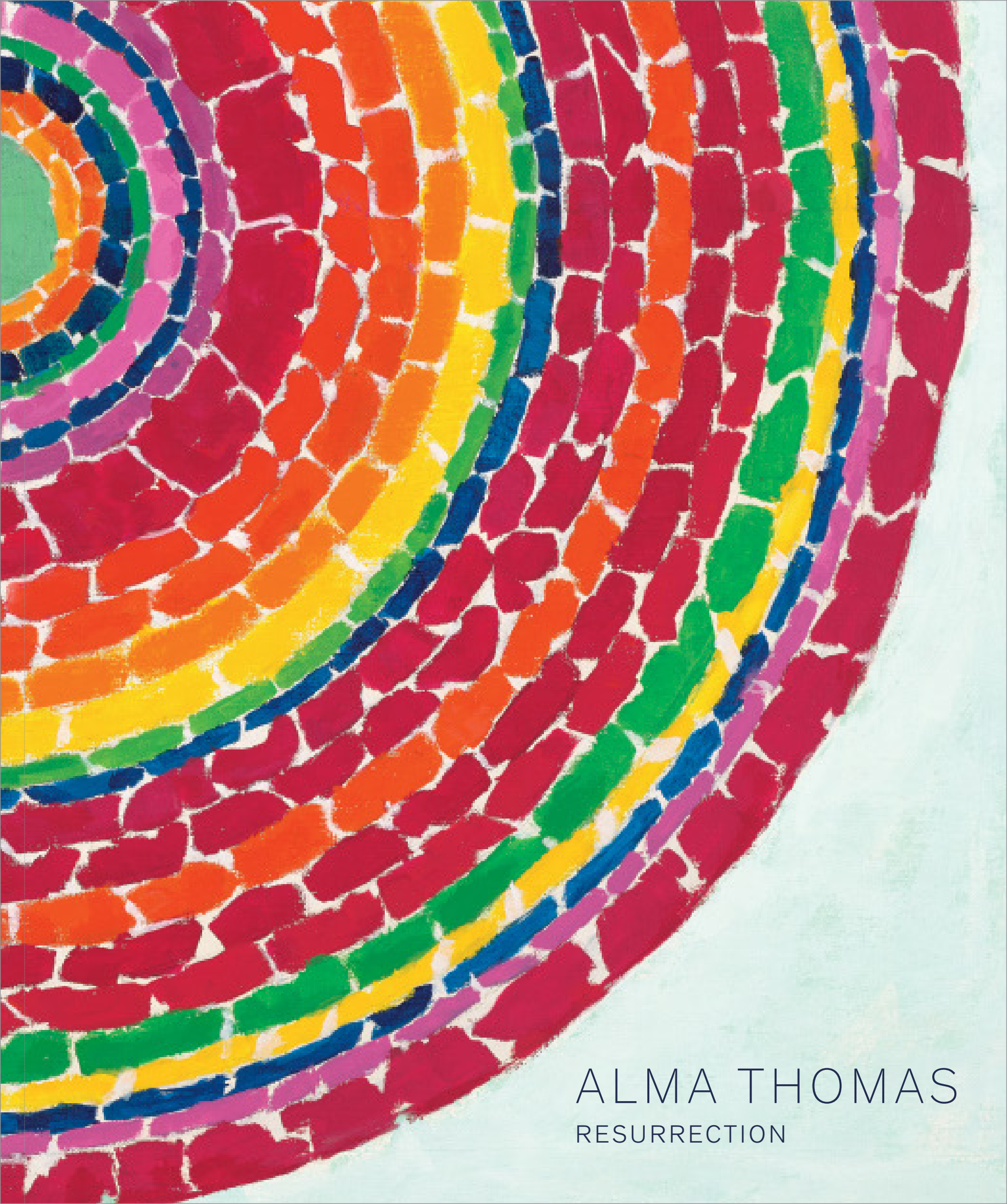

ALMA THOMAS

RESURRECTION

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RESURRECTION

CURATED BY SUKANYA RAJARATNAM

MNUCHIN GALLERY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with great pride that we present *Alma Thomas: Resurrection*.

It has been a longtime dream to organize an exhibition of Thomas's work in this space. For over 25 years, the gallery has presented the very best examples of postwar abstraction, including solo exhibitions of Thomas's Washington, DC, contemporaries, Morris Louis (2014) and Sam Gilliam (2017). A presentation of Thomas's achievements in this context is long overdue. In fact, this is the first exhibition of her work on the Upper East Side since her show at Martha Jackson Gallery in 1976.

We have always admired Thomas's paintings: the color, light, and rhythm of her compositions, the effortless way in which she draws upon Post-Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and Color Field painting to convey a view of the world that is unmistakably her own. However, equally importantly, we were also inspired by her remarkable personal story and its moments of intersection with America's evolution. Hers was a life of breaking down barriers— through leadership, through service to her community, and through the lifelong pursuit of education. She was the first-ever graduate of Howard University's art department and the first woman of color to have solo shows at the Whitney Museum in New York and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. We are privileged to help share her story, both in our exhibition and in the pages of this catalogue.

This exhibition would not have been possible without our lenders, who so graciously entrusted us with their works. Thank you to our institutional lenders: Lenore Miller and the Luther Brady Art Gallery at George Washington University; Melissa Chiu, Stéphane Aquin, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Amanda Sanfilippo Long and the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, Art in Public Places; and Joanna Robotham and the Tampa Museum of Art. Thank you also to those private lenders who so generously shared their works with the public: Russell Baker and Brad Aspel; Emily Friedman Fine Art; the Jennings-Overstreet Collection; Byron and Sylvia Lewis; Ray McGuire and Crystal McCrary; Elliot and Kimberly Perry; Robert and Linda Schmier; and those who wish to remain anonymous. We are also grateful for all the important support we received from Caitlin Berry Fine Art; David Henry; David Moos; and Dennis Scholl.

We extend a special note of gratitude to Howard University, the alma mater of Alma Thomas and the largest lender to our exhibition. Dr. Charles M. Boyd, Lisa Jones Gentry, Esq., and Gardy St. Fleur were instrumental in facilitating this major loan of three paintings.

We are grateful to our essay author Erin Jenoa Gilbert for her enthusiasm for the project and the fresh insights of her text. We thank David Zaza, Logan Myers, and Sarah Wolberg of McCall Associates for their inspired catalogue, and Tom Powel Imaging for his beautiful captures of the works and installation that are featured in these pages. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge Liana Gorman, whose significant contribution to this exhibition cannot be overstated, along with our team of registrars, David McClelland and Arrow Mueller.

ROBERT MNUCHIN SUKANYA RAJARATNAM MICHAEL MCGINNIS

SEEING RED: ROMANCE, RAGE, AND RESURRECTION

ERIN JENOA GILBERT

Theory and art production transform art into textual image. The visual becomes a sign, a referent to the historical moment of its production. Painting and sculpture are like artifacts, primary source material from which one extrapolates meaning and significance about culture and society.… In its radical configuration, post-modernism ultimately is about power and knowledge.
—Sharon Patton[1]

The history of abstract expressionist painting by African American women must begin with Alma Woodsey Thomas, whose luminous kaleidoscopic canvases radiate and reverberate, expanding the capacity of Color Field painting to subversively contextualize historical events and convey political messages. Though she may not have explicitly expressed her political views during her lifetime, her works have traveled a politicized path. Her ascendance created a path for other African American women who became abstract expressionists and color painters, including Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Sylvia Snowden, Mavis Pusey, Betty Blayton-Taylor, and Howardena Pindell. All, like Thomas, have contributed to the canon through artistic production, art education, art administration, and activism. This essay investigates the interplay between colors executed on canvas by an African American woman, and can be interpreted too as an investigation of the role of race in shaping America.

Alma Woodsey Thomas was born on September 22, 1891, in Columbus, Georgia. Her father, John Harris Thomas, was a successful businessman and her mother, Amelia Cantey Thomas, was a highly sought-after dress designer. Alma was the oldest of four girls; the other three were Fannie, Kathryn, and John Maurice. They lived in a Victorian home surrounded by gardens, in a segregated neighborhood, Columbus's Rose Hill District, just over an hour south of Atlanta.

Alma turned 15 on September 22, 1906. On the day of her birthday, and in the weeks that followed, race riots in Atlanta made international news: the front page of Paris's *Petit Journal* announced "Lynching in the USA,"[2] Scotland's *Aberdeen Press and Journal* wrote "Race Riots in Georgia,"[3] and the *London Standard* bore the headline "Anti-Negro Riots."[4] It is estimated that between 60 and 100 African Americans were killed during the riots, though the exact figure is unknown.

According to the Atlanta History Center, some African Americans were hanged from lampposts; others were shot, beaten, or stabbed to death. They were pulled from streetcars and attacked on the roads; white mobs invaded black neighborhoods, destroying homes and businesses. The immediate catalysts were newspaper reports that four European American women had been raped, allegedly by African American men, in separate incidents. (None of these reports was ever substantiated.) An underlying cause was the growing racial tension in a rapidly changing city and economy, with increasing competition for jobs, housing, and political power.[5]

At an impressionable age, Alma Thomas saw the red of bloodshed. The prevalence of Black Codes and Sundown Laws, and the segregation of schools, libraries, and museums dehumanized African Americans in the Deep South and subjected them to state-approved violence. Due to the physical and psychological violence spreading throughout Georgia, the Thomas family migrated north shortly after the riots, to Washington, DC, where Amelia Thomas's sister lived. When the family crossed over the Potomac River during their exodus, John told his daughters to remove their shoes and knock off every last bit of the Georgia sand so they could begin their new life.[6]

In Washington, DC, the Thomases lived in a two-story brick house at 1530 15th Street NW in Logan Circle, approximately five miles from the azalea gardens of the National Arboretum. Alma lived there, gazing upon her holly tree and circular flower beds, until her death in 1978. The Thomas family's decision to migrate north ensured that she could continue her education. Upon arrival, she was enrolled in Armstrong Technical High School, where she took her first art classes and excelled in mathematics and architectural drawing. From 1911 to 1913 she took teacher training courses at Miner Normal School. Having earned her teaching certificate, she taught kindergarten from 1915 to 1921 at Thomas Garrett Settlement House in Wilmington, Delaware. In 1921 Thomas enrolled at Howard University as a home economics major; after seeing her sketches for costume designs, Howard's newly appointed art instructor James V. Herring convinced her to pursue fine art instead. In 1924 she completed a bachelor of science degree in fine arts, becoming both the first graduate of Howard's fine art department and possibly the first African American woman ever to hold a BS in fine arts.[7] Upon matriculation, Thomas became the director of drawing at Pennsylvania's Cheyney Training School for Teachers, where she met Laura Wheeler Waring. In Waring's iconic *Portrait of A Lady*, 1947 (Figure 1), executed more than 20 years after their first encounter, Thomas wears an imperial red dress, red nail polish, and red lipstick. Thomas's friendship with Waring lasted throughout their lifetimes.

Thomas left Cheyney after one semester to accept another position in Washington, DC. Believing deeply in the power of education to elevate African Americans to physical and psychological freedom, she taught art at Shaw Junior High School for the next 35 years (1925–60). Shaw was a segregated school with restricted resources for art education, so Thomas took the students on art excursions; in examinations, she impressed upon them the importance of African American artists such as her friend Waring, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, Palmer Hayden, Edward Bannister, and Lois Mailou Jones. During the summer, Thomas took courses at Columbia University in New York, where she earned a master's in art education in 1934.

In 1943 she became the founding vice president of the Barnett-Aden Gallery in Washington, DC, one of the first African American-owned and -operated galleries in the United States. It was

FIGURE 1

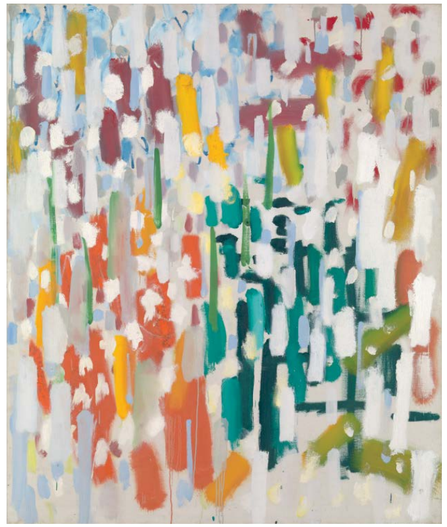
Laura Wheeler Waring, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1947, oil on canvas, 30 × 25⅛ inches (76.1 × 63.8 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1977.21

established by James Herring, who directed the Howard University Gallery of Art, and Alonzo J. Aden, who had been the first curator of Howard's gallery. The Barnett-Aden Gallery was located on the first floor of Herring and Aden's home, a rowhouse located at 127 Randolph Street NW. From 1943 to 1969 the gallery represented artists without regard to their nationality, race, ethnicity, or gender. Barnett-Aden's exhibitions, educational programming, and special events provided a racially integrated space for artists, curators, collectors, and even congressmen to convene, critique, and celebrate one another in segregated Washington, DC. It was at the gallery that Thomas first met Jacob Kainen, the artist and Smithsonian Institution curator.

In 1948 Thomas joined the Little Paris Group. Formed by Lois Jones and Céline Tabary, the group met twice weekly at Jones's home at 1220 Quincy Street NE. Encouraging African American artists, art historians, and art educators to examine and expand their own artistic practices, the group produced exhibitions on an annual basis. Between 1950 and 1960, Thomas continued her own art education by taking night and weekend courses at American University. There she studied color theory and painting with professors such as Kainen, Ben "Joe" Summerford, and Robert Gates.

From June 23 to September 4, 1958, Thomas traveled throughout Europe on a study-abroad tour entitled "The Art of Western Europe," led by a professor from Temple University's Tyler School of Art. The group of artists, art historians, and collectors traveled across the continent by boat and train to view cathedrals, castles, museums, and monuments. Photographs from the tour reveal that Thomas was one of the only African American women in the group. The tour inspired Thomas to innovate and signaled a turning point in her artistic practice.

The tour group began in England, in Southampton; then they traveled to London where they visited the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Tate, the Wallace Collection, and the



Courtauld. In England, Thomas would likely have seen the work of British abstract painter and art critic Patrick Heron. Heron has been hailed as "one of the most influential figures in post-war British art," [8] and his *Azalea Garden: May 1956* (Figure 2) and *Camellia Garden: March 1956*, both 1956, are in the Tate collection.

The tour group traveled to Brussels and Antwerp, crossed into Germany to see Cologne, and proceeded to Vaduz, Liechtenstein, and Lucerne, Switzerland, before moving on to Italy. They stopped in Milan, before arriving in Venice on July 26 to view the 29th Venice Biennale. Gestural abstract painter Mark Tobey won that Biennale's International Grand Prize, becoming the second American to do so. Seeking to represent the mystical through art, Tobey created (per a 1944 review by Clement Greenberg) "'white writing': the calligraphic, tightly meshed interlacing of white lines which build up to a vertical, rectangular mass;…these cause the picture surface to vibrate in depth" (Figure 3).[9] The paintings that Thomas created after 1964 suggest a visual memory of and relationship to Heron's and Tobey's color palettes, brushstrokes, and compositional arrangements.

The tour group's visit to the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, was a pivotal point in Thomas's practice; both the architecture and the aesthetic propositions of the art within influenced the work she created after 1964. The basilica is an octagon whose central dome is surrounded by high arches giving access to several arcades (Figure 4); it is famous for having the largest collection of Byzantine mosaics with Christian iconography outside of Constantinople. Mosaics in an interior triumphal arch show 15 figures, including Christ and the 12 disciples; other mosaics depict parables of the Old and New Testaments, including the parable of Moses and the Burning Bush from Exodus. Exodus was particularly significant for African Americans. Per Joshua Pederson: "In novels, hymns, songs, poems, speeches, and sermons, African Americans cast

FIGURE 2

Patrick Heron, *Azalea Garden: May 1956*, 1956, oil on canvas, 60 × 50 ¼ inches (152.4 × 127.6 cm). Tate, London, T03107

FIGURE 3

Mark Tobey, *Autumn Field*, 1957, tempera on paper, 47 × 36 inches (119.4 × 91.5 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc., 1968.52.23

FIGURE 4

Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy

themselves in the role of the Israelites, enslaved but chosen by God for a glorious new freedom, oppressed but selected for a divine destiny."[10] Thomas, who attended St. Luke's Episcopal Church throughout her life, and whose father was a sexton at First Congregational Church in Washington, DC, would have heard those African American songs and sermons as she immersed herself in the sacred space of San Vitale. The circular arrangement of the basilica's tesserae, forming halos and crowns atop the central figures, modeled for Thomas how she might incorporate religious and political symbolism into her paintings; witness the titles of her paintings *Resurrection*, 1966, and *Earth Sermon—Beauty, Love and Peace*, 1971.

The question of transcendence and resurrection is prevalent in her autobiographical accounts and her artistic production. How does an older African American, whose body will suffer injuries that leave her at times immobile, transcend the barriers to inclusion in a realm reserved for white men? As African American women were often rendered invisible and inaudible by racist regimes, how would Thomas, in works rather than words, rise above them to render images as immortal as the Byzantine mosaics in San Vitale?

Returning to the US in September 1958, Thomas began to address these questions through experimentation. In a modernist intervention in the centuries-old tradition of mosaic, she eliminated religious, racial, gender, and national references. She flattened the picture plane and modernized the method of application—replacing the mosaic's glass, marble cubes, and ore with paint, which allowed for single authorship, shorter production time, and mobility across local, state, and national borders. In the exhibition catalogue for *Forever Free: Art by African American Women, 1862–1980*, Arna Bontemps describes the results of Thomas's intervention as "geometric abstractions composed of mosaic-like patterns of vivid colors rhythmically arranged in concentric circles or parallel lines."[11] How does the symbolism of the mosaic tile

resonate—the dispersed, diasporic, broken bars; blurred brushstrokes in concentric circles and parallel lines—and how do the colors thereof reflect the African American experience during the Civil Rights era? Ina Cole asserts that "the specific local condition in which a work is produced plays an important role in the understanding of the culturally divergent forms of modernism, as it is only the interplay between social, aesthetic and individual forces that can offer a coherent interpretation of art practise grounded in its historical context."[12]

Newspaper clippings, folded-down corners, tagged, and painted-upon pages of publications in Thomas's personal papers confirm that she read local, national, and international news from outlets such as the *Washington Post*, *The Crisis*, and *Art International*. As her Space paintings, 1969–72 (see pages 91, 93, and 109), demonstrate, Thomas often painted in direct response to current events publicized in newspapers or on radio and television. Her consciousness of current events is undisputed. She was acutely aware of the events in American history that took place during her lifetime, particularly those pertaining to the African American struggle for equality in public education in Washington, DC. Thomas has suggested that she responded to current events not through conversation but through compositions. In her autobiographical writings she quoted from Robert Clermont Witt's 1902 book *How to Look at Pictures*, writing:

> Whistler once said that art is cosmopolitan. The influence of nationality and physical and political conditions has indeed been somewhat unduly emphasized by critics and philosophers. But it is obvious that the life, character and history of a nation must be to no small degree reflected in its [art]. *Art is inevitably the expression of external conditions, modified though they be by the genius and personality of the artist*.[13]

Examining the body of Thomas's work that is available in public and private collections and publications, one discovers that the color red is dominant. Over 25 works and several untitled studies and watercolors use the color red. They are: *Red Abstraction*, 1959; *Red Abstraction #2*, 1959 (page 35); *Red Forms*, 1960; *Nature's Red Impressions*, 1968 (page 71); *A Fall Garden of Mums*, 1969 (page 81); *Azaleas*, 1969 (page 83); *Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset*, 1970; *Mars Dust*, 1972; *A Red Display of Fall Leaves*, 1972 (page 103); *Red Roses Sonata*, 1972; *Deep Red Roses Chant*, 1972; *Antares*, 1972; *Red Sunset, Old Pond Concerto*, 1972; *Carnival of Autumn Leaves*, 1973; *Red Rose Cantata*, 1973; *Oriental Sunset*, 1973; *Orion*, 1973; *Approaching Storm at Sunset*, 1973 (page 111); *Fiery Sunset*, 1973; *Red Glow*, 1974; *Red Scarlet Sage*, 1976; *Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirlwind Dervish*, 1976; *Christmas*, 1976 (page 117); *For Vincent*, 1976 (page 119); *Red Rambling Rose Spring Song*, 1976; *Red Azaleas Sing and Dance Rock and Roll Music*, 1976; and *Red Sunset, Old Pond Concert*, 1977. Of these paintings, six have titles referring to flowers, five to music, five to sunsets, four to the seasons, and four to space; 13 titles include the word *red*. Nikki A. Greene has discussed Thomas's inspiration in botany, and Lauren Haynes has expounded upon the subject of astronomy in Thomas's practice.[14] The use of musical references in Thomas's titles—*cantata*, *concerto*, *chant*, *sonata*, and *symphony*—is elucidated by a passage from Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*:

> A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. *And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of color, for setting color in motion*.[15]

In Thomas's naming conventions, as well as in her paintings, we see the repetition of red. If the repetition of color is an expression of the artist's inner life, why did she use the color red? What does red represent? Were her responses to the political and economic conditions projected through pencil and paint onto the canvas? Is there a compounded symbolism of the color red and the blocks, broken bars, blurred brushstrokes? Ann Gibson, in her essay "Putting Alma Thomas in Place: Modernist Painting, Color Theory and Civil Rights," notes that "Thomas's intellectual activism was stated in the language of abstraction."[16] At the conclusion of the essay, Gibson asks, "Did Thomas regard the way she established the framework of her career, and even the way she chose her colors, as political acts?"[17]

We know that Thomas, a consummate chromologist, read Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color*, Johannes Itten's *The Art of Color*, and Patrick Heron's *Studio International* articles and essays. We know this in part because of how often she quoted them when explaining her work. Thomas was aware of the optical and psychological effects of the electromagnetic spectrum. While the colors yellow and blue were prevalent in her "post-painterly" compositions, I propose that the use of red—the color with the longest wavelength (670 nm)—predominates in her practice because it is considered the most powerful color, with the greatest impact on the psyche. "In the eye, these vibrations of light are converted into electrical impulses which travel to the brain—ending up in the hypothalamus which controls the endocrine glands, which regulates our hormones. Each color focuses on a particular part of the body, stimulating a specific physiological response, which in turn evokes a psychological reaction."[18] Color is a form of nonverbal communication. In contrast to blue which calms, and yellow which inspires optimism, red raises blood pressure.

For this examination, I will not rely *solely* on quotes from the interviews published in magazines and newspapers because, as a survival strategy, African Americans code-switch in conversation with European Americans. This elocution is the verbal consequence of W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" and is believed to alleviate racialized alienation and physical and psychological violence. Some have focused on Thomas's words, but decoding the work itself rather than her words may lead us to a deeper understanding of why she employed abstract expressionism as a language.

Thomas was teaching high school art in 1957, the same year that, on September 2, nine African American children were scheduled to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, as the first students to implement the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision that had declared segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus dispatched the National Guard to physically prevent the students from entering the school

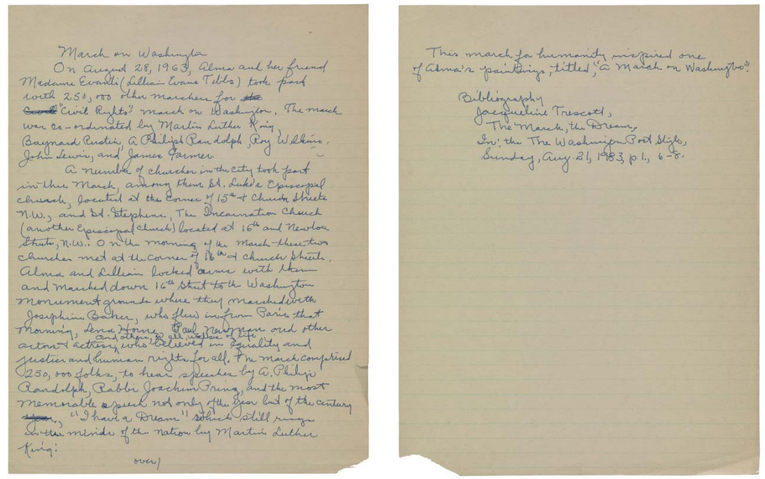
that day. Again the students (known as the Little Rock Nine) attempted to enter the school on September 4, but they were subjected to physical and psychological violence by an angry mob opposed to desegregation. Twenty-one days later, President Eisenhower sent soldiers from the National Guard and the Army's 101st Airborne to personally escort the students as they entered the school.[19] Central High School, whose building is composed of amber-colored bricks and surrounded by lush, deep-green grass and high pine trees, was closed in 1958 because Governor Faubus attempted to privatize the public school system to maintain segregation. In August of 1959 the school reopened. The images of Little Rock are ever etched into the mind's eye of the men and women who viewed them, whether standing on the scene or watching on the screen. In a spiritual sense, *Red Abstraction #2* (page 35) captures the aura of that specific moment in that specific place; the heat, tension, and anger. Having taught in the public school system for 34 years, and having pursued higher education herself, Alma Thomas cared deeply about the status of education and the school system in America. A woman who loved children, she undoubtedly sympathized with the Little Rock Nine so much that they may have been in her subconscious as she painted *Red Abstraction #2*.

Red Abstraction #2 was composed in the year after Thomas's return from Europe. It is as though the world is on fire: the left side of the canvas bursts of daring orange flames, while the broad brushstrokes of aggressive vermilion embers burn beneath. The right half of the canvas is a ragged rectangular configuration covered in crimson, contrasting with the bright orange flames only at the top-center of the canvas, as though two opposing forces met there. At the center-left, center-bottom, and center-right of the canvas are streaks of hues of blue, teal, and azure, suggesting military presence, strategically positioned against a hazy gray which extends as winds to the utmost corners of the canvas. And at the center of the canvas is a deep pine-colored formation, inside of which is an amber structure that suggests but resists the Josef Albers square. In this interaction of colors, oil paint has been applied in long, broad brushstrokes; there is a marked absence of pattern or geometric formation, no dabs, no white spaces. Here, the red represents rage.

Jonathan Binstock, in his essay "Apolitical Art in a Political World: Alma Thomas in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s," positions Thomas and her art as apolitical.[20] A reexamination of her work within the context of African American political history provides evidence to the contrary. It is only in a narrow reading of the potential of art to be politicized that her work can be seen as apolitical. Though she did not stand on the front lines protesting with members of the Art Workers Coalition, Ad Hoc, or the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, she was politically engaged. It is perhaps the case that in her late seventies and eighties she was prevented from participating in political activities due to the physical fragility of her age, psychological fatigue, or the seeming futility of physically confronting a psychological state. She pursued a different political strategy—painting.

In a letter dated September 30, 1963, James Farmer, national director of the Congress for Racial Equality, thanks Thomas for her participation in the *Artists for CORE* exhibition (May 23–29, 1963, at Martha Jackson Gallery) and reports the funds raised by the exhibition.

On August 28, 1963, Alma Thomas and a friend, the concert vocalist Lillian Evans (also known as Madame Evanti), joined the congregations of St. Luke's Episcopal Church and St. Stephen


March on Washington

On August 28, 1963, Alma and her friend Madame Evanti (Lillian Evans Tibbs) took part with 250,000 other marchers for ~~the~~ "Civil Rights" march on Washington. The march was co-ordinated by Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, John Lewis, and James Farmer.

A number of churches in the city took part in the March, among them St. Luke's Episcopal Church, located at the corner of 15th & Church Streets N.W., and St. Stephens, The Incarnation Church (another Episcopal church) located at 16th and Newton Streets, N.W. On the morning of the March-the marchers met at the corner of 16th & Church Streets. Alma and Lillian locked arms with them and marched down 16th Street to the Washington monument grounds where they marched with Josephine Baker, who flew in from Paris that morning, Lena Horne, Paul Newman and other actors, actresses and others, of all walks of life who believed in equality and justice and human rights for all. The march comprised 250,000 folks, to hear speeches by A. Philip Randolph, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, and the most memorable speech not only of the Year but of the century, "I Have a Dream" spoken & still ringing in the minds of the nation by Martin Luther King.

over)

This march for humanity inspired one of Alma's paintings, titled "A March on Washington."

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Jacqueline Trescott,
"The March, the Dream,
& the Washington Post Style,"
Sunday, Aug 21, 1983, p. 1, 6-8.

FIGURE 5

John Maurice Thomas, "Manuscript about Alma Thomas's March on Washington, DC, 1963," 1983, Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894–2001, Archives of American Art, box 2, folder 16

and the Incarnation Church at the corner of 16th and Church Streets in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. As one of the 250,000 people holding placards at their chests and above their heads, surrounding the Lincoln Memorial, she witnessed as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the speech in which he declared, "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood." King's reference to red means bloodshed. Thomas's youngest sister John Maurice later reflected, in a handwritten note (Figure 5):

> Alma and Lillian locked arms with them and marched down 16th Street to the Washington Monument grounds where they marched with Josephine Baker, who flew in from Paris that morning, Lena Horne, Paul Newman and other actors, actresses and others, of all walks of life who believed in equality and justice and human rights for all.[21]

Attempting to render that historical moment in 1963, Alma Thomas made two sketches for her most overtly political painting, entitled *March on Washington*, which was completed in 1964.

March on Washington and *Watusi (Hard Edge)*, 1963 (page 45), are two paintings that signify the shifts between 1963 and 1964. The first shift is from representational to nonrepresentational painting. In his essay "The Black Artist as Invisible (Wo)Man," Dawoud Bey asserts that "for a number of black artists, the decision to work outside of the boundaries of a racial and socialized form of representation came only after making exactly that type of work."[22] The second shift is from the wide brushstrokes of the Matisse-inspired *Watusi (Hard Edge)* to narrower, angular, symbolic gestures, which may be attributed in part to the fact that Thomas developed severe arthritis in 1964, which impacted her ability to paint and led to innovation in her artistic practice. Lowery Stokes Sims writes, "The work of the 1960s is characterized by a shortening and regimentation

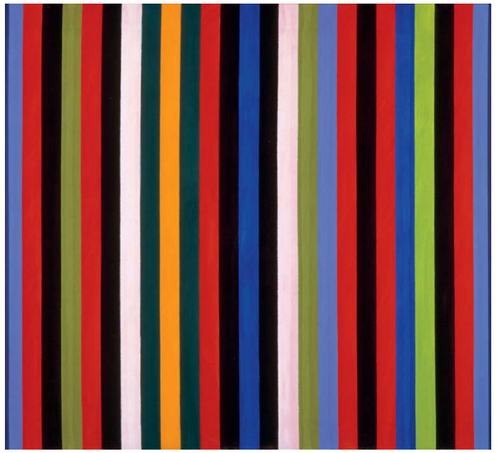

FIGURE 6

Kenneth Noland, *Blue, Yellow, Black*, n.d., acrylic on canvas, 33¾ × 33¾ inches (85.7 × 85.7 cm). Private collection

FIGURE 7

Gene Davis, *Hot Beat*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 45⅝ × 50¼ inches (115.9 × 127.6 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Woodward Foundation

of strokes, as well as a restriction of palette . . . and the objectification of the creative process that marked the artistic phenomena of the decade, Minimalism and Color Field Painting."[23]

Given the debate then raging among African American artists attempting to define "Black Art," it was radical for an African American woman to be an abstract expressionist painter. Perhaps it was even more radical to place herself in competition and comparison with white male Color Field painters of the Washington Color School, particularly Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Gene Davis. Noland was a student of Albers, and was known for staining concentric circles, chevrons, and stripes upon unprimed canvas (Figure 6). Louis, who trained at the Maryland Institute College of Applied Science, had abandoned the brush and begun to pour thinned Magna paint upon unprimed canvas. Davis was an untrained artist known for his hard-edge striped paintings, achieved by using tape in intervals of contrasting color (Figure 7). Noland's and Davis's influence has been well documented, yet Thomas's practice was distinct. She primed her canvases, measured her lines with a yardstick and marked pencil, and applied paint with brushes. Her intervention was not merely mimetic but technical and metaphorical.

On April 24, 1966, *Alma Thomas: A Retrospective Exhibition 1959–1966* opened at the Howard University Gallery of Art. At Thomas's alma mater, where her career as an artist began, she presented older works, such as *Red Abstraction #2*, and debuted the oeuvre for which she became internationally known. In images of the exhibition's opening night, Thomas smiles, standing close to her works in a powerful red jacket and skirt, surrounded by James Herring, James A. Porter, and David Driskell.

On April 4, 1968, African American men, primarily waste management workers for the city of Memphis, stood in similar lines, first moving forward, striking for higher wages, led by the Nobel Peace laureate Dr. King. That afternoon, standing in front of the crowd on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel, King was assassinated. At the announcement of his death, time stood still. The next day, the first processional was held in Memphis. This was followed by two funeral services conducted on April 9, 1968, in Atlanta, the first held for family and close friends at Ebenezer

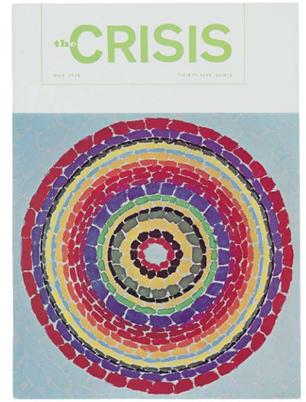

FIGURE 8

The Crisis, May 1970, with Thomas's *Spring—Delightful Flower Bed*, 1967, on the cover

Baptist Church, where King and his father had both served as senior pastors, followed by a three-mile procession to Morehouse College, King's alma mater, for a public service. A week later, on April 11, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act—the Civil Rights Act of 1968—prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race in the leasing and sale of houses and apartments. It was based on a proposal Johnson had discussed with Dr. King.

Like the tesserae lining the walls of the Basilica of San Vitale, the columns in Thomas's *Nature's Red Impressions* (page 71) commemorate the life of a political and spiritual leader. A pale pink vertical staccato "Alma stripe" lines the outermost edge of the canvas, contrasting with the blood red "Alma stripe" beside it.[24] Each stripe was delineated by wrapping a rubber band around a primed canvas and marking it inch by inch in graphite, measured with a yardstick. Applied right to left, top to bottom, are 10 syncopated colors of varying vibrance; embedded in the direction and movement of the 50 stripes formed of broken bars is a processional, emblematic of progress.

As she did with CORE years prior, Thomas continued to conspire with the leaders of the Civil Rights movement. The May 1970 issue of NAACP's *The Crisis* featured Thomas's *Spring—Delightful Flower Bed*, 1967 (Figure 8). At the time of the magazine's printing, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund was preparing to argue the case Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education before the Supreme Court on October 12, 1970.

On April 20, 1971, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled unanimously that busing students was a constitutional strategy to desegregate public schools and achieve racial balance. The artist Tomashi Jackson, an African American woman abstract painter working today, has used color theory to investigate "the history of American school desegregation and the contemporary re-segregation of public space."[25] Jackson says:

> I recognized terms about how "colors" interact from Albers's [*Interaction of Color*]: colored, boundaries, movement, transparency, mixture, purity, restriction, deception, memory, transformation, instrumentation, systems, recognition, psychic effect, placement, quality, and value. The language around *de jure* segregation is similar

FIGURE 9

Installation view of *Alma W. Thomas*, 1972, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

> to Albers's description of the wrong way to perceive color, as if color is static. Marshall and Albers concluded that color is relative, and what a viewer perceives a color to be is determined by the color nearest to it. Color is always changing, and, contrary to popular belief, it is not absolute. I saw the phenomenon of vibrating boundaries aligned with residential redistricting and redlining. Color theory and human rights are conceptually interwoven in my paintings. I find the language comparisons appropriate metaphors for a critique of racism rather than a critique of categories of race.[26]

The centrifugal force of spring green in Thomas's *Springtime in Washington*, 1971 (page 99), draws the concentric circles of kaleidoscopic rings closer to one another, with red rings illuminating a portal to another dimension. Like the Supreme Court ruling which revolutionized the American public education system, Thomas's ritualistic celebration of color revolves around the possibility of rebirth in the US center of political power, with reverberations around the world. The 23 rings of varying widths narrow as they oscillate toward the circle's center. With the precision of a pointillist, Thomas placed contrasting colors in conversation: four rings of cobalt, three rings of green, two rings of yellow, two rings of orange, three rings of vermilion, three rings of fuchsia, and nine rings of scarlet. Reminiscent of the halos in Byzantine mosaics, these luminous circular formations are punctuated by the white underlay; the colors pulsate against a sublime opaline hue which extends from the outermost circle to the corners of the canvas. One of several works that Thomas consigned to the Department of State's Art in Embassies program between 1969 and 1975, *Springtime in Washington* hung in the United States Embassy in Managua, Nicaragua.

In April 1972, the curator Robert Doty installed a single-room exhibition of six works on paper and 13 paintings by Thomas in the lower lobby of the Whitney Museum of American Art (Figure 9). The show was a part of a series of five solo exhibitions by African Americans that were developed in response to the demands of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. At the age of 80, Thomas rose to national attention, becoming the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney. The *New York Times* published three reviews of the exhibition, making Thomas

also the first African American woman to achieve critical acclaim as a non-figurative painter. In the years that followed, she exhibited extensively. In fact, she had more solo exhibitions in 1970–85 than nearly any other woman artist; only Laurie Anderson, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Nevelson, and Lee Krasner had more.[27]

Thomas's 1976 painting *For Vincent* (page 119) is a mélange of her tachiste abstractions of the 1950s and new, boldly articulated hieroglyphic markings on a monochromatic background. In *For Vincent*, small angular and semi-circular blurred brushstrokes of fire cascade across the surface of a rectangular canvas. The upper-right portion is underlaid in powder blue, which diagonally transitions to jasmine green, before giving way to a citron yellow. A gift from Thomas to Vincent Melzac that was displayed for decades in Melzac's home, this painting captures the controversial character of the person for whom it was named.[28] Known as a "racehorse-breeding playboy art collector," Melzac accumulated his fortune as the owner of a beauty school franchise; by the late '60s, he owned "arguably the most important private collection of works by the Washington Color School."[29] He was able to conflate his personal and professional prowess briefly, as the CEO of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. However, his tenure ended abruptly after a bloody fistfight with then-director Gene Baro on November 3, 1972.

Thomas's second retrospective had taken place at the Corcoran a few months prior (September 8–October 15, 1972), and Melzac was convinced that her work was as important as the work of the white male artists with whom she shared geographic and aesthetic space. To support Thomas's career and secure her place in the canon through exhibitions and acquisitions, Melzac purchased several works during her lifetime. He later donated the following to the Smithsonian American Art Museum: *Atmospheric Effects II*, 1971; *Untitled*, 1970; *Before Autumn*, 1974; *Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto*, 1973; *Snoopy—Early Sun Display on Earth*, 1970; *Atmospheric Effects I*, 1970; and *Grey Night Phenomenon*, 1972. He also gifted four paintings to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden: *Watusi (Hard Edge)*; *Joe Summerford's Still Life Study*, 1952; *Blue and Brown Still Life*, 1958; and *Skylight*, 1973.

Melzac's acquisitions are important today for framing the political context of the Washington Color School. Carey Dunne writes in *Hyperallergic*, "In 1968…Vincent Melzac…loaned a series of abstract paintings to the CIA. All were by artists affiliated with the Washington Color School. In 1987, the agency purchased 11 of these paintings. Eighteen more paintings were loaned in 2000 and then returned to the Melzac Estate [in 2015]. The original 11 paintings still hang on the walls of the agency's headquarters."[30] Thomas's *Mars Reflection*, 1972, is one of the paintings that was loaned to and later purchased by the CIA. Onetime CIA Museum director Carolyn Reams told Dunne, "[The paintings] are used for training purposes.… We'll have some of our guys and gals come down here and do a critical analysis of the paintings. Say you've got to analyze this big, heavy duty ISIL problem over here—maybe if you come look at the painting, it'll help you think about how to solve the ISIL problem creatively."[31] At the intersection of art and international politics, Alma Thomas is, once again, the only woman and the only African American artist included in this section of the CIA's collection.

In tandem with Thomas's breakthrough in the art world, Barbara Jordan became, on July 12, 1976, the first African American and the first woman to deliver a keynote address at the Democratic

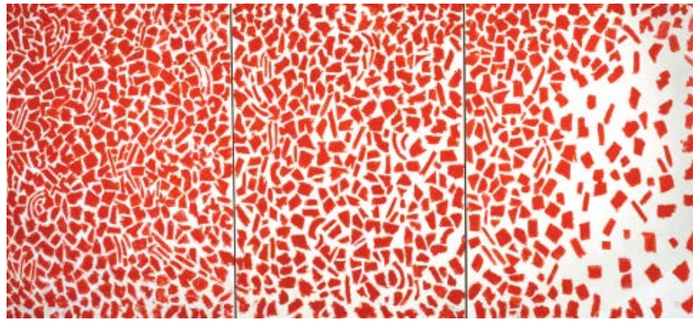

FIGURE 10

Alma Thomas, *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music*, 1976, 73¾ × 158½ × 2½ inches (187.3 × 402.6 × 6.4 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.2A-C

National Convention where Jimmy Carter was nominated for the presidency. African Americans played a key role in electing Carter later that year. In 1977, Carter invited Alma Thomas to the White House.

Red Azaleas Sing and Dance Rock and Roll Music, 1976 (Figure 10), debuted in the exhibition *Alma Thomas: Recent Paintings 1975–1976*, Thomas's second show at Martha Jackson West in New York. The red azaleas in the painting are humanized. Irregular bars and serpentine brushstrokes of ruby red tesserae form heptagonal groupings which rhythmically contract and expand from right to left. Experiencing freedom, the forms rhizomatically migrate across the tripartite canvas, twirling and circulating, crossing borders from the densely populated left side of the painting, where color is segregated, to the right side of the canvas, where the forms are desegregated, dispersed unevenly throughout white spaces. The hybrid azaleas from the South that are cultivated in the National Arboretum, not far from Thomas's longtime home, make an apt metaphor for Thomas's life. She too was plucked from the South and replanted in the North. Botanists say that the azalea symbolizes remembering one's home with fondness, or wishing to return home. The red azalea, for Thomas, may also represent a romanticization of the gardens on her grandfather's plantation in Georgia where she played in red clay, and of her childhood and Southern roots; an understanding of the bloody circumstances that caused her to be uprooted from her home; and the revelry of newfound freedom.

In 1977, the year prior to Thomas's death, having accepted Jimmy Carter's invitation to the White House, Thomas found herself at the center of both Abstract Expressionist art and politics, neither one of which was considered an African American woman's realm at the time of her birth 86 years prior. Through the use of mosaic iconography and an understanding of color theory, she innovated a signature style, incorporating African American advocacy for equality and education in each calculated, syncopated brushstroke. Thomas's radical refusal of the barriers to African American women's ascendance in the art world won her a central place in the Old Family Dining Room at the White House and a coveted place in art history. At the request of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama in 2015 (37 years after Thomas's death), she became the first African American woman to have a painting enter the White House's permanent collection. In some ways a metaphor for Thomas's career trajectory after 2015, the White House painting is entitled *Resurrection*, 1966.

NOTES

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4. "Anti-Negro Riots," *London Standard*, September 26, 1906, p. 7.

5. See David Fort Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

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7. See Benjamin, "From Academic Representation to Poetic Abstraction," p. 21.

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13. Alma Thomas, typescript of autobiographical writings, circa 1960s–70, Alma Thomas Papers, Circa 1894–2001, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, box 2, folder 7, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/alma-thomas-papers-9241/subseries-3-1/box-2-folder-7. Thomas here paraphrases Robert Clermont Witt in places; for Witt's original, see *How to Look at Pictures*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1906), p. 21. Emphasis mine.

14. See Nikki A. Greene, "'Wind, Sunshine and Flowers': The Visual Cadences of Alma Thomas's Washington, DC," and Lauren Haynes, "Painting Space," both in *Alma Thomas*, exh. cat., ed. Ian Berry and Lauren Haynes (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem; Saratoga Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2016), pp. 53–59, 101–105.

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17. Gibson, "Putting Alma Thomas in Place," p. 50.

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19. Lonnie Bunch, "The Little Rock Nine," *Our American Story* (blog), National Museum of African American History & Culture, Smithsonian Institution, https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/little-rock-nine.

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21. John Maurice Thomas, "Manuscript about Alma Thomas's March on Washington, DC, 1963," 1983, Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894–2001, Archives of American Art, box 2, folder 16, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/alma-thomas-papers-9241/subseries-3-2/box-2-folder-16.

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24. Thomas referred to her own technique as "Alma stripes."

25. Risa Puleo, "The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism," *Hyperallergic*, December 14, 2016, https://hyperallergic.com/345021/the-linguistic-overlap-of-color-theory-and-racism/.

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30. Carey Dunne, "A Visit to the CIA's 'Secret' Abstract Art Collection," *Hyperallergic*, October 20, 2016, https://hyperallergic.com/294142/a-visit-to-the-the-cias-secret-abstract-art-collection/.

31. Dunne, "A Visit to the CIA's "Secret" Abstract Art Collection."

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ALMA
THOMAS
RESURRECTION

Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man.

–ALMA THOMAS, 1972

Through color I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather
on man's inhumanity to man.

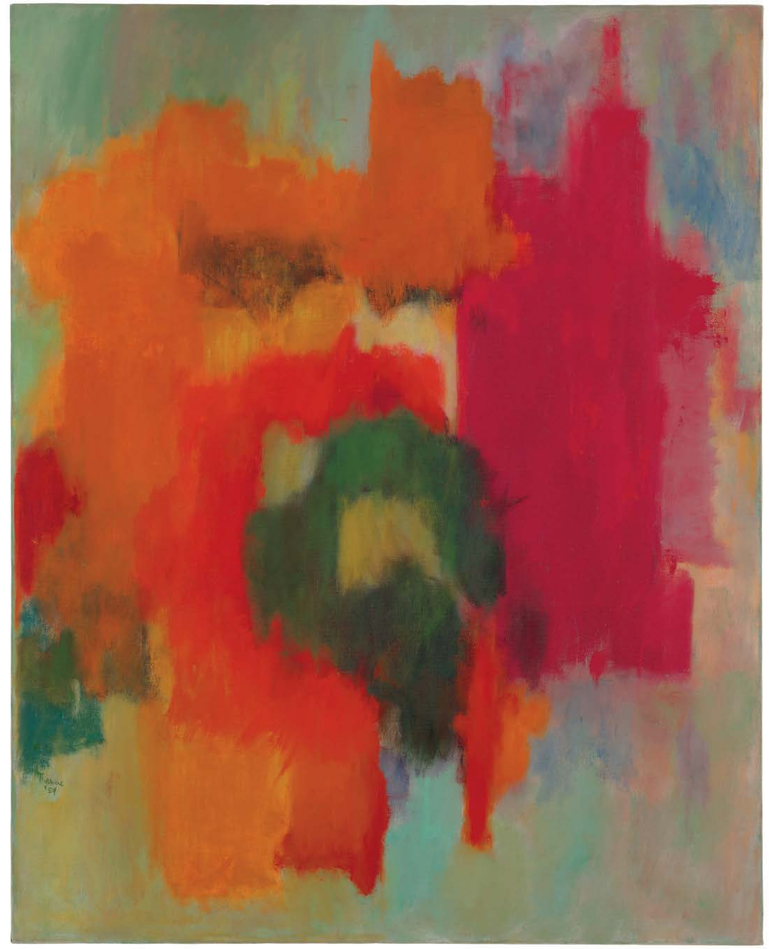
Red Abstraction #2

1959

Oil on canvas

40 × 32 inches

(101.6 × 81.3 cm)



Untitled

circa 1960
Watercolor on paper
9 × 12 inches
(22.9 × 30.5 cm)

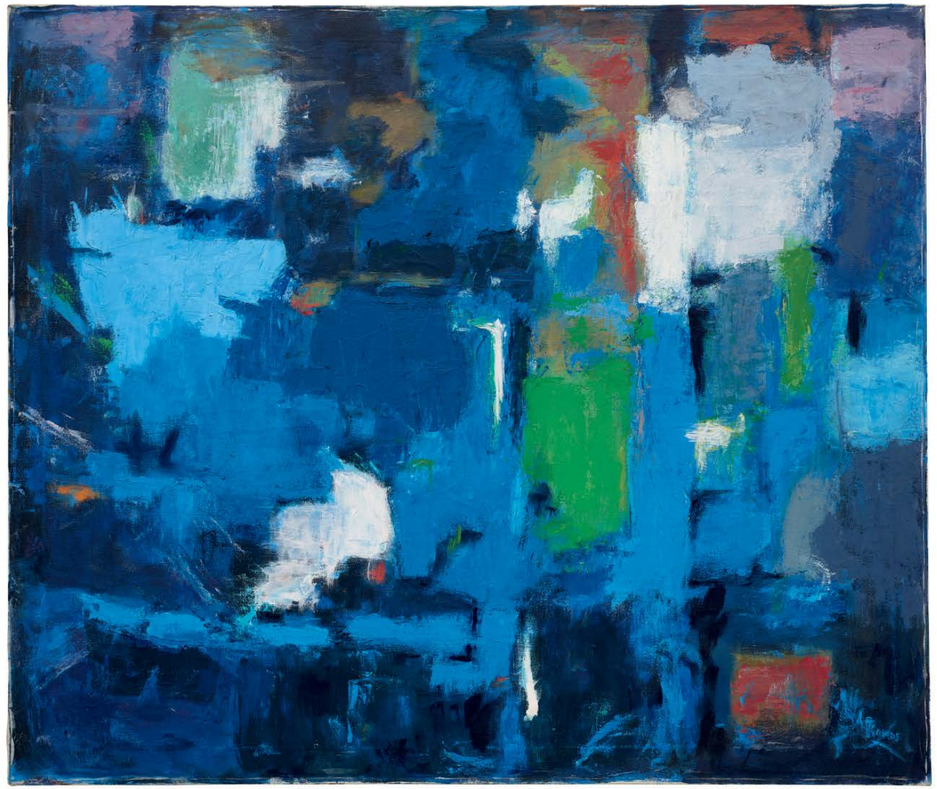
Blue Abstraction

1961

Oil on canvas

34 × 40 inches

(86.4 × 101.6 cm)



Watusi (Hard Edge)

1963

Acrylic on canvas

47 5⁄8 × 44 1⁄4 inches

(121 × 112.4 cm)

Untitled

circa 1965
Watercolor on paper
9 ½ × 12 ⅛ inches
(24.1 × 30.8 cm)

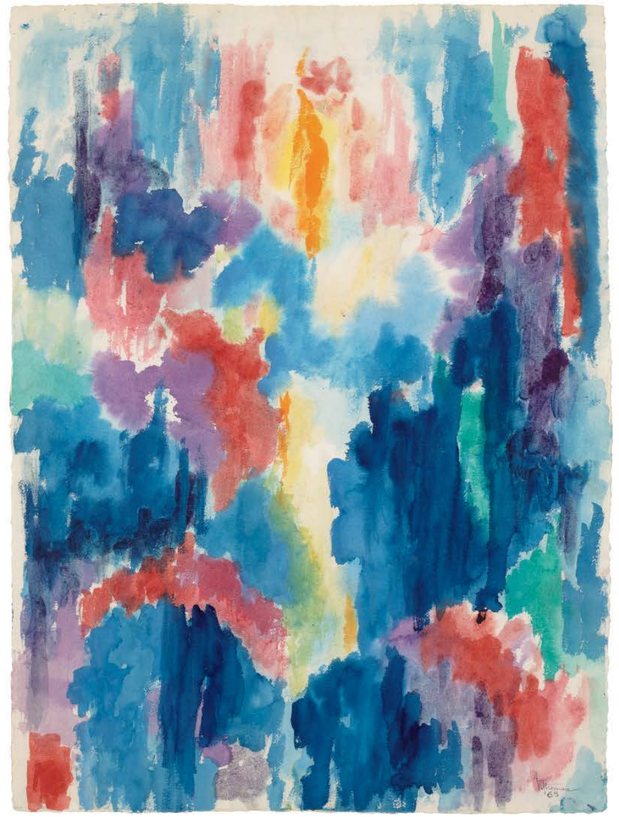
Untitled

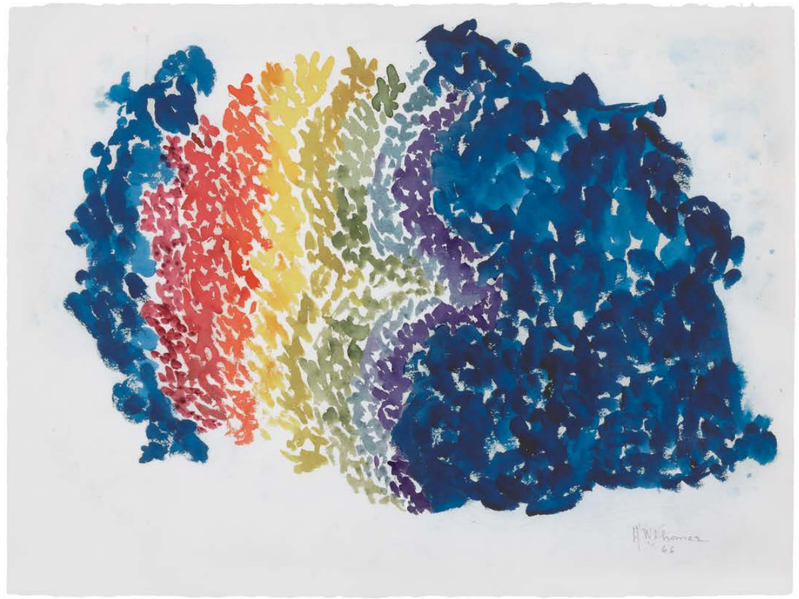
1965

Watercolor on paper

30 ½ × 22 ¾ inches

(77.5 × 57.8 cm)





Confetti
1966
Watercolor on paper
22½ × 29¾ inches
(57.2 × 75.6 cm)

Untitled
1966
Watercolor on paper
22½ × 30½ inches
(57.2 × 77.5 cm)

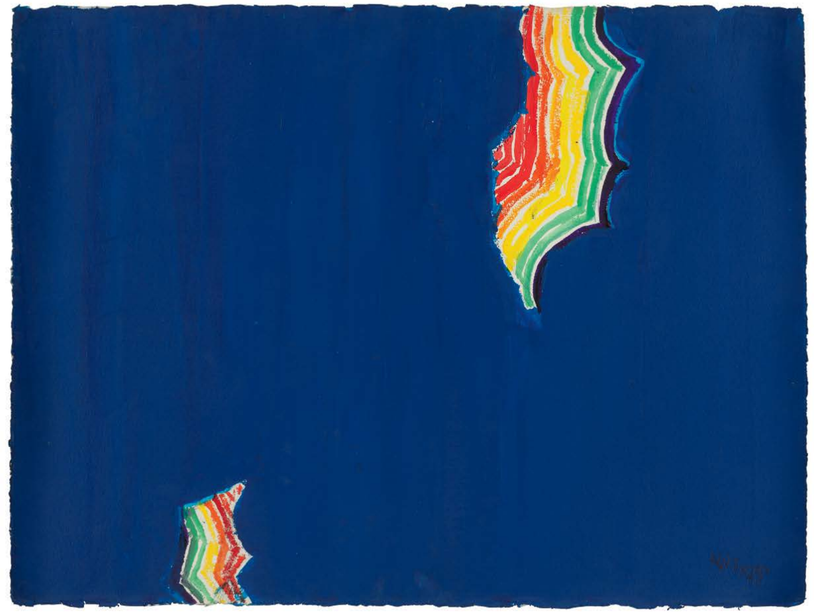
Fallen Wings

1967

Acrylic on paper

22 ¾ × 30 inches

(57.8 × 76.2 cm)



Spectrum
1967
Acrylic on paper
22 × 30 inches
(55.9 × 76.2 cm)

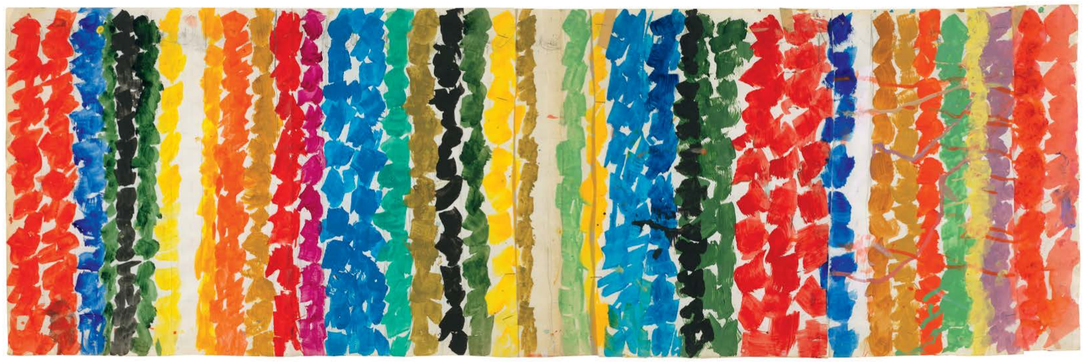
Untitled (Study for Breeze Rustling through Fall Flowers, 1968)

circa 1968

Acrylic on cut-and-stapled paper

16 × 49½ inches

(40.6 × 125.7 cm)



Untitled

circa 1968

Acrylic on cut-and-stapled paper

18 ½ × 34 inches

(47 × 86.4 cm)

Burst of Fall
1968
Acrylic on canvas
48 × 24 inches
(121.9 × 61 cm)

End of Autumn

1968

Acrylic and graphite on canvas

24 ⅞ × 24 ⅞ inches

(63.2 × 63.2 cm)

Nature's Red Impressions

1968

Acrylic on canvas

51 × 49 ½ inches

(129.5 × 125.7 cm)

Orange Glow

1968

Acrylic on canvas

29 ¾ × 49 inches

(75.6 × 124.5 cm)

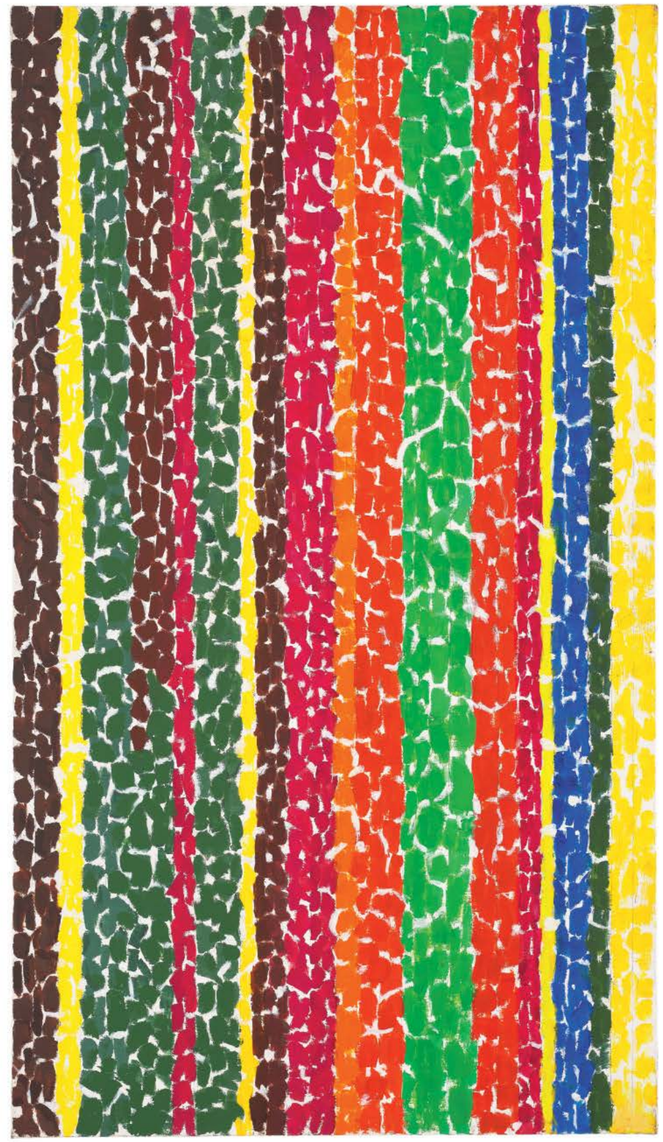
Summer At Its Best

1968

Acrylic on canvas

49 × 29 inches

(124.5 × 73.7 cm)



A Fall Garden of Mums

1969

Acrylic on canvas

27 ¾ × 27 ¾ inches

(70.5 × 70.5 cm)

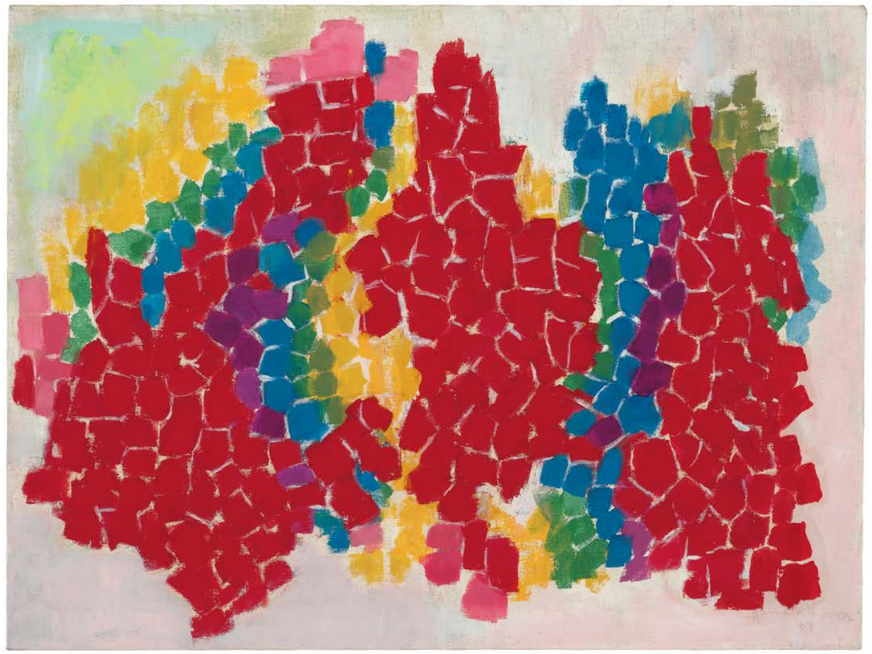
Azaleas

1969

Acrylic on canvas

23½ × 31½ inches

(59.7 × 80 cm)



Spring Delight

1969

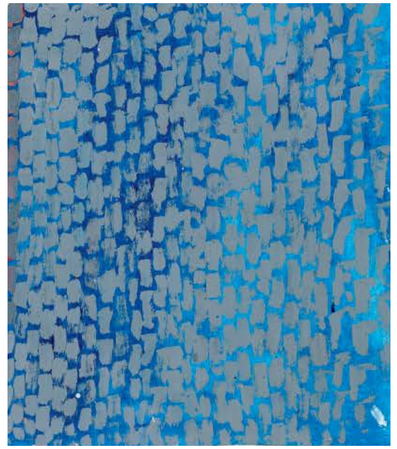
Watercolor on paper

12 × 15 inches

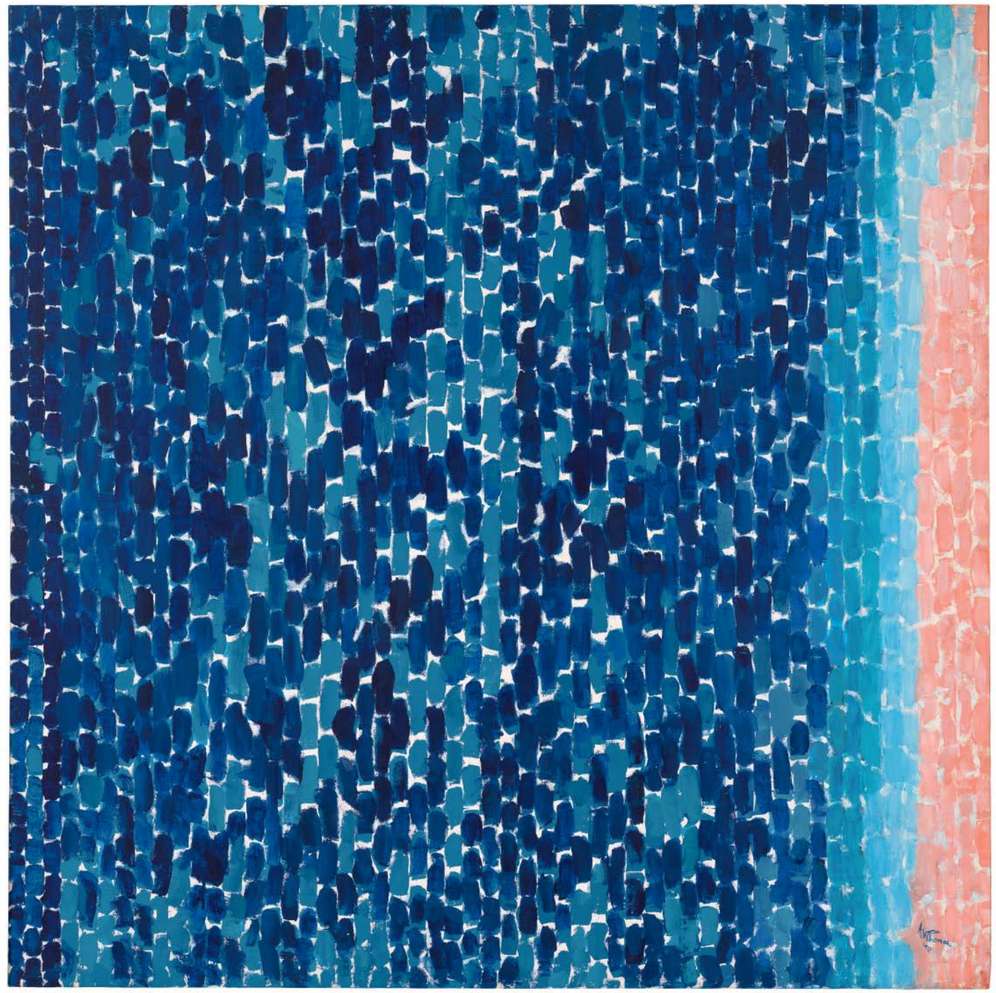
(30.5 × 38.1 cm)

Untitled

circa 1970s
Acrylic on paper
8 × 7 inches
(20.3 × 17.8 cm)



New Galaxy
1970
Acrylic on canvas
54 × 54 inches
(137.2 × 137.2 cm)



Snoopy Sees a Daybreak on Earth

1970

Acrylic on canvas

48 ½ × 50 ¼ inches

(123.2 × 127.6 cm)

Give Love Hope For Peace 1971

1971

Acrylic on arches paper

6 ½ × 9 ¾ inches

(16.5 × 24.8 cm)

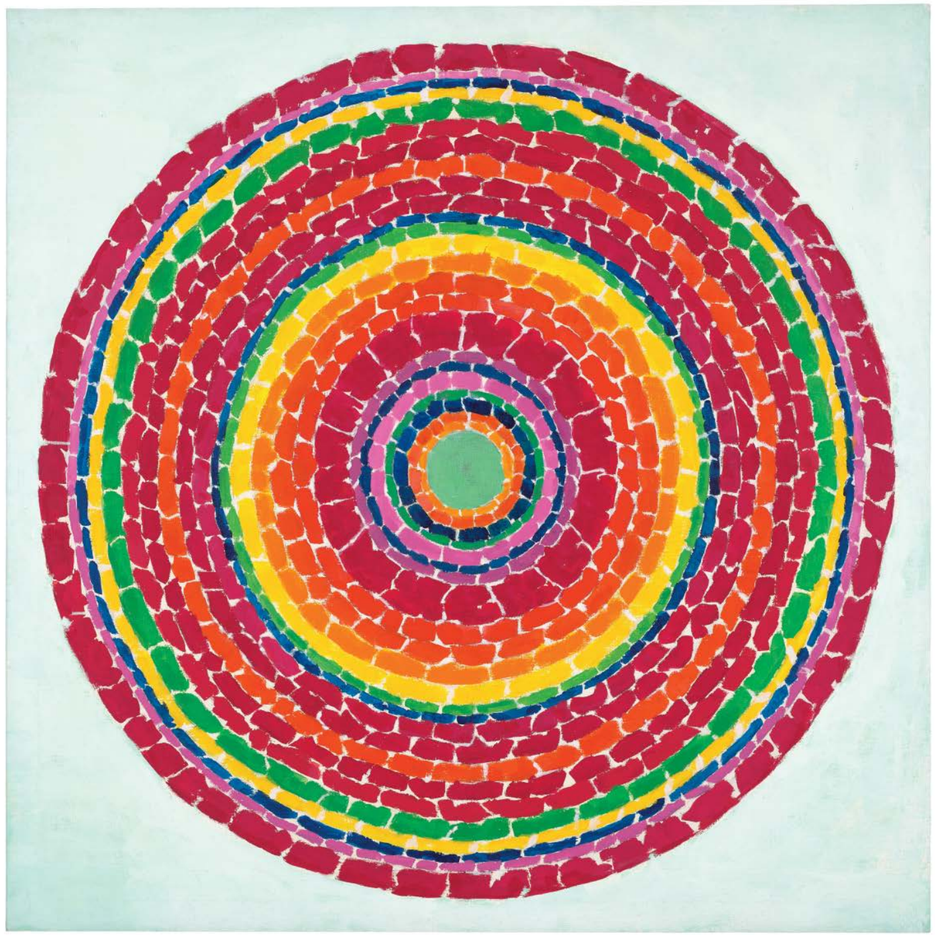
Springtime in Washington

1971

Acrylic on canvas

48 × 48 inches

(121.9 × 121.9 cm)



Untitled

1971

Gouache on paper

8 ¼ × 9 inches

(21 × 22.9 cm)

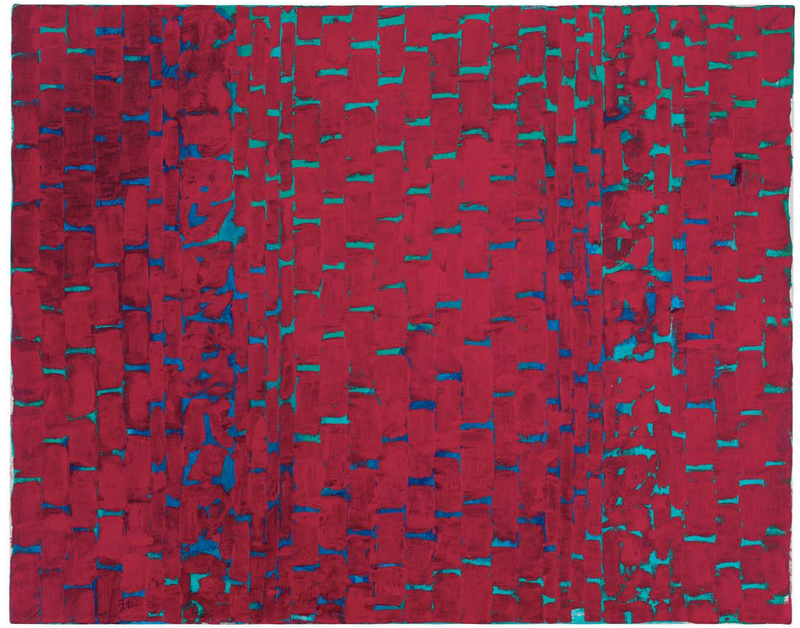
A Red Display of Fall Leaves

1972

Acrylic on canvas

22 × 30 inches

(55.9 × 76.2 cm)



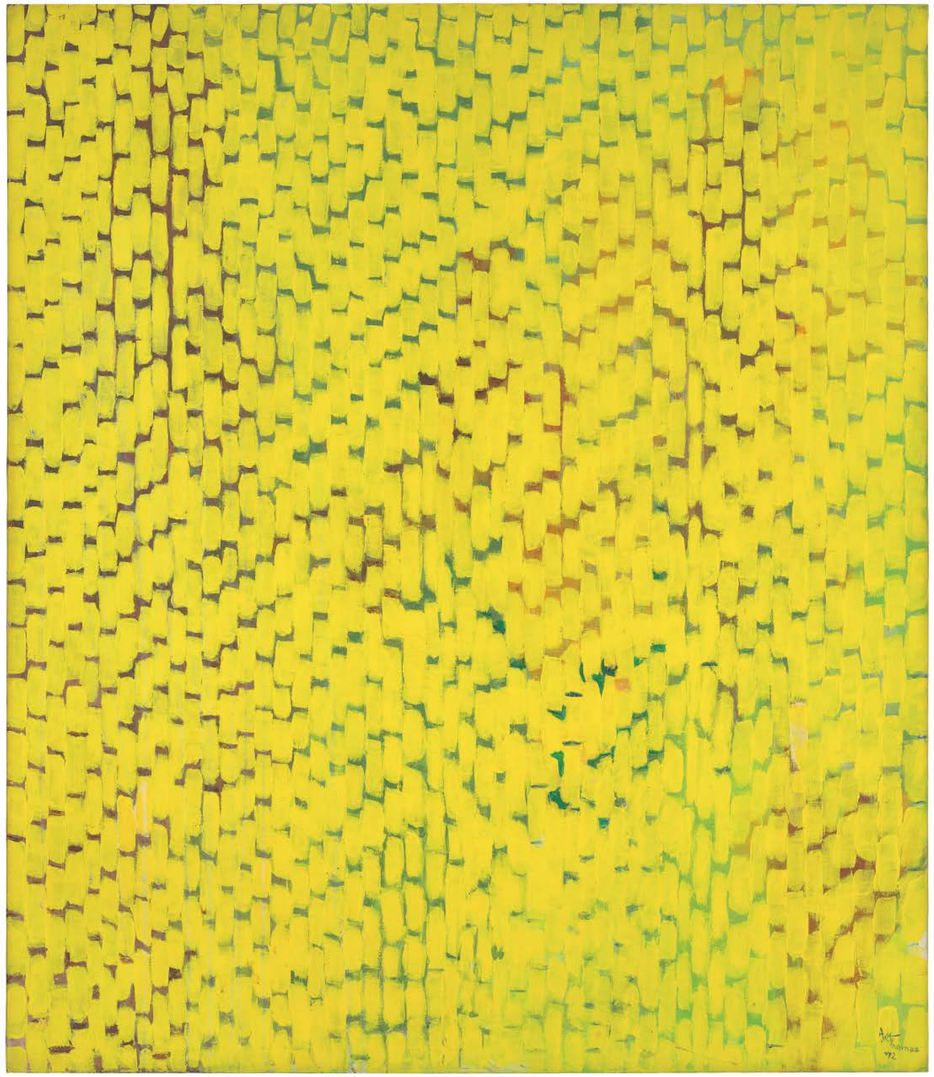
Forsythia Among Spring Flowers

1972

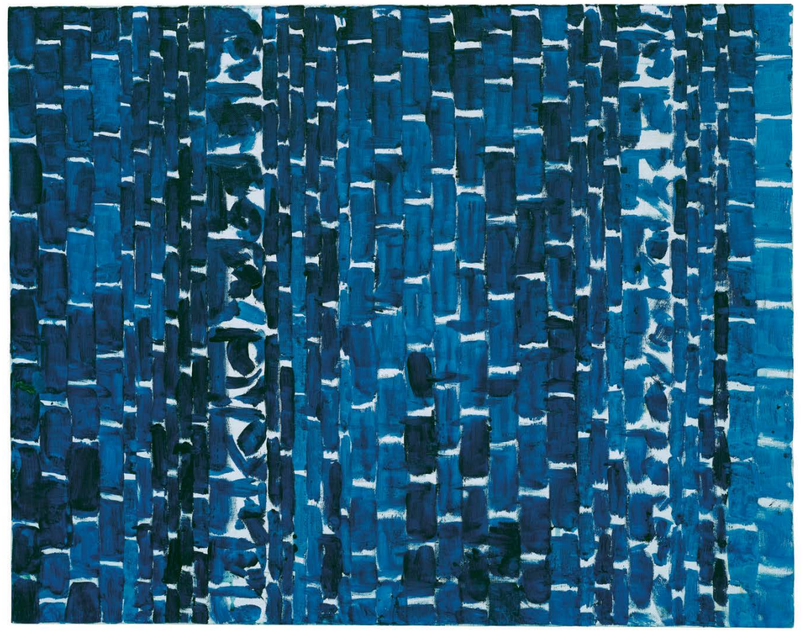
Acrylic on canvas

61 × 53 inches

(154.9 × 134.6 cm)



Milky Way
1972
Acrylic on canvas
22 × 28 inches
(55.9 × 71.1 cm)



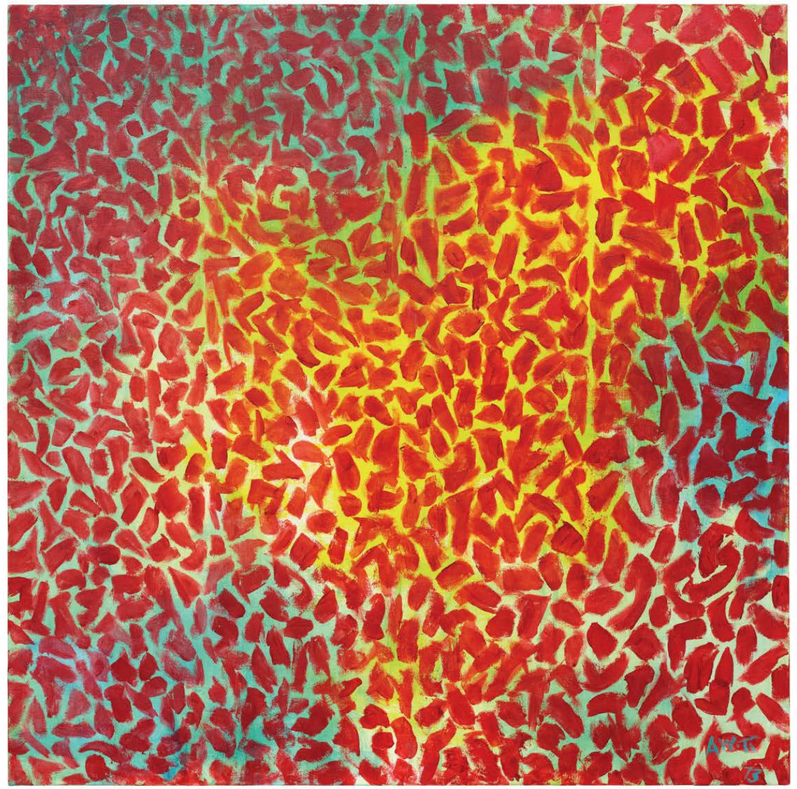
Approaching Storm at Sunset

1973

Acrylic on canvas

38 × 38 inches

(96.5 × 96.5 cm)



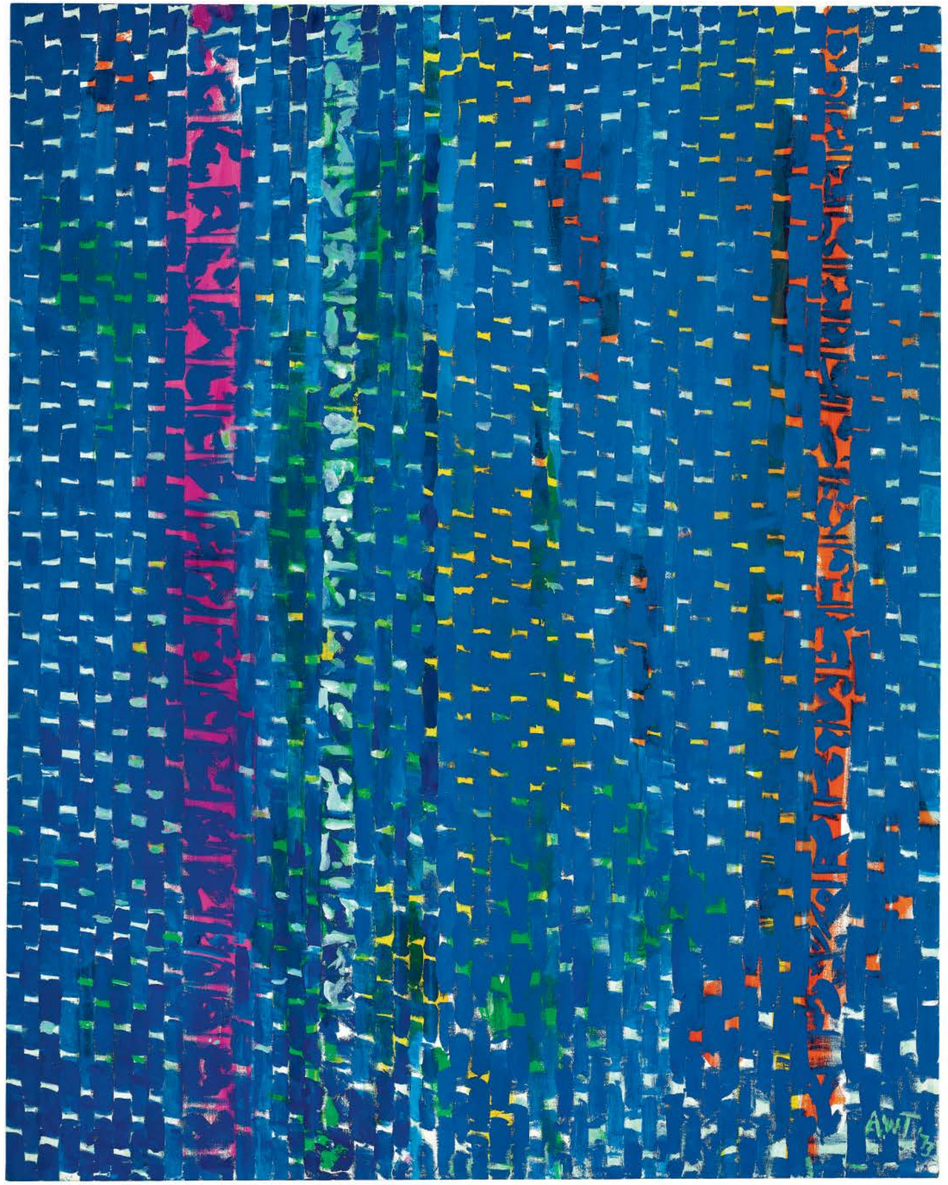
Night Sky Mysteries

1973

Acrylic on canvas

68 × 54 inches

(172.7 × 137.2 cm)



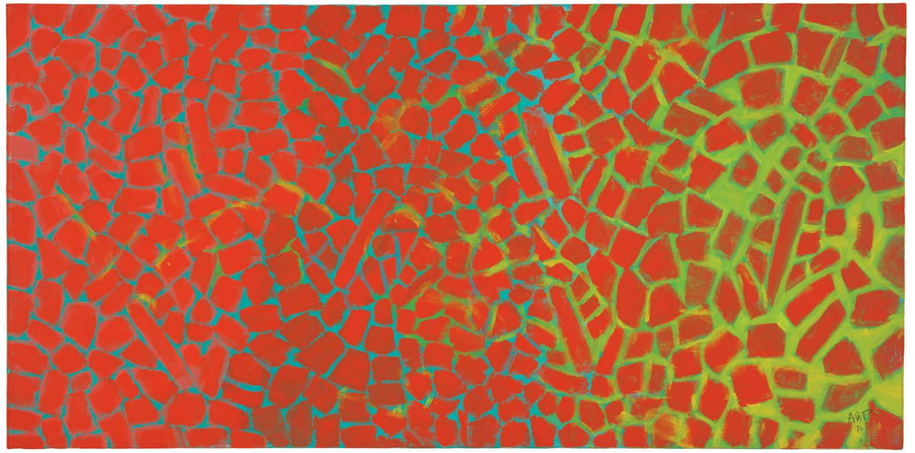
Christmas

1976

Acrylic on canvas

24 × 48 inches

(61 × 121.9 cm)



For Vincent

1976
Acrylic on canvas
50 × 26 inches
(127 × 66 cm)

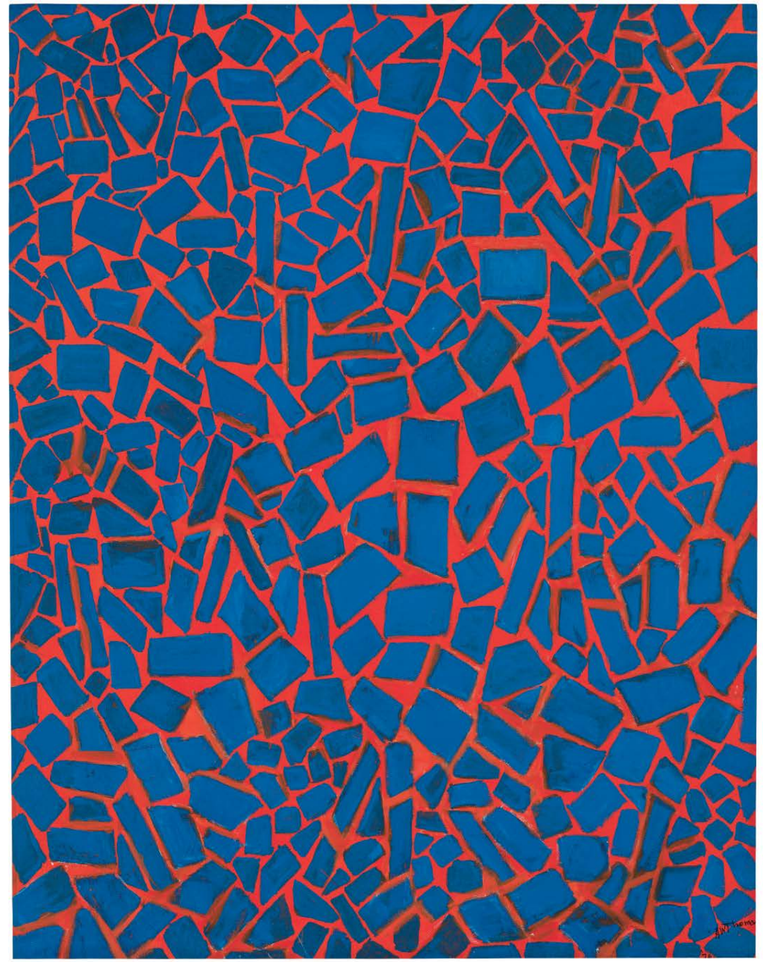
Sunset Duet

1976

Acrylic on canvas

46 × 36 inches

(116.8 × 91.4 cm)

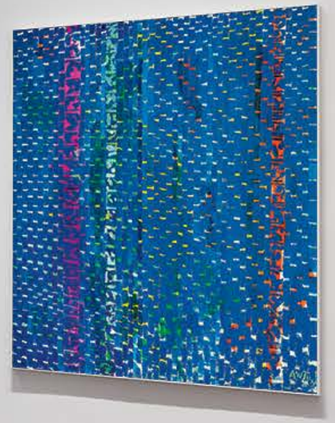


One of the things we couldn't do was to go into museums, let alone think of hanging our pictures there. My, times have changed. Just look at me now.

—ALMA THOMAS, 1972

When I was in the South, that was segregated. When I came to Washington, that was segregated. And New York—that was segregated, too. But I always thought the reason was ignorance. I thought myself superior and kept going. Culture is sensitivity to beauty. And a cultured person is the highest stage of the human being. If everybody were cultured we would have no wars or disturbance. There would be peace in the world.

—ALMA THOMAS, 1978



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Red Abstraction #2
1959
Oil on canvas
40 × 32 inches
(101.6 × 81.3 cm)
Private collection
page 35

Untitled
circa 1960
Watercolor on paper
9 × 12 inches
(22.9 × 30.5 cm)
Private collection
page 39

Blue Abstraction
1961
Oil on canvas
34 × 40 inches
(86.4 × 101.6 cm)
The work is on Loan from Howard University
and Howard University reserves all rights
page 41

Watusi (Hard Edge)
1963
Acrylic on canvas
47 ⅝ × 44 ¼ inches
(121 × 112.4 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC,
Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1976
page 45

Untitled
circa 1965
Watercolor on paper
9 ½ × 12 ⅛ inches
(24.1 × 30.8 cm)
Private collection
page 47

Untitled
1965
Watercolor on paper
30 ½ × 22 ¾ inches
(77.5 × 57.8 cm)
Private collection
page 49

Confetti
1966
Watercolor on paper
22 ½ × 29 ¾ inches
(57.2 × 75.6 cm)
Private collection
page 51

Untitled
1966
Watercolor on paper
22 ½ × 30 ½ inches
(57.2 × 77.5 cm)
Byron E. Lewis, Sr., and Sylvia S. Lewis
page 53

Fallen Wings
1967
Acrylic on paper
22 ¾ × 30 inches
(57.8 × 76.2 cm)
Private collection
page 55

Spectrum
1967
Acrylic on paper
22 × 30 inches
(55.9 × 76.2 cm)
Private collection
page 59

Untitled (Study for Breeze Rustling through Fall Flowers, 1968)
circa 1968
Acrylic on cut-and-stapled paper
16 × 49 ½ inches
(40.6 × 125.7 cm)
Private collection
page 61

Untitled
circa 1968
Acrylic on cut-and-stapled paper
18 ½ × 34 inches
(47 × 86.4 cm)
Private collection, Florida,
courtesy of Emily Friedman Fine Art
page 63

Burst of Fall
1968
Acrylic on canvas
48 × 24 inches
(121.9 × 61 cm)
Private collection
page 67

End of Autumn
1968
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
24 ⅞ × 24 ⅞ inches
(63.2 × 63.2 cm)
Private collection, New York
page 69

Nature's Red Impressions
1968
Acrylic on canvas
51 × 49 ½ inches
(129.5 × 125.7 cm)
George Washington University Collection,
courtesy of the Luther W. Brady Art Gallery
page 71

Orange Glow
1968
Acrylic on canvas
29 ¾ × 49 inches
(75.6 × 124.5 cm)
The work is on Loan from Howard University
and Howard University reserves all rights
page 75

Summer At Its Best
1968
Acrylic on canvas
49 × 29 inches
(124.5 × 73.7 cm)
Private collection
page 77

A Fall Garden of Mums
1969
Acrylic on canvas
27 ¾ × 27 ¾ inches
(70.5 × 70.5 cm)
Private collection
page 81

Azaleas
1969
Acrylic on canvas
23 ½ × 31 ½ inches
(59.7 × 80 cm)
Private collection
page 83

Spring Delight
1969
Watercolor on paper
12 × 15 inches
(30.5 × 38.1 cm)
Private collection, California,
courtesy of Emily Friedman Fine Art
page 87

Untitled
circa 1970s
Acrylic on paper
8 × 7 inches
(20.3 × 17.8 cm)
Collection of Russell Baker and Brad Aspel
page 89

New Galaxy
1970
Acrylic on canvas
54 × 54 inches
(137.2 × 137.2 cm)
Tampa Museum of Art, Gift of Douglas H Teller,
in memory of Julian H. Singman, 1997.017
page 91

Snoopy Sees a Daybreak on Earth
1970
Acrylic on canvas
48 ½ × 50 ¼ inches
(123.2 × 127.6 cm)
Private collection
page 93

Give Love Hope For Peace 1971
1971
Acrylic on arches paper
6 ½ × 9 ¾ inches
(16.5 × 24.8 cm)
Emily Friedman Fine Art
page 97

Springtime in Washington
1971
Acrylic on canvas
48 × 48 inches
(121.9 × 121.9 cm)
Private Collection of Crystal McCrary
and Raymond J. McGuire
page 99

Untitled
1971
Gouache on paper
8 ¼ × 9 inches
(21 × 22.9 cm)
Jennings-Overstreet
page 101

A Red Display of Fall Leaves
1972
Acrylic on canvas
22 × 30 inches
(55.9 × 76.2 cm)
Private collection
page 103

Forsythia Among Spring Flowers
1972
Acrylic on canvas
61 × 53 inches
(154.9 × 134.6 cm)
The work is on Loan from Howard University
and Howard University reserves all rights
page 107

Milky Way
1972
Acrylic on canvas
22 × 28 inches
(55.9 × 71.1 cm)
Collection of Robert and Linda Schmier
page 109

Approaching Storm at Sunset
1973
Acrylic on canvas
38 × 38 inches
(96.5 × 96.5 cm)
Collection of Robert and Linda Schmier
page 111

Night Sky Mysteries
1973
Acrylic on canvas
68 × 54 inches
(172.7 × 137.2 cm)
Miami-Dade County Art in Public
Places Trust, Public Art Collection
page 113

Christmas
1976
Acrylic on canvas
24 × 48 inches
(61 × 121.9 cm)
Private collection, Washington, DC,
courtesy of Caitlin Berry Fine Art
page 117

For Vincent
1976
Acrylic on canvas
50 × 26 inches
(127 × 66 cm)
Private collection
page 119

Sunset Duet
1976
Acrylic on canvas
46 × 36 inches
(116.8 × 91.4 cm)
Collection of Elliot and Kimberly Perry, Memphis
page 121

CHRONOLOGY

Text adapted and expanded by Liana Gorman, Exhibitions Director at Mnuchin Gallery, from the chronology compiled by Leah H. Reeder, Registrar at Fort Wayne Museum of Art, originally published in Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings, *catalogue for a 1998 exhibition at Fort Wayne Museum of Art.*[1]

1891

Alma Thomas is born September 22 in Columbus, Georgia, to John Harris, a successful businessman, and Amelia Cantey Thomas, a sought-after dress designer.[2] Alma is the eldest of four daughters. She hails from a prominent local family; her maternal grandfather is a respected veterinarian, horse breeder, and cotton dealer who owns a 450-acre farm ten miles from Columbus where the Thomas daughters spend their summers. Thomas later writes:

> I have lovely memories of a Victorian type of house, which my father built, situated in a section of the city called Rose Hill. It was rightly named because roses bloomed there almost the year round. Still fresh in my memory are the beautiful flower gardens that we had. There were two unusual circular flower beds, so deeply preserved in my subconscious, which find expression in my paintings.
>
> My childhood in Columbus, where I attended the grade schools, was very pleasant. My mother and aunts were teachers and were graduates of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. I can remember their participation in Cultural clubs, their studying Latin, History, and the Classics. A white professor from Atlanta came to our home once or twice a month to instruct them. A friend of theirs went to Washington and took lessons in painting on velvet. Upon her return to Columbus, she opened a class in that type of painting. I enjoyed the club's meeting at my house, for their tubes of oil paints and their beautiful colors fascinated me. I was given music lessons and my mother played the violin.[3]

Thomas's childhood home in Columbus, Georgia

Thomas's parents, Amelia Cantey Thomas and John Harris Thomas, shortly after their marriage

1907

Seeking respite from racism and violence, as well as greater educational opportunities for their daughters, the Thomases move to Washington, DC. They purchase a home at 1530 15th Street NW, where Thomas resides from age 16 until her death. John becomes a sexton at the First Congregational Church and Amelia continues working as a successful dressmaker.

Thomas instructing her students, circa 1940

1907–11
Thomas attends and graduates from Armstrong Manual Training High School, Washington, DC, where she studies math, architectural drawing, German, biology, home economics, and fashion design.[4]

1911–13
Attends Miner Normal School, Washington, DC; receives a certificate to teach kindergarten.

1914
Teaches school in Princess Anne, MD.

1915–21
Teaches at and then becomes director of Thomas Garrett Settlement House, Wilmington, DE.

1921
Enrolls in the home economics department at Howard University, Washington, DC, intending to become a costume designer. Designs costumes for the university's theatrical troupe, the Howard Players.

1922
Howard University fine arts instructor James V. Herring urges Thomas to enroll in the university's newly founded department of art. Studying under Herring and portraitist-sculptor May Howard Jackson, Thomas becomes the university's first student to major in art.

1924
Becomes the first Howard University graduate to earn a bachelor of science degree in fine arts.

1924–25
Teaches drawing for one term at Cheyney Training School for Teachers, Cheyney, PA, where she meets artist Laura Wheeler Waring.

1925
Begins teaching art at Shaw Junior High School, Washington, DC, where she will go on to teach for 35 years.

1930–34
Attends Teachers College at Columbia University, New York, over the course of five summers to earn a master's degree in art education; writes her thesis on marionettes.

1934–40
Organizes and directs the Washington, DC, Marionette Club, presenting plays for local students in the African American community; directs Shaw Junior High School student marionette shows.

1936–39
Organizes and directs the School Arts League. Based at the Howard University Gallery of Art, its aim is to foster art appreciation among selected junior high school students.

Little Paris Group meeting at the studio of Lois Mailou Jones, 1948. Thomas is seated second from right

Thomas at the New York dock, either on her way to or returning from Europe, summer 1958

1937
Organizes the Junior High School Arts Club; its members take field trips to museums and attend lectures at Howard University.

1943
James Herring and his former student Alonzo J. Aden, the curator of the Howard University Gallery of Art, found the Barnett-Aden Gallery. Located in their home at 127 Randolph Street NW, it is the first private gallery in Washington, DC, to organize racially integrated exhibits. Thomas serves as vice president. Exhibited artists include Elizabeth Catlett, Gene Davis, Lois Mailou Jones, Jacob Kainen, Morris Louis, I. Rice Pereira, Jack Perlmutter, Theodore Stamos, and Charles White.[5]

1946–50
Thomas is a member of the Little Paris Studio, a group of local artists, organized by Lois Mailou Jones and Céline Tabary, who paint, sketch, critique each other's work, and exhibit together.

1950–60
Thomas enrolls in weekend and evening classes at American University, Washington, DC, at the urging of Alonzo Aden and Morris Louis.[6] She is part of the advanced group taught by Jacob Kainen, who introduces them to the work of Renoir, van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Titian, Rubens, and Velázquez.[7] Thomas later writes, quoting in part Robert Clermont Witt's *How To Look at Pictures*:

> The study of creative painting at the American University released me from the limitations of the past and opened the door to creativity.… "It is of all ages, of every land, and if by this we merely mean that the creative spirit in man which produces a picture or a statue is common to the whole civilized world, independently of age, race, and nationality, the statement may stand unchallenged."[8]

While some of Thomas's works from this period include figurative forms, she moves increasingly toward abstraction, experimenting with different compositional structures.

1952
GROUP EXHIBITION
8th Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Sculptures and Prints by Negro Artists, Atlanta University.

1954
GROUP EXHIBITION
Six Washington Painters, Barnett-Aden Gallery.

1956
GROUP EXHIBITION
64th Annual Exhibition, organized by the Society of Washington Artists, National Collection of Fine Arts (now the American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution), National History Building, Washington, DC.

1958
Takes a summer study tour of Europe, sponsored by Tyler School of Fine Art, Temple University, Philadelphia. Visits Tate Gallery, London; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Uffizi, Florence; and Capitoline Museum, Rome, and attends lectures and sees plays.

GROUP EXHIBITION
Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings, College Arts Traveling Service, Washington, DC.

Thomas at the opening of her 1959 exhibition at American University, with her mentor James V. Herring, head of the art department at Howard University

1959

TWO-PERSON EXHIBITION

With Hilda Shapiro, Watkins Gallery, American University. Favorably reviewed in *Washington Post* and *Times Herald*.

1960

Retires from Shaw Junior High School on January 31 to devote herself fully to painting.

SOLO EXHIBITION

Watercolors by Alma Thomas, Dupont Theatre Art Gallery, Washington, DC. Thomas's first solo exhibition. It is well received by the public; almost all works are sold.[9]

Begins painting almost exclusively in water-based media, including watercolors and acrylics, perhaps in part to avoid the odor of turpentine in her home.[10]

1961

Visits exhibition of Henri Matisse's cut-paper collages, *The Last Works of Matisse: Large Cut Gouaches*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.[11] The influence of his mosaic-like forms can be seen in Thomas's works in following years.

SOLO EXHIBITION

Dupont Theatre Art Gallery.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

64th Annual National Exhibition, Washington Watercolor Association, Washington, DC.

New Vistas in American Art, Howard University Gallery of Art.

1962

SOLO EXHIBITION

Dupont Theatre Art Gallery.

Organizes the Beauty Club, whose aim is to raise the cultural level of children in Thomas's neighborhood by presenting stories, lectures, travelogues, and films on art.

1963

On August 28, over 250,000 people, including Thomas, participate in the March on Washington, gathering at the Lincoln Memorial to peacefully protest racial discrimination and to support pending civil rights legislation. Here, Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech. The following year, Thomas creates a rare figurative painting, as well as related sketches, depicting the event.

Coordinates art exhibitions and classes for the Government of the District of Columbia Commissioners Youth Council

GROUP EXHIBITION

Artists for CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] *Exhibition and Sale*, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York. Harold Hart, director of Martha Jackson Gallery, and the first African American man to hold such a prominent position in the New York art world, had lived with Thomas as a young boy and been exposed to art during his time with her.[12]

1964–66

Teaches children as part of a regular Sunday-afternoon culture club at Uplift House, an Anacostia neighborhood community center.

Begins suffering from severe chronic arthritis, which affects her for the rest of her life and causes extended periods of limited mobility.

1966

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma Thomas: A Retrospective Exhibition (1959–1966), Howard University Gallery of Art (catalogue). While creating new works for the exhibition, she realizes her mature style, including her signature "Alma stripes" and her iconic mandala forms.[13] Thomas later writes:

> From my lengthy experimentation with color, I discovered that it was the light glittering through a holly tree near the bay window of my home that attracted my fancy. I noticed how the light shone on and through other trees, shrubs, and flowers and tried repeatedly to capture this magic. My goal was not to offend the beauty in nature, but rather to share with others those aspects of it that have given me so much joy.[14]

1967

SOLO EXHIBITION

Margaret Dickey Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

1968

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma Thomas: Recent Paintings, Franz Bader Gallery, Washington, DC. Thomas's first solo exhibition in a commercial gallery. Bader introduced many of the Washington Color School painters and was one of the first galleries to present African American artists. He worked with Thomas until her death. The exhibition is positively reviewed in multiple local newspapers; Paul Richard of the *Washington Post* writes:

> Her best pictures, the colored, mosaic stripes and the gay circular work…are at once free and under complete control. She combines the discipline of "hard edge" art with the free expressionistic brushwork of the Impressionists. There is as much of "The Water Lilies" as there is of the straight edge in this bright and sunwashed show.[15]

Leads art workshops for Isis Artists, a non-profit organization focusing on arts of the Americas through exhibitions, lectures, and performances. (Isis was the forerunner of Fondo del Sol Visual Arts and Media Center, Washington, DC.)

1968–72

NASA executes the Apollo program, which includes 11 spaceflights, the first moon landing on July 20, 1969, and five subsequent moon landings. Thomas follows the developments closely on radio and television, and creates a body of work, the Space paintings, inspired by these events. In an artist's statement about this series, Thomas writes:

> I was born at the end of the 19th century, horse and buggy days, and experienced the phenomenal changes of the 20th century machine and space age. Today not only can our great scientists send astronauts to and from the moon to photograph its surface and bring back samples of rocks and other materials, but through the medium of color television all can actually see and experience the thrill of these adventures. These phenomena set my creativity in motion.[16]

1969

Exhibits works at the office of Walter Washington, mayor of Washington, DC, and at the White House.

GROUP EXHIBITION

The Washington Painters, Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL.

1969–72

Works displayed internationally through the US Department of State's Art in Embassies Program.

1970

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma Thomas: Earth and Space Paintings, Franz Bader Gallery.

GROUP EXHIBITION

Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston, Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston; School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1971

SOLO EXHIBITION

Recent Paintings by Alma W. Thomas: Earth and Space Series, 1961–1971, Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, Fisk University, Nashville (catalogue). Fisk acquires two paintings for their permanent collection: *It Is Spring* and *Winter Evening Glow*.

GROUP EXHIBITION

Contemporary Black Artists in America, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Art Barn, Washington, DC; Audubon Naturalist Society, Chevy Chase, MD.

Installation view of Thomas's 1972 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art

1972

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Alma W. Thomas, Whitney Museum of American Art (brochure). Thomas is the first African American woman accorded a one-person show at the Whitney. The Whitney acquires *Mars Dust*, 1972, for its permanent collection. The *New York Times* reviews the exhibition on three separate occasions; Peter Schjeldahl writes:

> She is a gifted, ebullient abstractionist.... Her best pictures are loose, gridlike arrangements of more or less uniform vertical brushstrokes, sumptuous and strongly rhythmic in color and full of light.[17]

Alma W. Thomas: Retrospective Exhibition, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (catalogue).

Mayor Walter Washington declares September 8, the opening day of the Corcoran retrospective, Alma W. Thomas Day in Washington, DC. TV and radio programs on her life and work are broadcast, September 20–23.

1973

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma W. Thomas: Paintings, Martha Jackson Gallery (catalogue).

GROUP EXHIBITION

United States Embassy, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

1974

Falls and breaks her hip in an accident in her home, which severely limits her mobility for the following two years.[18]

SOLO EXHIBITION

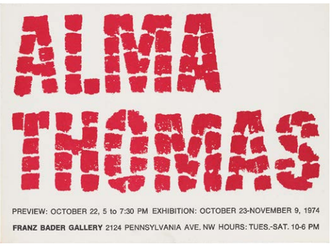
Franz Bader Gallery.

GROUP EXHIBITION

Painting and Sculpture Today, Indianapolis Museum of Art; Contemporary Arts Center and Taft Museum, Cincinnati; National Convention, American Institute of Architects, Washington, DC.

Thomas with collector Vincent Melzac at the opening of her 1972 retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery. Her painting *For Vincent*, 1976 (page 119) is dedicated to Melzac

Installation view of Thomas's 1973 exhibition at Martha Jackson Gallery



Announcement card for Thomas's 1974 exhibition at Franz Bader Gallery

Thomas with Howard University President James Cheek at the Howard Charter Day dinner in 1975

Thomas with Franz Bader and an unidentified visitor at the opening of her 1976 exhibition at Franz Bader Gallery

1975

Receives Howard University's Alumni of Achievement Award at the Charter Day Convocation celebrating the university's 108th anniversary, March 3.

GROUP EXHIBITION

11 in New York, Women's Interart Center Inc., New York (brochure).

1976

The painting *Red Rose Sonata*, 1972, is donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, by the New York–based Longview Foundation, a Hess family foundation. Thomas Hess, chief art critic and editor of *ARTnews*, had acquired the painting in 1972.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Alma W. Thomas: Recent Paintings, H.C. Taylor Art Gallery, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Greensboro (catalogue).

Alma W. Thomas: Recent Paintings, 1975–1976, Martha Jackson Gallery (catalogue). The exhibition debuts the late, graphic style which Thomas refers to as "hieroglyphs."[19]

GROUP EXHIBITION

Black American Artists: 1750–1950, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum.

1977

Visits the White House at the invitation of President Jimmy Carter, June 14.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

35th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, Corcoran Gallery of Art (catalogue).

Pattern, Grid, and System Art, Ralph Wilson Gallery, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Summit Gallery, New York.

1978

Enters Howard University Hospital for aortal surgery, bringing her paint box and drawing pad with her.[20] Dies February 24 at the hospital from complications following the operation.

1981

SOLO EXHIBITION

A Life in Art: Alma Thomas, 1891–1978, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

1984

GROUP EXHIBITION

Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art, The Center Gallery (now Samek Art Museum), Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA; The Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, College at Westbury (now SUNY Old Westbury), State University of New York, Old Westbury; Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, NY; University of Maryland Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA; Museum of Art (now Palmer Museum of Art), Pennsylvania State University, University Park.

Installation view, *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Indiana, September 5–November 8, 1998

1992

GROUP EXHIBITION

Free within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento; Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, TN; Columbus Museum, GA.

1996

GROUP EXHIBITION

Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists, ExhibitsUSA, Spelman College, Atlanta; Polk Art Museum, Lakeland, FL; Columbus Museum, GA; African American Museum, Dallas; Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul; Kennedy Museum of American Art, Athens, OH; Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC; Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, KS; Portland Museum of Art, ME; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Washington State University, Pullman.

1997

GROUP EXHIBITION

Revisiting American Art: Works from the Collections of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Katonah Museum of Art, NY.

1998

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, IN; Tampa Museum of Art, FL; New Jersey State Museum, Trenton; Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Columbus Museum, GA (catalogue).

2001

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma Thomas: Phantasmagoria, Major Paintings, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York; Women's Museum: An Institute for the Future, Dallas (catalogue).

2002

GROUP EXHIBITION

In the Spirit of Martin: The Living Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Charles H. Wright Museum of African American Art, Detroit; Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington; Brooklyn Museum; Memphis Brooks Museum of Art; Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, AL.

2003

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Five African American Artists, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

African American Masters: Highlights of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, New-York Historical Society, New York; Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville; Cummer Museum of Art, Jacksonville, FL; Cincinnati Art Museum; Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, NH; Delaware Art Museum; Long Beach Museum of Art, CA; Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City.

An American Legacy: Art from the Studio Museum in Harlem, Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY.

2008

GROUP EXHIBITION

Circa 1958: Breaking Ground in American Art, Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

First Lady Michelle Obama in the White House's Old Family Dining Room, February 10, 2015, with Robert Rauschenberg's *Early Bloomer [Anagram (A Pun)]*, 1998; Alma Thomas's *Resurrection*, 1966; and a 1950 rug by Anni Albers

2010

TWO-PERSON EXHIBITION

Color Balance: Paintings by Felrath Hines and Alma Thomas, Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC.

2012

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Blues for Smoke, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Whitney Museum of American Art.

African American Art in the 20th Century, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

After Tanner: African American Artists since 1940, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

African American Art Since 1950: Perspectives from the David C. Driskell Center, organized by Smithsonian Institute of Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES), David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora, University of Maryland, College Park; Susquehanna Art Museum, Harrisburg, PA; Polk Museum of Art, Lakeland, FL; Figge Art Museum, Davenport, IA; Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts & Culture, Charlotte, NC; Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati.

2013

GROUP EXHIBITION

Regarding the Forces of Nature: From Alma Thomas to Yayoi Kusama, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, ME.

2014

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era and Beyond, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento.

Venus Drawn Out: 20th-Century Drawings by Great Women Artists, The Armory Show Modern, New York.

2015

In February, First Lady Michelle Obama unveils the newly refurbished Old Family Dining Room at the White House for its first public viewing in White House history. Thomas's painting *Resurrection*, 1966, features prominently in the new installation, alongside works by Robert Rauschenberg and Josef and Anni Albers, making it the first artwork by an African American woman to hang in the public spaces of the White House. The work was acquired in 2014 by the George B. Hartzog Jr. White House Acquisition Trust.

Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquires *Fiery Sunset*, 1973.

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma Thomas: Moving Heaven & Earth, Paintings and Works on Paper, 1958–1978, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC (catalogue).

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

America Is Hard to See, Whitney Museum of American Art.

Represent: 200 Years of African American Art in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

Chromatic, Newark Museum, NJ.

2016

SOLO EXHIBITION

Alma Thomas, Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Saratoga Springs, NY; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (catalogue). The *New York Times* reviews the exhibition on two separate occasions; Ken Johnson writes:

> Alma Thomas, whose joyful abstract paintings are the subject of an undersized but important and inspiring exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, had one of the great, late-blooming careers in American art during the post–World War II era.... Her kind of unfettered optimism and generosity of spirit is an invigorating antidote to the anxious negativity pervading the world of art today.[21]

GROUP EXHIBITION

The Color Line: African American Artists and the Civil Rights in the United States, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.

2017

GROUP EXHIBITION

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, Tate Modern, London; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Brooklyn Museum; Broad Museum, Los Angeles; de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

2018

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

The Long Run, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The Joy of Color, Mnuchin Gallery, New York.

Alma Thomas: The Light of the Whole Universe, Smith College Museum of Art, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

Peindre la nuit, Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz, France.

2019

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art deaccessions Mark Rothko's *Untitled*, 1960, to fund efforts to diversify their collection; proceeds from the sale go towards the acquisition of Thomas's painting *Cumulus*, 1972, among other works.

GROUP EXHIBITION

Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco; Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC; Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, MI; Smith College Museum of Art, Smith College; Frye Art Museum, Seattle; Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

Echoing Forms: American Abstraction from the Permanent Collection, Tampa Museum of Art.

Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art, Baltimore Museum of Art.

Seeing America, Newark Museum.

The Expanding Universe of Postwar Art, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

NOTES

1. Leah H. Reeder, "Artist's Chronology," in *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*, exh. cat. (Fort Wayne, IN: Fort Wayne Museum of Art, 1998), pp. 130–133.

2. The source for this birth year is the artist's sister John Maurice Thomas. Other sources variously give the year as 1892, 1894, 1895, or 1896.

3. Alma Thomas, typescript of autobiographical writings, circa 1960s–70, Alma Thomas Papers, Circa 1894–2001, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, box 2, folder 7, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/alma-thomas-papers-9241/subseries-3-1/box-2-folder-7.

4. See Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, "From Academic Representation to Poetic Abstraction," in *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*, exh. cat. (Fort Wayne, IN: Fort Wayne Museum of Art, 1998), p. 19.

5. See Benjamin, "From Academic Representation to Poetic Abstraction," p. 23–24.

6. See Jacob Kainen, "Alma W. Thomas: Order and Emotion," in *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*, exh. cat. (Fort Wayne, IN: Fort Wayne Museum of Art, 1998), p. 37.

7. Ibid., p. 31.

8. Thomas, typescript of autobiographical writings, circa 1960s–70, Alma Thomas Papers, AAA. The quotation within is Robert Clermont Witt, *How To Look at Pictures* 2nd rev. ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1906), p. 10.

9. See Kainen, "Alma W. Thomas: Order and Emotion," p. 31.

10. Ibid.

11. See Ian Berry and Lauren Haynes, ed., *Alma Thomas*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem; Saratoga Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2016), p. 155

12. See Kainen, "Alma W. Thomas: Order and Emotion," p. 36.

13. Thomas, typescript of autobiographical writings, circa 1960s–70, Alma Thomas Papers, AAA.

14. Ibid.

15. Paul Richard, "Building Blocks: Endless Art," *Washington Post*, September 15, 1968, p. E8.

16. Alma Thomas, "Artist's Statement," in *Recent Paintings by Alma W. Thomas: Earth and Space Series, 1961–1971*, exh. cat. (Nashville: Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, Fisk University, 1971), unpaginated.

17. Peter Schjeldahl, "Art," *New York Times*, May 14, 1972, p. D23.

18. See Kainen, "Alma W. Thomas: Order and Emotion," p. 34.

19. Ibid., p. 35.

20. Ibid., p. 37.

21. Ken Johnson, "A Bright Believer in Human Progress," *New York Times*, August 5, 2016, p. C17.

Published on occasion of the exhibition

ALMA THOMAS
RESURRECTION

September 10 – October 19, 2019

Mnuchin Gallery
45 East 78 Street
New York, NY 10075

Partners: Robert Mnuchin, Sukanya Rajaratnam, Michael McGinnis
Exhibitions Director: Liana Gorman
Director of Operations: David McClelland
Senior Registrar: Arrow Mueller

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Installation views of the present exhibition and plate photography, unless otherwise specified, are by Tom Powel Imaging.

Captions:
cover: Alma Thomas, *Springtime in Washington*, 1971 (detail; see p. 99)
p. 2: Alma Thomas at her Whitney Museum exhibition opening, 1972
p. 4: Alma Thomas, *Untitled*, 1965 (detail; see p. 49)
pp. 6, 26–33, 122–131: Installation views of *Alma Thomas: Resurrection*, Mnuchin Gallery, New York
pp. 8, 142–143, 150: Alma Thomas in her studio, circa 1968
pp. 24–25: Alma Thomas in her studio, early 1970s
p. 132: Alma Thomas at home, with her portrait by Laura Wheeler Waring (see p. 11)

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