

# Alma Thomas

## An Art Teacher Whose Abstract Paintings Are Still Teaching Us

HERBERT R. HARTEL, JR.



Alma Thomas  
*Watusi (Hard Edge)*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 47 3/8 x 44 1/4"  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

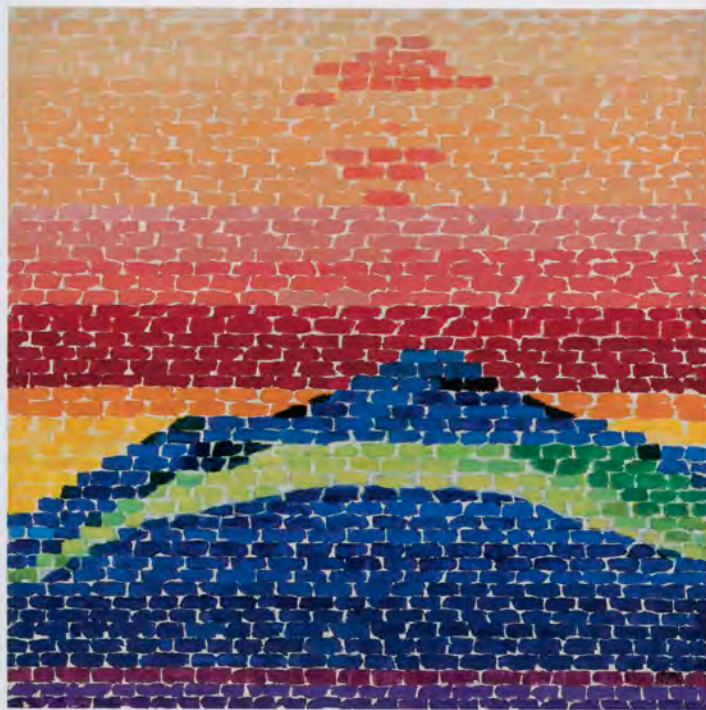
ALMA THOMAS WAS AN ABSTRACT PAINTER WHO DARED TO BE DIFFERENT SIMPLY BY BEING ABSOLUTELY TRUE TO HERSELF in an unassuming, yet confident way. In the process, she dismantled expectations, categories and stereotypes in society and art. She is known for large abstract paintings with brilliant, diverse colors and intricately designed, carefully-coordinated shapes and rhythmically controlled dabs, blotches and streaks of paint. They convey and evoke a range of emotional responses: joy, excitement, awe, contentment, tranquility, melancholy and introspection. They remind us of classroom exercises in design, color mixing and paint handling, not surprising for an artist who taught art to children for over 35 years, yet they are immediately more than prosaic demonstrations and practice efforts. They resemble manual crafts like quilting, bead designs and collage, but quickly transcend anything purely utilitarian or decorative. Their colors, scale and compositions are related to Color Field Painting and its offshoot, the so-called "Washington School" of the 1960s that included Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis. Yet they retain a unique appeal that distinguishes the artist.

Thomas' coordinated small paint marks and brushstrokes vibrate on the canvas in a way that brings to mind Clement Greenberg's "ineluctable flatness" of the picture plane, which was crucial to the theoretical basis of Post-Painterly Abstraction. Yet in Thomas' works this optical effect seems more like a timely coincidence yet secondary consideration; it hardly led her to experiment with theoretical modernism. The intricacy of her color arrangements and painting techniques relate her to the Pattern-and-Decoration movement of the 1970s, in fact her work almost anticipates it, but again Thomas' individuality perseveres. Her unique aesthetic sensibility never wavered and would never be confused with the abstract artists who dominated the 1960s, most of whom were men and nearly all of whom were white. Thomas' paintings are refreshingly distinct and innovative in a period when abstraction seems to many to have become redundant, homogenized and socially irrelevant, and this is because they originated from very different intentions. They exude a fresh, genuine, heartfelt response to ordinary optical experiences. Thomas found profound beauty and wonder in seemingly commonplace things — in light, color and atmosphere. As she said in 1970, "Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man."<sup>1</sup>

As a black woman whose artistic career coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, it is impossible not to consider how Thomas' abstraction fits into this tumultuous era, and the urge to interpret and evaluate her work in this context is powerful. Yet such an approach quickly proves frustrating because most expectations about black artists prove unreliable in her situation. Thomas' abstract paintings usually do not have complex underlying meanings, and they are almost never about racial identity, social conflicts or political activism. The lack of a compelling basis for sociological and racial discourse among scholars and critics seems to have done Thomas a great disservice and marginalized her for years. The historiography of American art emphasizes African American artists whose work is socially aware and engaged. Thus, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, David Hammons, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kara Walker have become virtually canonical while Thomas is only now being "rediscovered" almost 40 years after her death. She was celebrated in the last 15 years of her life. She achieved such fame that in 1972 she became the first black woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, but she fell into something of a historical "limbo" after her death in 1978 at age 87. She was never completely forgotten and there have been a number of exhibitions of her work over the years, but interest in her has waned. With a traveling retrospective on view at Skidmore College and the Studio Museum of Harlem this year, she has been rediscovered, even though she was never really completely lost.

Race did not define, preoccupy or constrain Thomas. She had a mostly happy childhood in Augusta, Georgia, and her memories of the abundant flowers in her neighborhood and around her house





Alma Thomas  
 Apollo 12 "Splash Down," 1970, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 50 ¼ x 50 ¼"  
 Private collection

were the basis for many of her large fields of small units of vibrant color. She experienced racial bigotry when she was young, which led her family to move to Washington, D.C. for greater educational opportunities for their children. She was a junior high school art teacher in Washington, D.C. for 36 years after she graduated from Howard University in 1924 as its first major in its fledgling art program. During her years of teaching, she immersed herself in developing her knowledge and abilities as an art teacher and a practicing artist. She earned a master's degree in art education from Teachers College at Columbia University in 1934 and an M.F.A. from Washington University in 1960. She did not devote herself to her own art until the late-1950s, right before she retired in 1960. As the 1960s passed she became famous and her work was often exhibited and highly praised, even by historically important critics like Harold Rosenberg.

Thomas' abstract paintings were inspired by things and phenomena in nature that most people would observe casually and in passing, and from such mundane inspiration she composed wonderful designs that subtly evoke their sources although they often bear little resemblance to them. The titles that Thomas gave to her paintings frequently indicate their sources of inspiration, whether they are in nature or not. Several paintings consist of long, narrow, wavy bands of ultramarine, cadmium red, lemon yellow, bright orange, forest green, pale blue, violet and more hues rendered with wide individual dabs of paint that resemble Neo-Impressionism at its most abstract, when Paul Signac and Henri-Edmond Cross made their divided brush strokes conspicuously large in their exploration of beautiful, mesmerizing effects of light and color. *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers*, *Wind, Sunshine and Flowers* (both 1968) and *Iris*,

*Tulips, Jonquils and Crocuses* (1969) are great examples of this color and design strategy, which distills the optical essence of broad fields of many kinds of flowers. If the paint had been rendered in smoother, tighter and flatter bands, these works would closely resemble the compact stripe paintings of Gene Davis. *Resurrection* (1966) and *Eclipse* (1970) feature similar colors in circular designs that pulsate joy and excitement. Both could be textured or Neo-Impressionist variations on Kenneth Noland's target paintings. The similarities among such differently titled canvases indicates that Thomas was not restricted to nature as her inspiration and that her chosen titles are not always obliquely descriptive indicators of the subjects behind her abstractions.

Some paintings are essentially monochromatic, but relying on a single dominant hue never dampened her chromatic charms. *Deep Red Roses Chant and Stars and Their Display* (both 1972) are filled with grids of brushy, wide paint strokes interrupted by scattered narrow streaks of other lighter, contrasting colors. The first painting is a wide canvas filled with broad vertical brushstrokes of lush cadmium mildly interrupted by narrow streaks of light blue. The second is a long canvas with similarly wide vertical brushstrokes of deep ultramarine punctuated by narrow streaks of yellow and dark red. Both paintings have taken the Neo-Impressionist technique of divided brush strokes to their ultimate abstract conclusion. The profound effects of large areas of a single hue derived from natural experience have been carefully studied with their optical essence celebrated in powerful, economical means. *Cherry Blossom Symphony* (1973), a pictorial love letter to the trees that bloom so splendidly in Washington, D.C. every April, is a broad field of lavender punctuated with small dashes of blue-green. In her last few years, Thomas usually worked monochromatically but often with lighter, paler hues and shapes that become more dispersed and fragmented, to the extent that they look chipped and scaly. These fascinating tactile experiences are found in *Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish* and *White Roses Sing and Sing* (both 1976).

Current events do appear in Thomas' canvases occasionally. She did a number of paintings with multiple color combinations whose titles refer to astronomy and 1960s space exploration. The historic events that spanned the era in which she was professionally active start with Sputnik and include NASA's Apollo program. For Thomas, these events probably embodied a pinnacle of human achievement that transcended political views, economics, nationality, sex and race. *Splash Down Apollo 13* (1970) is similar to her rainbow-like designs but the colors are arranged in a circular, target-like pattern. *Apollo 12 "Splash Down"* (1970) uses the same colors but are stretched and squeezed into broader and tapered bands which suggest a mountain bathed in bright sunlight. *Orion* (1973) is one of her monochromatic fields of wide brush strokes, but in this case the dominant color is burgundy. Perhaps the darker, rather somber tone is a reference to the nocturnal sky during which one would see these stars. Her titles which refer to astronomical themes demonstrate that her colors and compositions are sometimes only loosely connected to anything in the physical world and that color symbolism is not as obvious as some might expect.

In 1964, when she still painted figuratively, she did several paintings of civil rights demonstrations. These are not her best, most compelling artistic statements; they are rather muddled in color and form. This certainly was not the result of detachment or disregard from the current problems that beset African-Americans, but rather





Alma Thomas  
*March on Washington*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 31 x 39"

a matter of how one's creative direction and impulses are deep-rooted and undeniable, and do not always connect to broader social and political matters. Social commentary and activism in figurative art was simply not part of Thomas' artistic being. One of her few abstract paintings that explores African identity and aesthetics is *Watusi (Hard Edge)* (1963) an early painting that is abstract but a stylistic anomaly. It is similar in choice and arrangement of shapes to Henri Matisse's late cut-out *Snails*, but differs mostly in her use of darker, cooler tones, including numerous shades of blue. Some have interpreted it as an homage to Matisse while others have condemned it as plagiarized.<sup>2</sup> Thomas does not seem to have been interested in reworking earlier modernist art and *Snails* is so famous that an attempt at plagiarism is implausible. Perhaps she was attempting to recreate high modernism to produce something that would be more relatable or emblematic to viewers of African and African American ancestry. More militant thinking would probably say she was co-opting or appropriating mainstream modernism, which would be inherently white, male and Westernized. It is unfortunate and curious that this work has been excluded from the 2016 retrospective. Thomas' works and her comments about them always radiate her enduring optimism about life. This is apparent in how she assessed the changing fortunes of blacks who were studying and making art during her lifetime. She once said: "One of the things we [African Americans] couldn't do was go into museums, let alone think of hanging our pictures. My, times have changed. Just look at me now."<sup>3</sup>

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Herbert R. Hartel, Jr. received his doctorate in modern and American art history from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He has taught at Hofstra University, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Baruch College, Brooklyn College, Parsons School of Design, and York College. He has published articles and reviews in *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Art in America*, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, *Part: The Online Journal of Art History*, *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas*, *New York History*, *Art and Christianity*, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* and *Contemporary Artists*. He has contributed chapters to the anthologies *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory (Routledge)* and *Locating American Art (Ashgate)*.

#### Endnotes

1. Alma Thomas quoted in Hilarie Sheets, "Museums Bring Pioneering Painter Alma Thomas out of Storage for Her First Major Retrospective in Over 30 Years," *Artsy.net*, Jan. 21, 2016 [<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-pioneering-painter-alma-thomas-is-making-a-comeback-over-30-years-since-her-last-major-retrospective>].
2. Blake Gopnik (with contributions by Robin Givhan and Timothy R. Smith), "Alma Thomas's 'Watusi (Hard Edge)' Won't Hang in White House," *Washington Post*, Nov. 5, 2009 [[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/04/AR2009110405053.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/04/AR2009110405053.html)], retrieved April 25, 2016].
3. Alma Thomas quoted in Hilarie Sheets, "Museums Bring Pioneering Painter Alma Thomas out of Storage for Her First Major Retrospective in Over 30 Years."