

Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891–1978)

“You never know what you’re going to do unless you keep working. People come to me and say, ‘Tell me how to paint.’ I say, ‘I can’t. It comes from inside you. You have to expose yourself. Nobody taught me how to paint. I had to do it myself.’” –ALMA THOMAS

Alma Thomas proved that a person is never too old to develop a new way of looking at the world or to become a famous artist. Thomas was in her seventies before she began painting in the colorful, abstract style for which she is best known. She was eighty when she had her first solo show at a major American museum.

Thomas was born in Columbus, Georgia, the oldest of four girls. She was a teenager when her family moved to Washington, D.C., seeking relief from the racial violence in the South. Though segregated, the nation’s capital still offered more opportunities for African Americans than most cities in those years. As a girl, Thomas dreamed of being an architect and building bridges, but there were few women architects a century ago. Instead, she studied art and spent the next thirty-five years of her life teaching art at a junior high school in the city. She was devoted to her students and organized art clubs, lectures, and student exhibitions for them.

Even while teaching, Thomas regularly exhibited her art, but critics paid little attention to these realistic compositions. Soon after she retired, while preparing for a new exhibition, Thomas developed her signature style of painting. While looking at a holly tree outside her front window, she noticed the shifting patterns of color and light through the leaves. Using small dabs of brightly colored paints, she made an image that called to mind the flickering light and rustling leaves she observed. She continued to paint large canvases filled with dense, irregular, abstract patterns. The colorful paintings were inspired by the landscape and even the American space program, which fascinated Thomas. For Thomas, the pursuit of beauty was a lifelong quest. “[M]y real belief is in art, in beauty. I say everyone on earth should take note of the spring...coming back each year, blooming and gorgeous.”

Thomas became an important role model for women, African Americans, and older artists. She was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art. A lifelong social activist, Thomas offered weekly art classes to children from Washington’s poorest neighborhoods. In her eighties, neither a broken hip nor a heart condition kept her from painting.

Selected Bibliography

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