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Why Brilliant African-American Painter Alma Thomas Wasn't Discovered Until Age 75

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A solo retrospective at a New York gallery seems an unlikely place to discover an artist largely unknown to the art world, yet [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery's](#) exhibition of 20 years of work by the late African-American painter [Alma Thomas](#) shines much-needed light on one such artist.

Despite a lack of widespread public recognition today, Thomas was fêted with a solo exhibition at the Whitney in 1972, just six years before her death. (It was the institution's first show entirely devoted to an African-American woman.) A posthumous national touring retrospective organized by the Fort Wayne Museum of Art also celebrated her work from 1998–2000. What's more, her work has been championed by presidents from Carter to Obama and included in multiple White House collections. Remarkably, these late-in-life recognitions are due not to the art world's failure to catch on to her work but rather to the fact that Thomas did not find her artistic stride until she was in her mid-70s.

The first fine arts graduate of historically black Howard University, Thomas only began to devote herself to a career as an artist after she retired from more than three decades as a high school art teacher, at the age of 69. Thomas's work then underwent a radical transformation from representation to colorful abstraction. Appropriating the work of Matisse and referencing black popular culture, Thomas developed a unique style, creating brightly hued, brick-shaped strokes that edge up against each other and coalesce into synchronous compositions. Neither overly representational nor political, Thomas's practice is unique among that of female African-American artists. And indeed, when asked if she saw herself as a black artist, Thomas [responded](#), "No, I do not. I'm a painter. I'm an American."

Early mature works, such as *End of Autumn* (1968), show Thomas's engaging use of color. Although a white ground is visible through strokes of paint, the image's background is mostly covered in a pale pinkish-sepia tone. In the center of the canvas is a blue circle with stripes of purple, orange, teal, and red. The whole picture is built from small patches of paint, reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics and the post-impressionist paintings of [Georges Seurat](#). *Spring No. 1* (1968) uses a similar construction, though here the colorful fields take up the entire plane of the painting in a tall vertical format.

Fall Approaching (1969) is more expressive, with swatches applied in less organized ways and, in places, painted over with white to occlude or erase them. Her color palette in many of these works is similar to the bright colors of painters such as [Alfred Jensen](#), who also used tiling and repetition to build his compositions.

Some of Thomas's compositions, such as *Deep Red Roses Chant* (1972) and *Oriental Sunset* (1973), use two-tone patterns all over the picture plane. The former juxtaposes crimson red on a bright blue ground, the latter a rich, bloody red on a vibrant field of yellow. Such work parallels [Yayoi Kusama's](#) "Infinity Nets" series, filling a large painted plane with an undulating expanse of repeated colors. Here, Thomas's formal skill is most visible, in her carefully modulated variations of a single color relationship.

Despite not identifying as a black artist, Thomas indeed felt the weight of her accomplishments. Having grown up in segregation-era Georgia, she once [told](#) an interviewer, "One of the things we couldn't do was to go into museums, let alone think of hanging our pictures there. My, how things have changed. Just look at me now."

—Stephen Dillon

"Alma Thomas: Moving Heaven & Earth. Paintings and Works on Paper, 1958–1978" is on view at [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#), New York, Mar. 20–May 16, 2015.

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Installation view of "Alma Thomas: Moving Heaven & Earth. Paintings and Works on Paper, 1958–1978," courtesy of [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#).



Alma Thomas
End of Autumn, 1968
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

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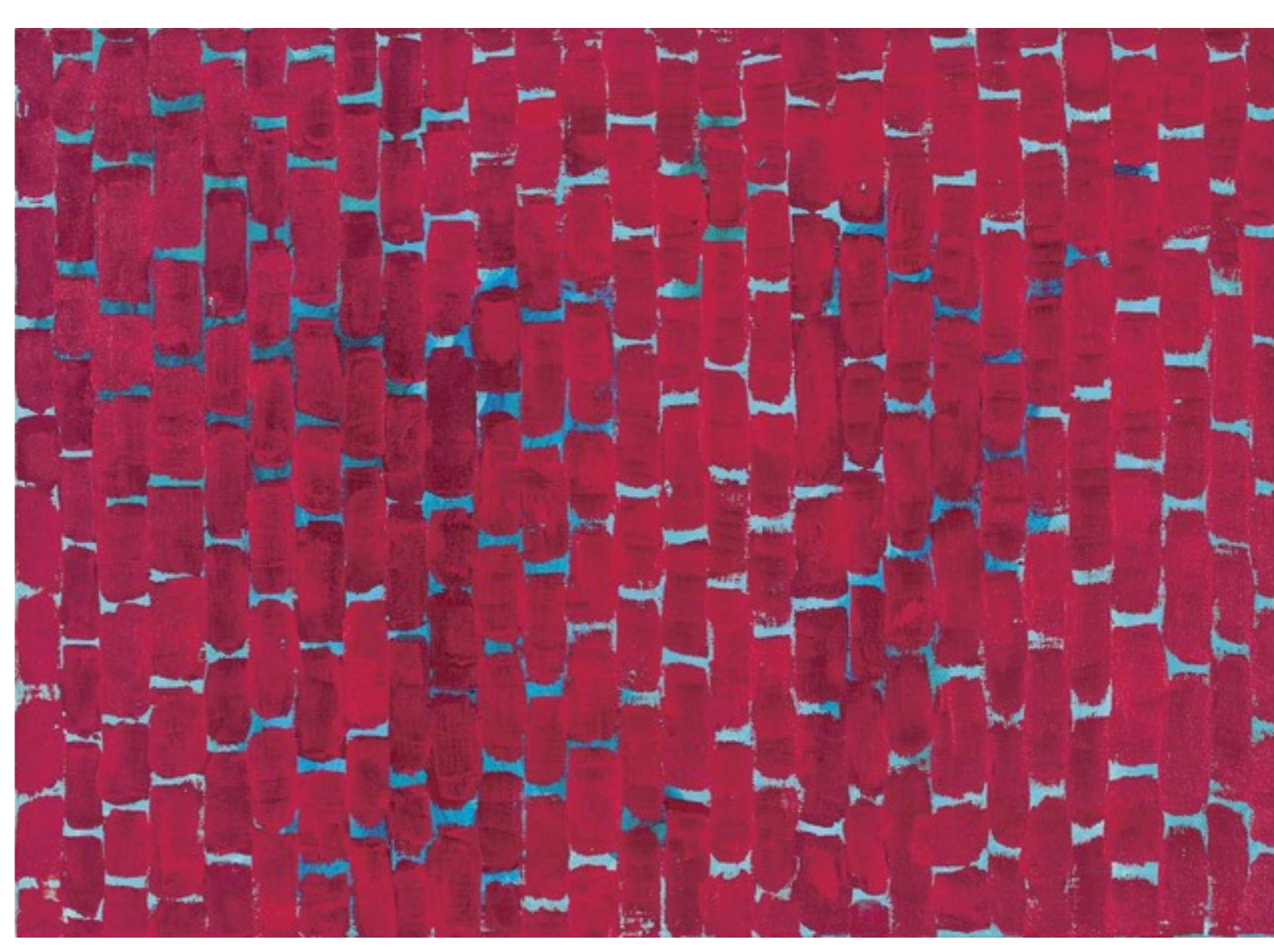
Alma Thomas
Spring No. 1, 1968
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

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Alma Thomas
Fall Approaching, 1969
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Alma Thomas
Deep Red Roses Chant, 1972
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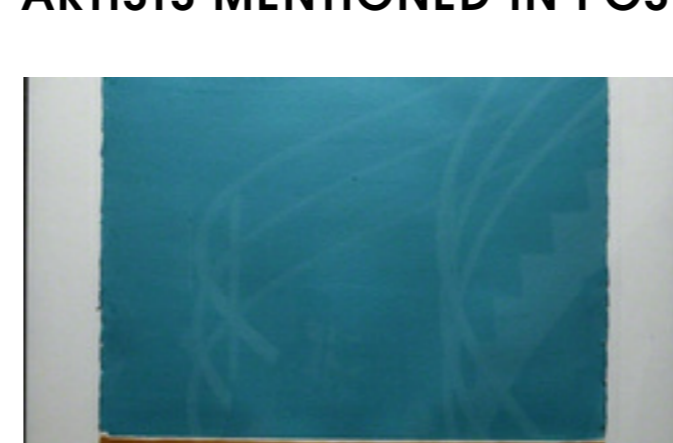
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Alma Thomas
Oriental Sunset, 1973
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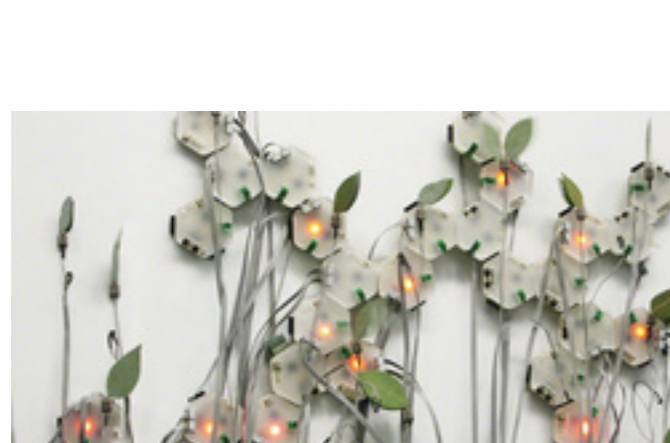
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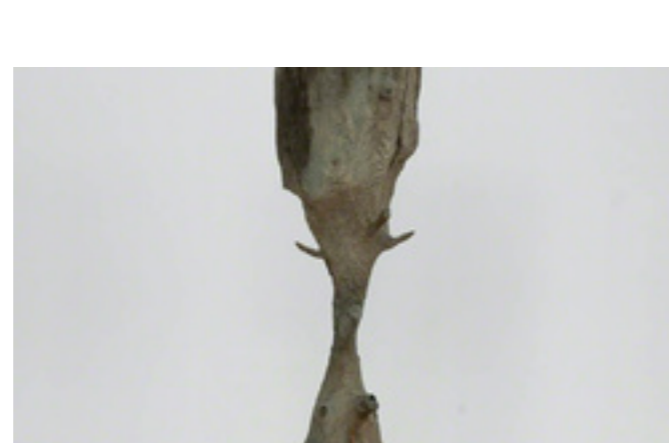
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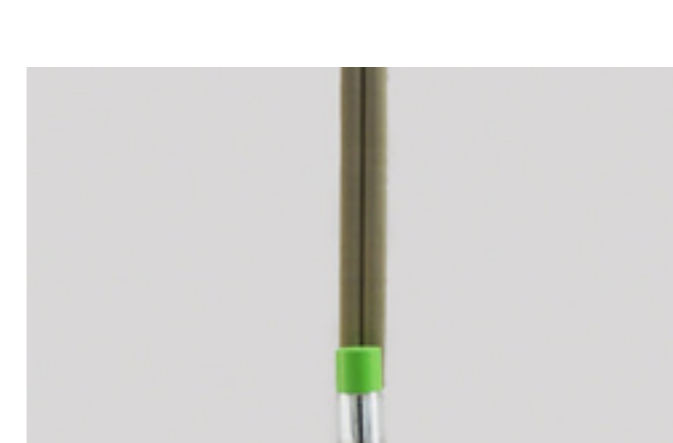
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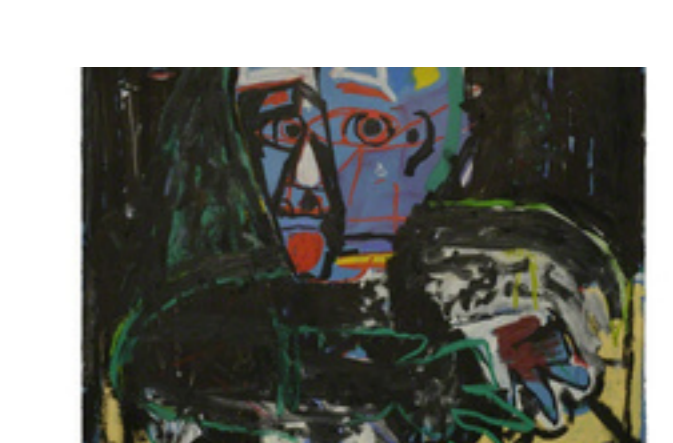
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