

Fall for Fine Arts 2: African American Artists

Welcome!

Enjoy the music* while you settle in or/and gather art painting supplies.

Recommend supplies: watercolor paints, a flat and round brush, and watercolor paper. (If you don't have this you may use other type of paints, a canvas/paper....or if you don't have brushes you will be able to dip a Q-tip into paints like acrylics or tempera paints. Finally as a last report just us colored pencils or crayons.)

*The Wah-Watusi by the Orlons was # 2 on the US pop chart hits in 1962, when the artist was painting more

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKH8CFXBxYw>



Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891-1978)
Art Teacher and Artist, American

Best known for her abstract paintings, full of happy color, pattern and rhythm, that she created late in life.

An abstract painting featuring a vibrant, multi-colored background of blue, green, yellow, orange, and red. Overlaid on this are dark, expressive, black brushstrokes that resemble a gnarled tree or a complex network of lines. The overall style is expressive and gestural, characteristic of Abstract Expressionism. The signature 'A. Thomas '57' is visible in the bottom right corner.

Art Periods & Terms

Art Periods her Paintings were Categorized Within

Expressionism –artistic movement that began in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century where artists distorted to evoke moods and emotion.

Abstract expressionism – artistic movement that began in New York after World War II. It achieved international influence and placed New York at the center of the western art world, a role formerly held by Paris.

Washington Color School – An artistic movement consisting of Abstract Expressionists who were mainly concerned with Color Field Painting. **Color Field Painting** is a style of abstract painting that emerged in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s...Color Field Painting is characterized primarily by large fields of flat, solid color.

Migrated to Washington, D.C.

Alma Thomas, the oldest of four girls, was born on September 22, 1891 to an upper middle-class family in Columbus, Georgia. When she was about 16 years old, in 1907, she and her family migrated north to Washington, D.C. in order to escape the racial violence in the south. This is known as the Great Migration.

Northern cities, though still segregated, offered more opportunities for African Americans than cities in the South. Segregation, legal till the late 1960s, required separate housing, education and other services for people of color. Imagine how that would feel! Would you feel safe or rejected...

Thomas wrote in the 1970s, *"At least Washington's libraries were open to Negroes, whereas Columbus excluded Negroes from its **only** library."*

Alma Thomas' family home in Washington, D.C. in which Miss Thomas first moved into as a teen, and in which she lived till her death, is now a historic site. →



Educational Highlights

Alma Thomas became the first graduate of the newly organized art department of Howard University (an all black college) in 1924.

She taught art for over 35 years at Shaw Junior High, and engaged in many extra-curricular activities (i.e., creating student art galleries, etc.). A lifelong learner, she also attended several colleges, earning a Masters degree. She even studied the art masters in Europe.

Despite the segregation and prejudice of her times, she achieved success.

Take away: Think about how your work in education and learning can bring you success in life. What subjects (math, reading, writing, art, science...) attract you? In High School, Miss Thomas excelled in science and math, but when she took her first art class she said, *...“it felt like entering heaven...”*

Still Life with Mandolin,
circa 1950



Yellow and Blue,
circa 1959

Art Achievement Highlights

Thomas devoted herself to painting full-time after her retirement in 1960. She was 68 years old! Late in life, her paintings transformed into more abstract and unique masterpieces. It is never too early or too late to create! Age and for that matter (race, religion, health etc..) does not matter. Miss Thomas said, *“We artists are put on God’s good earth to create. Some of us may be black, but that’s not the important thing. The important thing is for us to create, to give form to what we have inside of us. We can’t accept any barriers, any limitations of any kind, on what we create or how we do it.”*

She had several various exhibits, but what really brought her national fame was when at the age of 80 in 1972 she became the first African American woman to hold a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She said:

“When I was a little girl in Columbus, there were things we could do and things we couldn’t. 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.” [Perhaps use as critical



Opening at Solo Exhibition,
Whitney Museum of American Art, 1972



President Jimmy Carter honored her with an invitation to the White House; the D.C. mayor, in 1972, declared September 9th, Alma Thomas day. Several of her paintings hung on view at the White House. This one is titled Resurrection (1966), and the Obamas hung it in the White House dining room in 2015.



Miss Thomas was the first African American Female to have her paintings hung in the White House. However, when asked if she thought of herself as a Black artist, she stated: *"No, I do not. I am a painter. I am an American. I've been here for at least three or four generations. When I was in the South, that was segregated. When I came to Washington, that was segregated. And New York-that was segregated. But I always thought the reason was ignorance. I thought myself superior and kept on going. **Culture is sensitivity to beauty.** And a cultured person is the highest stage of the human being. If everybody were cultured we would have no wars or disturbance. There would be peace in the world."*

Through her eyes, leaves fluttering outside her window became
a swirling dance of autumn hues...



Fall Begins, 1976

The titles of her abstract works often give clues as to what inspired her to paint them at the time.



Autumn Leaves Fluttering in the Breeze, 1973

Some of Miss Thomas' paintings have been compared to Byzantine mosaics....and paintings by Pointillists like Georges Seurat...



White Daisies Rhapsody, 1973

Through Miss Thomas' eyes....an eclipse would be a kaleidoscope of bursting colors. Miss Thomas said: "Color is Life"
"Light reveals to us the spirit and living soul of the world through colors."



The Eclipse, 1970



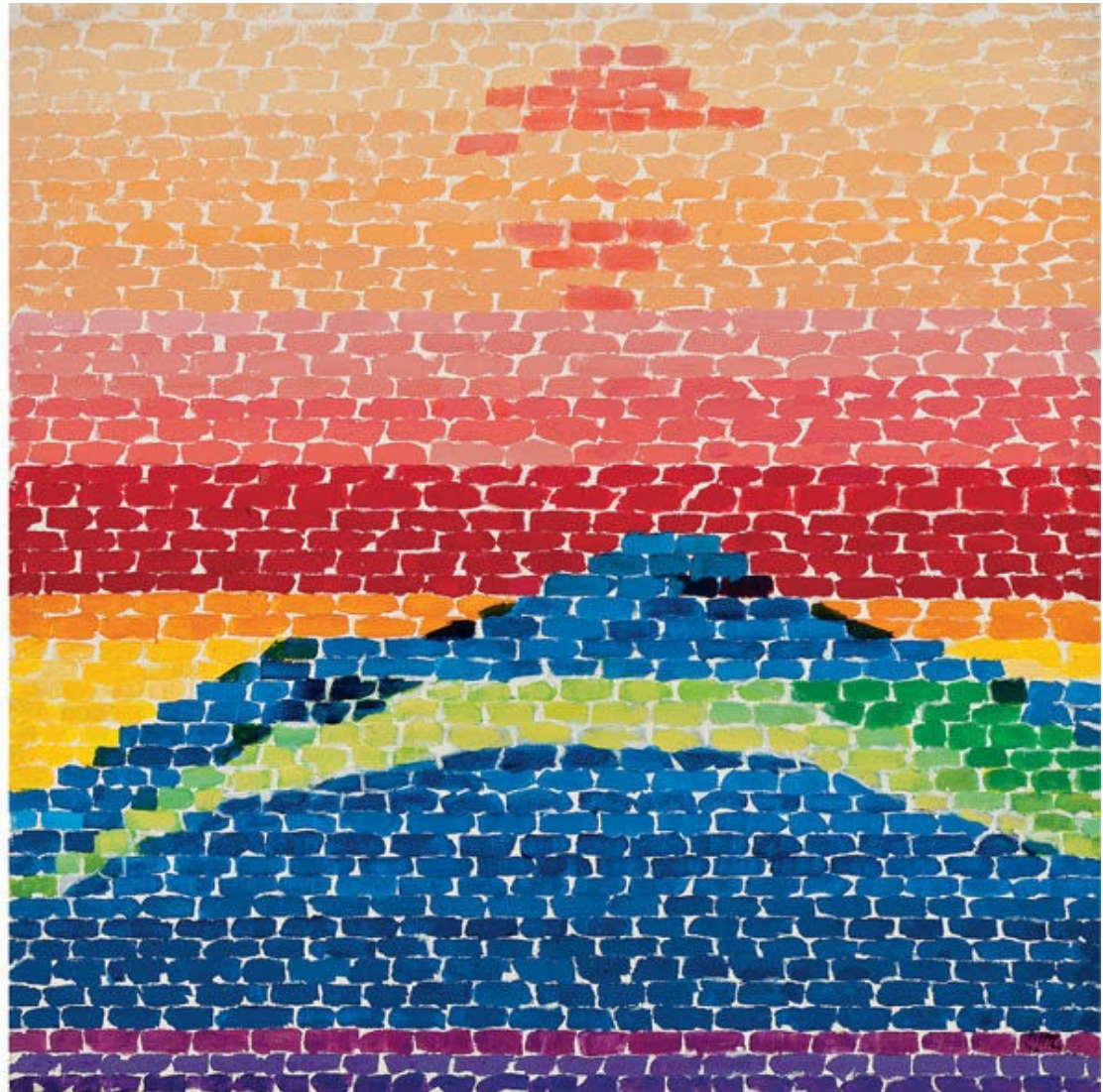
Blast Off, 1970

This painting is called *Blast Off*. In 1969 NASA astronauts landed on the moon and this sparked Miss Thomas' imagination to create a series of space paintings.





Left: Splash Down Apollo 13, 1970.



Right: Apollo 12 "Splash Down," 1970.



Starry Night and the Astronauts, 1972

Can you think of another artist who created a painting called Starry Night. We learned about him in our first Fall for Fine Arts [<https://programminglibrarian.org/programs/fall-fine-arts>] program series, where we focused on European art masters.

If you guessed Van Gogh, you're right.





Henri Matisse, another artist we learned about last Fall, created these very huge collage cut outs and assembled them into this work titled, *The Snail*. Matisse inspired Thomas to paint a work titled, *Watusi*:



Watusi – Also a popular dance of the 1960s, fueled by the success of the song "Wah-Watusi" by The Orlons in 1962. After the Watusi was danced by President Johnson's daughter; she was nicknamed Watusi Luci. This dance was 2nd in popularity to the twist.



Alma Thomas
Watusi (Hard Edge)
1963

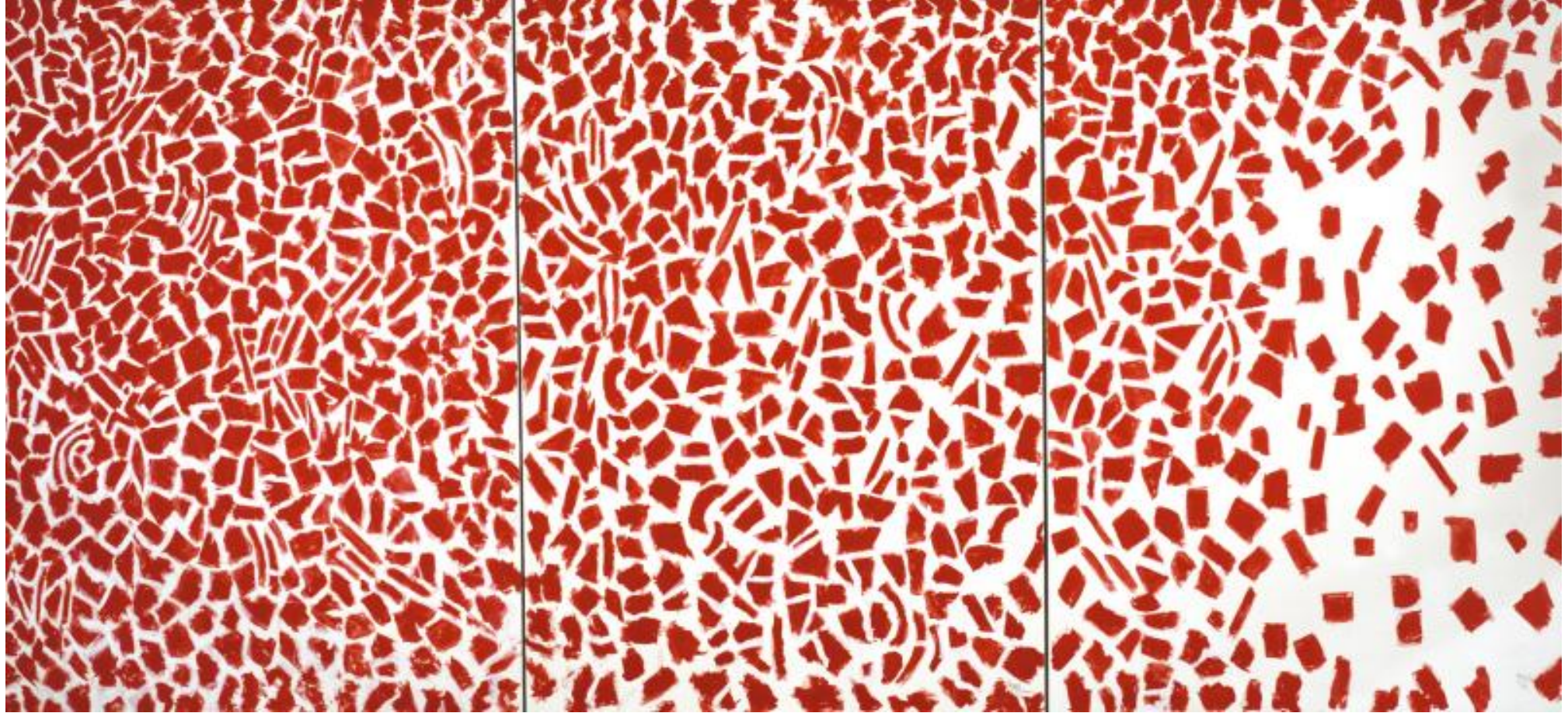
acrylic on canvas

47 5/8 x 44 1/4 inches (121 x 112.4 cm)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1976



Record Album



Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music, 1976



Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto, 1973

Some of Miss Thomas' paintings include flowing patterns to show movement and rhythm



White Roses Sing and Sing, 1976

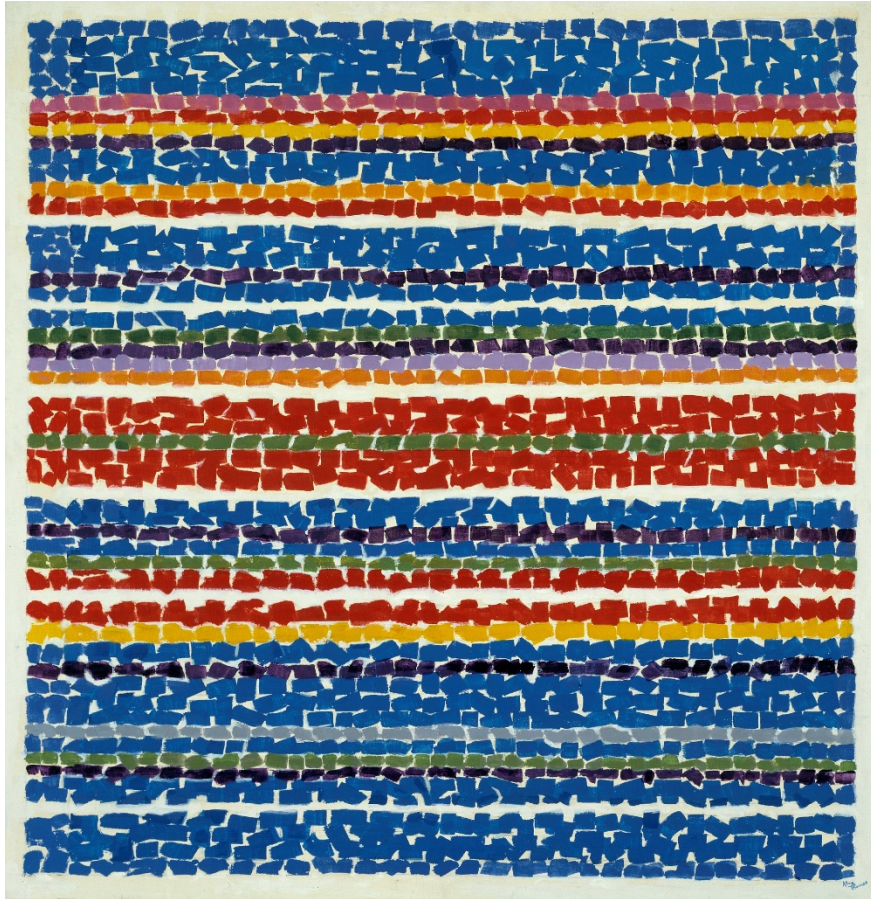


Grassy Melodic Chant, 1976

Some of her paintings are organized in a concentric circular pattern or radial design. What is Radial Design? Take a hint from math class, and you'll remember that a radius is the distance between the center of a circle and its edge. Radial design is all **AROUND**, pun intended: a snowflake, stars (including the sun), some spider-webs, the pupil of your eyes, many flowers like sunflowers and daisies, sea urchin shells....



Some of her paintings are organized in vertical or horizontal stripes. Notice the white swirls (right); if you were to get close to one of her paintings you could see the pencil marks that organized her markings.



Light Blue Nursery, 1968



Wind, Sunshine and Flowers, 1968



Iris Tulips Jonquils and Crocuses, 1969

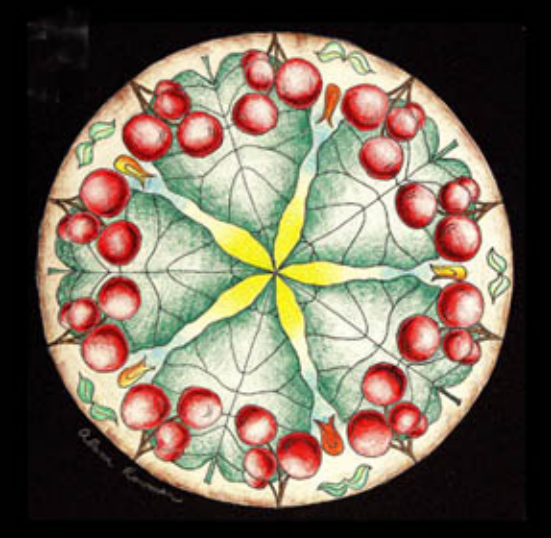
“The use of color...is of paramount importance to me. Through color I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man’s inhumanity to man.”

-Alma Thomas

For our art project today, we are going to make radial designs inspired by ALMA THOMAS. If you really want to challenge yourself, make a sea scape painting that incorporates all three: radial, horizontal and vertical marks, like this one:



Radial Designs from the PAUL J. GELINAS JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
VISUAL ARTS DEPARTMENT - http://www.3villagecsd.k12.ny.us/artsgelinas/radial_design.htm



Then send me your work for our mini art show on
durantlibrary Instagram site:
durant@lapl.org or abartoletti@lapl.org

Powerpoint compiled by Mrs. Bartoletti on 2/18/21; Some of the resources include:

The Smithsonian (esp. Smithsonian American Art Museum)

Whitney Museum of American Art

Wikipedia & Wikiart

Google Arts & Culture & Google Image search

CultureType.com

Tate Gallery

[Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings](#), Fort Wayne Museum of Art 1998

DC's own Alma Thomas rises to new heights in the art world Career trajectory for African-American expressionist led from DC Public Schools to the Whitney Museum

By Rober Bettmann Last updated Nov 2, 2018

<https://thedcline.org/2018/10/26/dcs-own-alma-thomas-rises-to-new-heights-in-the-art-world/>

“Alma Thomas defied gravity and reached for the stars” by Ariella Budick, AUGUST 19 2016 in Financial Times

<https://www.ft.com/content/45ac0118-645d-11e6-8310-ecf0bddad227>

Mnuchin Gallery, Alma Thomas RESURRECTION, SEPTEMBER 10 – OCTOBER 19, 2019 installation

“Diversity in White House Art: Alma Thomas”, The White House Historical Association Lina Mann:

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/diversity-in-white-house-art-alma-thomas>