

At 77, She's Made It to the Whitney

By DAVID L. SHIREY

"Who would have ever dreamed that somebody like me would make it to the Whitney in New York? I'm a 77-year-old Negro woman, after all, who was born in Columbus, Georgia." But Alma Thomas has made it to the Whitney Museum, where she is being honored with an exhibition of her lively and colorful abstract paintings, and she has made it to other places as well.

Rewards Come In

Within the last 10 years her talents have been rewarded with an abundance of art prizes and representation in more than 70 group and solo art shows all over the country. More recently, she has received favorable critical attention. A resident of Washington, Miss Thomas is considered as an artist working in the style of the Washington school of color painters, which includes the late Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis.

"When I was a little girl in Columbus, there were things we could do and things we couldn't," Miss Thomas recalled in a recent interview. "One of the things we couldn't do was go into museums, let alone think of hanging our pictures there. My, times have changed. Just look at me now."

Inspiration From Nature

Her abstractions, which are rather large canvases composed of thumb-size irregular brush strokes placed in straight lines and in concentric circles, are, she said, "earth and space paintings inspired solely from nature." She explained that the earth canvases are her versions of cherry blossoms, holly leaves, circular flower beds and nurseries as "seen from planes that are airborne." Her space paintings, she said, were inspired from the "heavens and stars and my idea of what it is like to be an astronaut, exploring space."

Miss Thomas feels most emphatically that color, however, is the most important element in her art. "A world



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Alma Thomas alongside one of her paintings: "One of the things we couldn't do was go into museums, let alone think of hanging our pictures there. My, times have changed."

without color would seem dead," she said. "Color for me is life."

Miss Thomas got her start in art, she said, from her mother, who "painted dainty pictures on velvet," and from the "artsy" household atmosphere of her childhood. She said that both her parents were teachers and always had "educated folks" such as Booker T. Washington in their home. Later, she went to Howard University, where she was the only art student and the first graduate, in 1924, of the university's art program.

After graduation, Miss Thomas was a teacher at Shaw Junior High School in

Washington until her retirement in 1960. She said she attempted to teach her students that "art could be anything—it could be behavior—as long as it's beautiful." While teaching, she continued to paint in the kitchen of her home, in Washington's most densely populated ghetto. "I have been in this house most of my life. It has a tradition," she said. "I do not plan to leave it."

She "never married a man but my art," she said. "What man would have ever appreciated what I was up to?" She spends much of her free time entertaining Washington artist friends and seeing art shows.

Miss Thomas feels no bitterness about discrimination against women and blacks. "Everybody says I paint like a man anyway," she said. Refusing flatly to use the word "black," she said that "Negroes have now made their political statement about their problems in the art world." "It's time," she added, "that they get down to work and produce an art they can really be proud of."

She said she doesn't want to hold up her own life as an example to anybody. All she wants, she concluded, is "the chance to do some more paintings. As long as I can get a stroke to the canvas, I know I'm moving on."

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