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Culture Talk: Curator Jonathan Walz on the Rich History Found in the Archives and Collections Dedicated to Artist Alma Thomas

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Aug 28, 2018 • 9:58 am

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Portrait of Alma Thomas painted by Laura Wheeler Waring (1947). | Smithsonian American Art Museum

RESEARCH IS ONGOING for a forthcoming exhibition dedicated to the life and work of Alma Thomas (1891-1978), the accomplished and technically rigorous abstract painter who was the first African American woman to

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have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1972.

The [Columbus Museum](#) in Columbus, Ga., and the [Chrysler Museum of Art](#) in Norfolk, Va., have [announced](#) the co-organization of a retrospective of Thomas that will reach beyond her painting practice, explore the many forms of creativity she pursued throughout her life, and connect her to Columbus, where she was born and raised. The Columbus Museum's expansive collection of Thomas material, about 500 items, including art, family photographs, documents, personal property, and furniture, will form the foundation of the exhibition.

Co-curated by Jonathan Frederick Walz, director of curatorial affairs and curator of American art at The Columbus Museum, and Seth Feman, curator of exhibitions and curator of photography at the Chrysler, the show will open at the Chrysler in summer 2020 and travel to the Columbus Museum in fall 2021. The curators expect the tour to include two additional venues in between, and are working to confirm those stops. Presenting the exhibition on the West Coast is of particular interest.

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Walz conducted research on Thomas at the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. Donated by her sister John Maurice Thomas, and grand nephew Charles Thomas Lewis, [the artist's papers](#) at the Archives date from 1894-2000, with the bulk of the material covering 1936-1982.

Last month, the Archives announced the digitization of the [Thomas papers](#) is complete. The files include 6.6 linear feet of letters, notes and writings, scrapbooks, photographs, photo albums, exhibition files, business records, biographical material, audio recordings and two videos. The digital record totals 6,741 images.

I attended a talk Walz gave earlier this year at the Archives about the vision for the exhibition. Feman, co-curator of the show, was present, but did not participate in the March 14 program. The presentation took place in a large conference room with about three dozen people, mostly Smithsonian employees, Archives staff, and fellow scholars.

THOMAS GREW UP in Columbus and moved with her family to Washington, D.C., in 1907. She was 15. After graduating from Armstrong Technical High School, she attended Miner Normal School (which over the years merged and transitioned to become what is today the University of the District of Columbia), where she earned a teaching certificate. She worked for nearly a decade, before entering Howard University. She was 30 and eventually became the first student to earn a fine arts degree from the HBCU in 1924.

Thomas spent her career at Shaw Junior High School. During her tenure, she continued her own education—earning a graduate degree from Columbia University (art education) and enrolling in painting courses at American University—and actively pursued her painting and many other creative interests. She retired from Shaw in 1960, after teaching for 35 years, and devoted herself full-time to her painting practice.

Walz said a key goal of the forthcoming exhibition is to dispel the myth that Thomas's creativity largely thrived post-retirement. He said it was "boundless" and that they want to tell "much more of a story about how she got to the Whitney Museum."

The presentation broke down six key objectives for the exhibition:

- mount a true retrospective instead of focusing on later work
- present Thomas as real person, a real human being
- contextualize her with peer artists in Washington, D.C.
- plumb underutilized archival material
- curate in an interdisciplinary manner
- explore her creativity in many, many ways beyond painting



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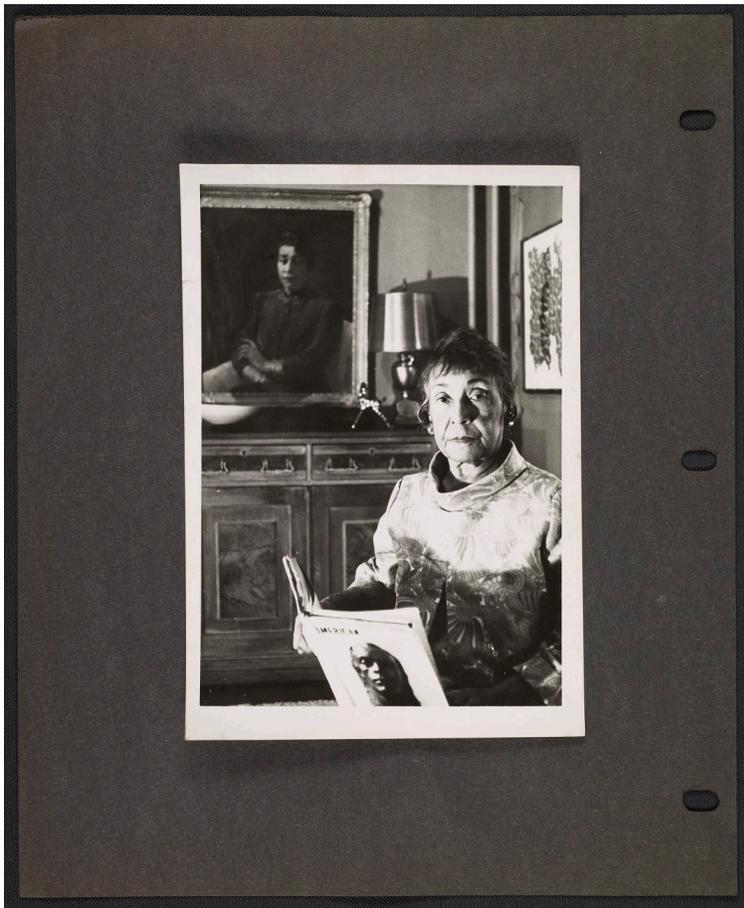
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Page from photo album featuring image of Alma Thomas (n.d.) with a portrait painted of her by Laura Wheeler Waring, in the background, and one of her own abstracts hanging at right. Thomas is holding the book "American Negro Art" by Cedric Dover (New York Graphic Society, 1960). | Photograph album of Alma Thomas, 1911 – 1982. Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

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This painting resembles the work displayed at right in the photograph above. It sold at auction in 2017. **Lot 102:** ALMA THOMAS (1891-1978), "Sign of Spring," 1966 (oil on canvas, 26 x 18 inches). | Estimated \$60,000-\$80,000. **Sold for \$237,500 (including fees)**

I SPOKE WITH WALZ by phone a couple of weeks after his presentation about the vision for the exhibition, and what we might learn about Thomas from her papers at the Archives and the cache of materials in the Columbus Museum's collection.

CULTURE TYPE: What prompted the Alma Thomas exhibition?

JONATHAN WALZ: The main impetus is that the Columbus Museum has this cache of material that really hasn't...

a) it's not well known and b) scholars have come, but there's so much. I think there's a lot of stories that those archival materials can really tell. The Columbus Museum has participated in tours of shows on Alma Thomas previously but has never organized one itself and it just seemed like she's from here and we have this amazing amount of material that's not really well known. We wanted to share it.

How did the collaboration with Seth Feman come about?

We met in grad school. We were both eventually Smithsonian fellows. We were on each other's radar. I knew he was working on art and art education in Washington, D.C., and eventually came to understand that one of his [dissertation] chapters was on Alma Thomas so that was always in the back of my mind.

When I started to organize the project, I didn't necessarily know that he would end up being a co-curator, but I always knew I wanted him to be one of the catalog authors. I knew that and then basically when I felt him out about writing an essay, I realized he knows so much and would be a really great collaborator and would know things that I didn't know or have connections to make that I wouldn't necessarily be able to make on my own. It just seemed kind of smart to ask him to co-curate.

Part of it, too, was in looking for venues. It wouldn't make as much sense for Seth to be involved if the Chrysler wasn't 100 percent behind him. He could do it as a guest curator, but he and I in discussions realized that it would make more sense for the Chrysler to be a venue. He has confirmed that, so both Seth and Chrysler are on board.

Tell me about your research at the Archives. What were you seeking and what did you discover?

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL'S 'PAST TIMES' SOARS TO RECORD-SETTING \$21.1 MILLION AT SOTHEBY'S, ARTIST ASSUMES MANTLE AS MOST EXPENSIVE LIVING AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTIST



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YINKA SHONIBARE WRAPPED MORE THAN 200 BOOKS IN 'AFRICAN' TEXTILES, HIS 'AMERICAN LIBRARY' IS DESIGNED TO START A CONVERSATION ABOUT IMMIGRATION

I am starting to realize/understand that what the Archives of American Art—it makes sense once I say it out loud, but it has taken me this long to figure it out—but the Archives of American Art, John Maurice and Charles (the artist's sister and nephew) gave those materials. The bulk of that material is from Alma's possessions. Then, what we have [at the Columbus Museum] is material related to Alma, about Alma, or by Alma, but it was in the possession of John Maurice.

Sometimes there's actually overlap, say in photography. Alma kept her own photo album and John Maurice had her own photo album, so there might be the same image in both of them. But I didn't realize that until I started really comparing both of them to each other. That was actually helpful to think through and realize what the overlap would be. Because of that, because John Maurice kept things that Alma didn't give to the Archives of American Art, we ended up with them. So some of that material, there is an overlap with the Archives and I think that's partly why we want to do the show. The things the John Maurice had are not really well known.

What I found is confirmation about how important dress and fashion were to her. There is really an interesting photo record in the Archives of American Art and some things we don't have here. We have early pictures of Alma from John Maurice, but ours trail off later in life. There are some things, but I think the Archives of American Art have a better overall photographic record of Alma, specifically in various outfits...

“What I found is confirmation about how important dress and fashion were to her. There is really an interesting photo record in the Archives of American Art and some things we don't have here. We have early pictures of Alma from John Maurice, but ours trail off later in life.”
 — Jonathan Walz



Portrait of Alma Thomas, 1975. (This image may document the artist receiving an Alumni Achievement Award from Howard University. The honor was bestowed in 1975.) | Photo by Roland Freeman, Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Visiting the Archives in D.C., was really helpful for us because we haven't completely cataloged everything with a fine-tooth comb. We had an image of a young lady in a fur-trimmed coat standing somewhere bucolic. We had that image and they also had it at the Archives of American Art. What was great was with theirs the backing was gone or it was mounted to a different piece of paper and John Maurice had actually explained what it was. Whereas our version, we didn't know who it was. We had a guest curator thinking it was actually Alma. The record at the Archives of American Art, in John Maurice's hand, explains the coat was made by the mother. This was actually John Maurice. They went to Rock Creek Park specifically for this photo shoot. It is very obvious that they are self consciously taking these photos as glamour shots. It's really kind of fun.



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ARCHIVES

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Can you characterize the holdings of the Columbus Museum in terms of the Alma Thomas works? What's the overview? How many items? And then what was the source of the materials? Was it all from her sister? Was it donated all at once?

[Alma Thomas] passed away in 1978 and then the following year some citizens here in Columbus banded together and engineered the acquisition of the major acrylic on canvas that we have. That was accessioned in 1979 and that was a museum purchase and also a gift from the National Association of Negro Business Women ("[Air View of a Spring Nursery](#)," 1966). That was pretty cool and that was the first thing by her that we got into the collection. Then her sister John Maurice gave a painting of their grandfather's house by Alma ("Grandfather's House," 1952). That was in 1982. That was the second thing. Those were the only two things we had for a chunk of time.

(More than a decade later, in 1994, John Maurice donated a large bulk of materials to the Columbus Museum. She gave 16 additional items in 2001—furniture, vases, a necklace, and a photograph of a young African American man. On the back of the photograph, John Maurice wrote that it was Samuel Thaggard from Fayetteville, North Carolina—one of Alma's admirers. Her last contribution was a few years before her death in 2004 at age 105.)

As an overview, [the museum's collection] has documents. There's a lot of family photographs. I would say that's the most exciting part because we have some things that Archives of American Art doesn't. I think those in conjunction with some other local history items, just in general about Columbus, I think we can tell a more nuanced story than if someone were just using the photos in the Archives of American Art. We got student work that I don't think is known at all. Those marionettes... She was super into marionettes. She did marionettes for about, I want to say, five years and we have five of them. Those were saved by the sister and then given to us. Those are actually post-Howard. We have Howard work. ...We have some personal tangible property from the Thomas family that John Maurice gave us.

What does personal tangible property mean?

Furniture or household items that are not necessarily quote unquote art but have some sort of relationship with the person.

I should also say, in terms of the overview, John Maurice also gave us early paintings that she herself had in her collection and a lot of studies and sketches that are not very well known. There was a chunk of them in the Studio-Tang exhibition but I think that might have been the first time that those were shown publicly at a national level.



Alma Thomas working in her studio, circa 1968. | Photo by Ida Jervis, Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001.
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



Installation view of "Alma Thomas" at the Studio Museum in Harlem (June 14-Oct. 30, 2016), smaller works, watercolors and drawings by Thomas from the collection of the Columbus Museum in Georgia, the artist's hometown museum. | Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

The whole purpose of this exhibition, and what will distinguish it from others, is that rather than focusing only on Alma Thomas's art, her later more mature art, you really want to present her comprehensive creative life and that includes her art as well as all these other things she did—the puppets, the attention to clothing and the gardening and cooking, all of these things. How would you characterize the balance in the exhibition? Will it be half art and the rest other objects related to her life?

I would say we are hoping that there will be, I don't know what word I want to use, "costumes" sprinkled throughout the exhibition sections. There's not going to be one section that's just costumes (examples of Thomas's clothing, as well as costumes she designed for theater productions). There'll be one or two hopefully in each section.

...What's interesting is that part of the emphasis of why this museum is looking at her life that way in particular is because at the Columbus Museum we have a dual mission of regional history and art. We really are an art plus history museum. I think there will be history items from the history side of the collection and art items from the art side of the collection. In telling her story about her life there will be art objects that do that as well. ...Seth and I are still hammering out the checklist. Why don't we ...say one-third history and two-thirds art. I would consider the marionettes art. Someone else might consider that material culture.

"I think there will be history items from the history side of the collection and art items from the art side of the collection. In telling her story about her life there will be art objects that do that as well. ...Seth and I are still hammering out the checklist. Why don't we ...say one-third history and two-thirds art."

— Jonathan Walz

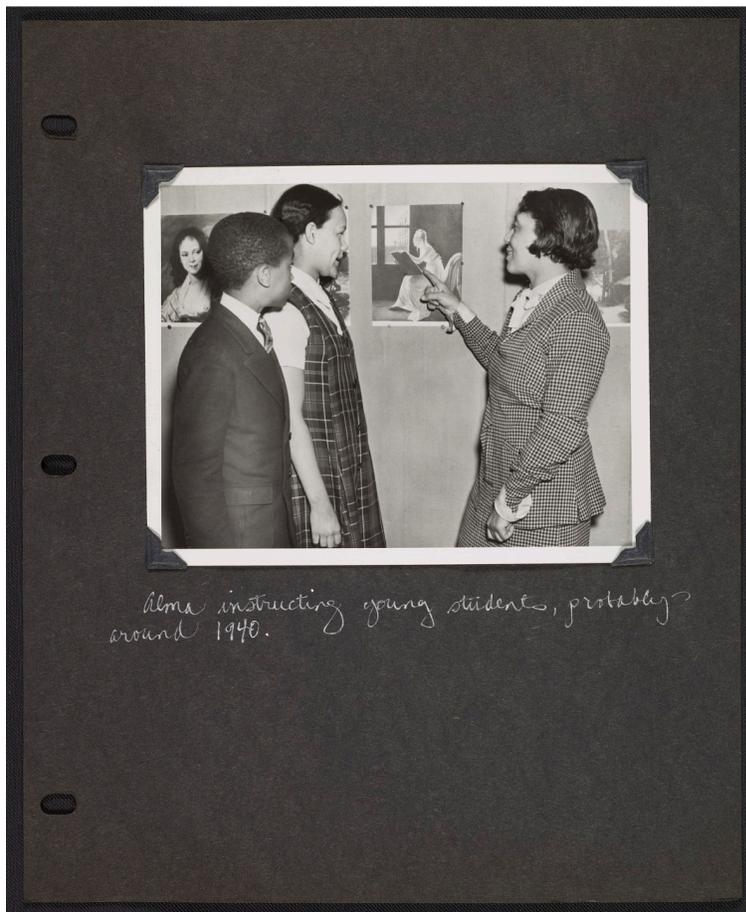
How will the exhibition be presented? Chronologically, thematically...?

Seth and I have been wrestling with that and I think we are going to do it—I know this sounds like a cop out, but I will explain. It will be thematic, but the themes will be in chronological order. Originally, we were hoping to break out of chronology because that is how the other exhibitions have treated her, but it is just so hard to escape. The themes will actually be places where she did the creative work—Columbus, Howard, the constellation of organizations like Barnett Aden Gallery around Howard. American University will be one. It will be more place

oriented as sections. I think it will make more sense to our visitors to put those places in chronological order. But we want chronology to be a little less apparent than theme slash location.



ALMA THOMAS, "Clown marionette," circa 1930s (fabric and wood with paint and string, 22 x 10 x 31 1/4 inches). | The Columbus Museum, Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas, 1994



Page from photo album features image of Alma Thomas discussing art with two students. The handwritten caption reads: "Alma instructing young students probably around 1940." | Photograph album of Alma Thomas, 1911 – 1982. Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Previous exhibitions devoted to Alma Thomas have borrowed artworks from museums and private collections. Will you do the same?

We will borrow selectively. One of our ideas is we would like to show her work physically in context with her peers of Washington and what's great is that they don't have an Alma Thomas yet but the Chrysler has a really good representation of other Washington Color School artists. That's another reason why it makes sense for them to be a venue because they have [Kenneth] Noland, Morris Louis. They have Gene Davis, etc., etc. They have a really good representational cluster that will probably be in the show.

But we will have to selectively borrow from a few other nationwide venues or museums. The good news is for us— at least in terms of shipping, it's bad news for her—I feel bad, but most of her work in museums is still on the East Coast. It's pretty rare to find it much further than the Appalachians. Fort Wayne has a painting and Crystal Bridges just acquired one recently. I think that might be it really. ...That is another reason we feel impelled to get another venue farther than the Appalachians. It was in the Midwest for that show at Fort Wayne (Sept. 5-Nov. 8, 1998). At least there was some representation out there. But we'd like to get it farther, if we can.

Even though Thomas was a peer of and working at the same time as the Washington Color School artists, how much was she actually involved with those artists?

It's a good question and the record has been really confusing. That might be something we can help tease apart and explain better at the exhibition. I don't think she ever really considered herself to be a member. To be honest the designation was... I mean it wasn't like all of these people were hanging out, talking to each other, very specifically about this is what we are going to do as a group. All of these artists were thinking through similar issues and they knew each other, but it wasn't like they were very well organized at this point.

I don't think it's right to call her a Washington Color School artist, but she gets lumped in, and I think rightfully so in the sense that she does know all of the people. She is showing at Barnett Aden Gallery just like Morris Louis and Theodoros Stamos and Kenneth Noland. She's in there. The issues she is working through are slightly different.

She never lets go of nature and everybody else is about paint and what paint does as a physical thing—it stains, it pools, it does this when I use a squeegee.

She's definitely using color and I think she looked at Gene Davis, a lot, for example. But, I don't think she would have called herself a Washington Color School artist. Those designations, art historically, are always just sort of easy ways for critics and scholars to lump people together so that they can talk easily about a group of people.

...I have seen at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, specifically, in their permanent collection galleries, her work has been in the same room as Gene Davis, Morris Louis, etc. Conceptually or temporally it makes a lot of sense to show her with her peers because in certain regards they're working through color and they are all coming to prominence at the same time. But conceptually, she is doing something slightly different. **CT**

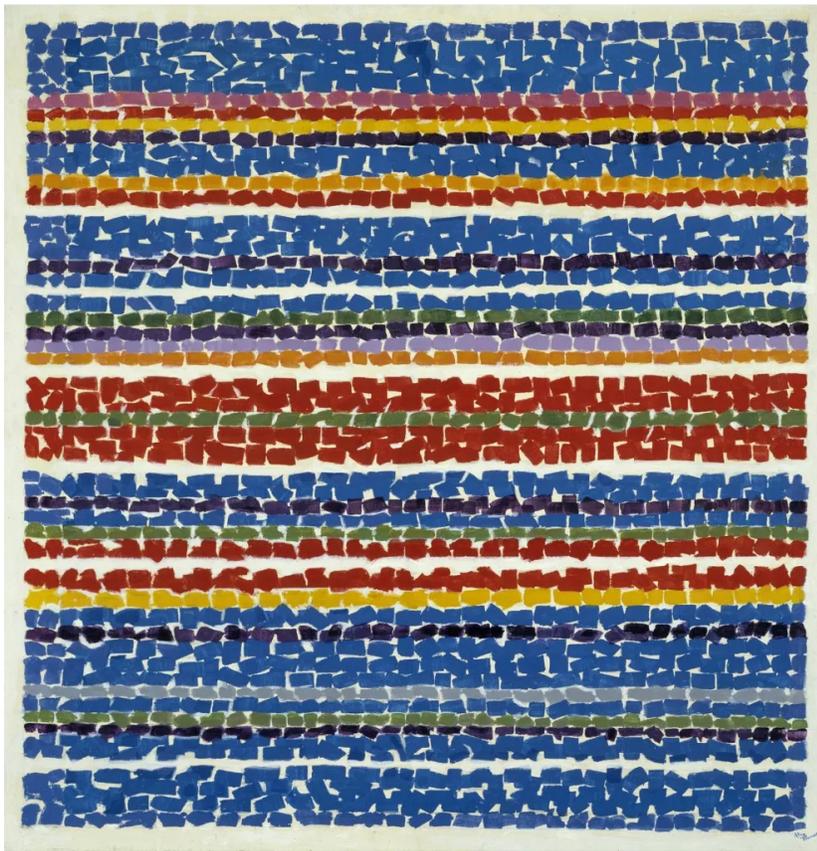
This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

UPDATE (Aug. 30, 2018): This article/interview was updated to include new information about exhibition dates/venues, and to correct a few factual errors, among them, the year Alma Thomas's sister John Maurice Thomas died (2004), and information provided by the Columbus Museum regarding the donation dates and details for the Alma Thomas materials from her family. In addition, the museum shared the latest thinking on how the Alma Thomas retrospective will be presented: "The organizing principles of the sections of the exhibition have evolved from specific locations in chronological order, into symbolic locations, each of which will contain work from various periods of her career, eschewing chronology altogether."

TOP IMAGE: LAURA WHEELING WARING, "Portrait of a Lady," 1947 (oil on canvas). | Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Vincent Melzac, 1977.121

BOOKSHELF

The Columbus and Chrysler museums plan to publish a catalog to accompany the forthcoming Alma Thomas retrospective. Complementing the exhibition organized by the Tang Teaching Museum and Studio Museum in Harlem, "[Alma Thomas](#)" features more than 125 vibrant, colorful paintings and works on paper, many published for the first time, a preface by Thelma Golden, scholarly essays, and responses to Thomas's work by four contemporary artists. To further explore the life and practice of Alma Thomas, consider "[Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings](#)," published to coincide with a traveling exhibition organized by the Fort Wayne Museum of Art (1998-2000). An earlier catalog, "[A Life in Art: Alma W. Thomas, 1891-1978](#)," accompanied a Smithsonian exhibition (1981–1982).



This Alma Thomas work is similar to the first painting the Columbus Museum acquired by the artist ("Air View of a Spring Nursery," 1966). The painting from the Smithsonian's collection was made two years later and bears a similar title. Shown, ALMA THOMAS, "Light Blue Nursery," 1968 (acrylic on canvas). | Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1970.324

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