period. Thomas sometimes produced as many as 20 watercolor studies before committing herself to a painting on canvas.

Thomas held her first solo exhibition in Washington, D. C. at the Dupont Theatre Art Gallery on Connecticut Avenue in 1960. The show, which consisted mostly of abstract watercolors, was an unqualified success and all but one of the 25 works sold.

In 1966, James Porter, director of the Gallery of Art at Howard University, invited Thomas to assemble a retrospective of her work. She treated this invitation as an opportunity to create something new. Thomas decided to "produce something significantly different, something different from anything I'd ever seen, different from anything I'd ever done." Thomas challenged herself to create new works and the results of this challenge were the series of works called "Earth Paintings" that treated wind and flower subjects. Stirred by the "leaves and flowers tossing in the winds as though they were dancing and singing," she turned to fluid acrylic color to help her dissect, enlarge, and round her patterns. The titles she gave to the "Earth Paintings" series, such as *Alma's Flower Garden*, *Spring Flowers Near Jefferson*

*Memorial*, and *Azaleas Spring Display*, relate them to nature, although the paintings depart entirely from nature's forms. With this series, she developed a specific method of interpretation, a unique visual language.

Throughout her career, Thomas experimented with a variety of artistic styles. She achieved national recognition in 1972 when she did a one-person exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a first for an African American woman. Thomas was Black, a woman, and an artist. Each of these circumstances presented its own difficulties but she was persistent and committed to overcoming these barriers and made the choices necessary to adapt her life to the education of her vision. Thomas did not paint black subjects and did not address racial or feminists' issues in her works. She believed the creative spirit to be independent of race or gender.

Perhaps for this reason, Thomas is as closely associated with the Color Field artists such as Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Helen Frankenthaler, etc. and the second generation of abstract expressionism, as she is with African American art.

Thomas wrote: "Creative art is for all time and is therefore independent of time. It is of all ages, of every land, and if by this we mean the creative spirit in man which produces a picture or a statue is common to the whole civilized world, independent of age, race and nationality, the statement may stand unchallenged." Thomas spent her entire life of almost 90 years observing the world and communicating what she saw to others. Her vision of the world was tied to her career of teaching art to children and her appreciation of her flower garden as well as to the production of grand and joyous paintings of abstract color.

Alma Thomas said, "Man's highest inspirations come from nature. A world without color would seem dead. Color is life. Light is the mother of color. Light reveals to us the spirit and living soul of the world through colors." Her works reflect her belief in color.

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