

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



Thomas, 1976

Photograph: Michael Fischer, Smithsonian

[Alma Thomas at the Smithsonian Institute for American Art](#)

[Alma Thomas Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute](#)

2018 [profile of Thomas](#) and her late foray into fashion by the Smithsonian Archives of American Art online journal, *Smithsonian Voices*

A 2016 retrospective organized by the [Frances Young Tang Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College](#) in Georgia, in partnership with [The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York](#), showcased the full breadth of Thomas's brief but prolific career from her move to abstraction in the 1950s to her final years in the late 1970s. The exhibition highlights two important series: *Earth*, a collection of vivid geometric abstractions inspired by nature; and *Space*, a late series inspired by NASA's lunar missions.

The Mnuchin Gallery in New York celebrated Thomas's contemporary relevance and the optimistic celebration of beauty at the heart of her oeuvre in [Resurrection](#), a 2019 survey of works on paper and paintings from throughout her career. As Thomas famously stated in the 1970s, "Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man."



Thomas in her studio, ca. 1968

Photograph: Ida Jervis, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian



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.