

Artist Profile – Alma Thomas

b. 1891 Columbus, GA; d. 1978 Washington, DC

Thomas grew up in Georgia but often spent summers in Alabama where her grandfather and his white half-brother had plantations across the Chattahoochee River. The land around her home and her grandfather's home heavily influenced Thomas' works. In 1907 Thomas and her family moved to Washington D.C. in search of better educational opportunities and to escape the racial riots that started in Atlanta in 1906. After graduating high school, where Thomas took special interest in art and architecture, she went on to become a teacher, spending her time teaching kindergarten and using her free time to organize extra classes for arts and theater. In 1921 she realized she needed to return to school and enrolled at Howard University becoming the first student to enroll in the fine arts curriculum. Eventually, Thomas went back to receive her Masters degree in art and became the first vice president of the Barnett-Aden Gallery in Washington.

Thomas' early works reflected the teaching assignments she either had from her professors or was giving to her own students, as Thomas was a teacher for most of her life. These included small clay sculptures, still lifes, and marionettes and costume design. Thomas took inspiration from the nature around her, she focused on the form, color, shapes, and patterns and was known to take long drives in the country to view the environment.

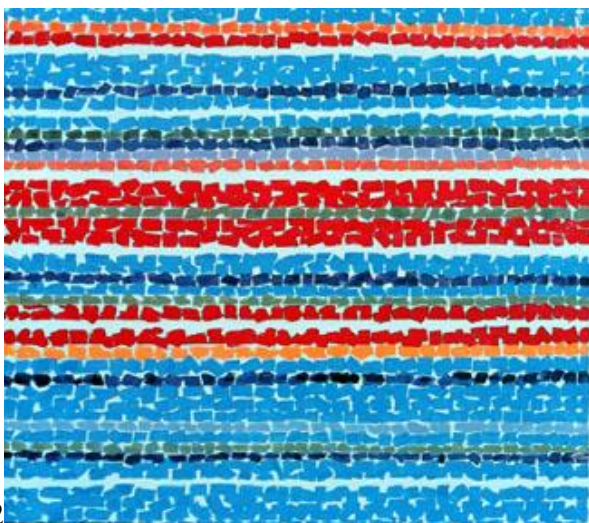
In 1950, shortly before her retirement from teaching, Thomas enrolled at the American University to study painting and art history, here she began her formal study of representational painting but also found her interest in abstraction. Her works began taking on a new style, at around age sixty, Thomas started creating paintings with a challenging arrangement of opaque color that were applied with a palette knife. Her pieces were flat, patterned, and had the illusion of folded edges and wrinkles, even her still lifes had a flatter and more angular look to them. These works were about the form, shape, and color, while later Thomas transitioned to focusing on images from nature.

After Thomas retired from teaching in 1960 she began a new painting style that involved energetic brush work and brighter colors, they also included more watercolors as opposed to strictly oils. These later works took a shift from being about the geometric form and started focusing more on organic shapes and scenes. Thomas' later works reflected nature in that they were a study of occurrences in nature, whether capturing light reflecting on a pond or a sunset beginning to form. Coming from this new style "Earth Paintings" and "Space Paintings" began; Thomas' series of work that she would spend the rest of her life perfecting. The Earth Painting series comprised of works that use patterns of color often floating on a white canvas, Thomas took her inspiration from gardens where flowers are planted in rows. In Space Paintings the colors were usually deeper and the organization was less clear, these styles were defined by Thomas' rugged, irregular size of the spots of paint and the different types of brush strokes she used.

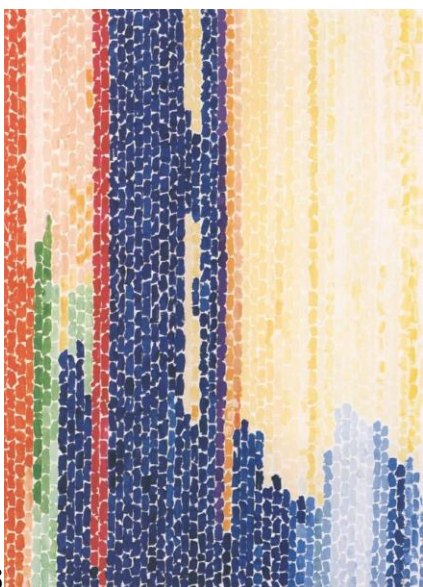
Examples of Thomas' works include *Watusi (Hard Edge)* (1), *Light Blue Nursery* (2), *Launch Pad* (3), and *Grassy Melodic Chant* (4).



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