

Alma Thomas (American, 1891-1978) – Artist Resources



Thomas, 1976
Photograph: Michael Fischer

[Thomas at the Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

[Thomas at the National Museum of Women in the Arts](#)

[Thomas at MoMA](#)

Browse digitized material related to Thomas’s life and career with the Smithsonian’s [Archives of American Art](#).

Read the [catalogue](#) for *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective Exhibition, 1959-1966*, which was on view at the Howard University Gallery in 1966.

The Washington Post published the [article](#) “The late Spring time of Alma Thomas” in 1979, which featured one of the last interviews the artist gave before her death.

Read a 2016 article by Leo J. O’Donovan, S.J. in [America Magazine](#): “Alma Thomas: an abstract expressionist and black artist, who fiercely resisted any labels.”

In 2016, the [Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College](#) and [The Studio Museum in Harlem](#) produced the solo exhibition *Alma Thomas*. Read a [review](#) of the exhibition in Hyperallergic and watch one of The Studio Museum’s [“Studio Salons”](#) about the artist.

[Alma Thomas: Resurrection](#) was on display at Mnuchin Gallery in 2019, featuring paintings and works on paper made between 1959 and 1976.

Listen to a short [podcast episode](#) by HerArt podcast focusing on Thomas’s legacy.

Read an [ARTnews article](#) by Alex Greenberger, “How Alma Thomas’s Radiant Paintings Plotted a New Course for Abstraction,” tracing the artist's career and her contributions to contemporary art history.

Alma Thomas: Everything is Beautiful was co-organized by the [Chrysler Museum of Art](#) and the [Columbus Museum](#) in 2021. The exhibition then traveled to the [Frist Art Museum](#) and was launched as a [citywide celebration](#) in Washington D.C., with partner events at the [Phillips Collection](#) and the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#). Read a [blog post](#) by the National Gallery of Art, “Alma Thomas: Life in Washington” and [watch](#) “An Evening Celebration of Alma Thomas” available on YouTube.

Learn about Thomas’s [Spring-Delightful Flower Bed](#) at the Delaware Art Museum.

In 2022, [Sand Unshaken: The Origin Story of Alma Thomas](#) was on display at the Columbus Museum. Read a [review](#) of the exhibition in Artfix daily.



Thomas at the Whitney Museum of American Art, ca. 1960s
Photograph: via Culture Type



Alma Thomas (American, 1891-1978)
Snow Reflections, 1973
Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2023:32.1

“I like the light to come in—my windows always open to light. Light is the mother of color, without which the world would seem dead; color is life.” Alma Thomas was born near Columbus, Georgia, to a successful African American family. When racial violence broke out in their white suburban area, her family moved to Washington, DC, where Thomas was the first graduate in the Art Department at Howard University. Her colorful, abstract paintings soon distinguished her as one of the few African American women leaders of the Washington Color School movement. However, the artist became a public school educator for 35 years before dedicating herself full time to her own artistic career. **Snow Reflections** was painted in this late season of Thomas’s prolific practice at the age of 82. The painting shows her fascination with light and color, inspired by a wintry view out her window. The artist painted views from this vantage point throughout her career, which offered glimpses into the changing natural world.

On view June 21 – October 1, 2023

Alma Thomas (American, 1891-1978)

Dogwood Blossom Along Skyline Drive, 1973

Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2019:158.1

Though Alma Thomas preferred to see herself simply as an American artist rather than an icon and role model for Black or female artists, she is remembered as a pioneer of marginalized voices. In 1972, at age 82, she became the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art and enter the permanent collection of the White House, where her work was installed a record three times by Barack and Michelle Obama.

Thomas grew up in the segregated cities of Columbus, Georgia, and Washington D.C., before becoming part of the first class to graduate with a degree in fine art from Howard University. She did not devote herself to an artistic practice, however, until her retirement from teaching in 1960 at age 69. The prolific 18-year career that followed includes soothing watercolors and vivid mosaic-like compositions that hesitate on the edge of pure abstraction, each piece driven by the artist's dedication to beauty, joy, and a generous belief in humanity. The white overlay mosaic in **Dogwood Blossom Along Skyline Drive** was painted one patch at a time, allowing the manipulations of color underneath to gently suggest the scene evoked by the title.

