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Culture Talk: Ian Berry on New Alma Thomas Exhibition Catalog, an Encyclopedic View of the Singular Artist

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Dec 11, 2016 · 11:37 pm

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ALMA THOMAS, "End of Autumn," 1968 (acrylic and graphite on canvas). | Collection of Richard Grossman and

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Adam Sheffer; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

EXPLAINING HER CHOICE to focus on brightly hued abstract work, **Alma Thomas** (1891-1978) said in 1970: "Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man." The quote is published in a new volume documenting Thomas's pioneering practice. Forty-six years hence, with man's inhumanity to man swirling all around us, new opportunities to explore the mesmerizing color, beauty and rhythm of her paintings have been a welcome departure.

For the first time in two decades, a comprehensive museum exhibition of her work was presented this year. The tightly curated show touched on four major themes—Move to Abstraction, Earth, Space, and Mosaic. "Alma Thomas" was co-curated by Ian Berry, director of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, and Lauren Haynes, an associate curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem who recently joined the Crystal Bridge Museum of American Art.

Co-edited by Berry and Haynes, a new, fully illustrated Thomas catalog expands beyond the exhibition, offering a nearly encyclopedic accounting of her work. The monograph features more than 125 vibrant, colorful paintings and works on paper, many published for the first time. A preface by Thelma Golden anchors the 256-page volume and is followed by scholarly essays from Haynes, Nikki A. Greene and Bridget R. Cooks; responses to Thomas's work by four contemporary artists; and a resource section including personal photos, an artist statement, and early articles and interviews.

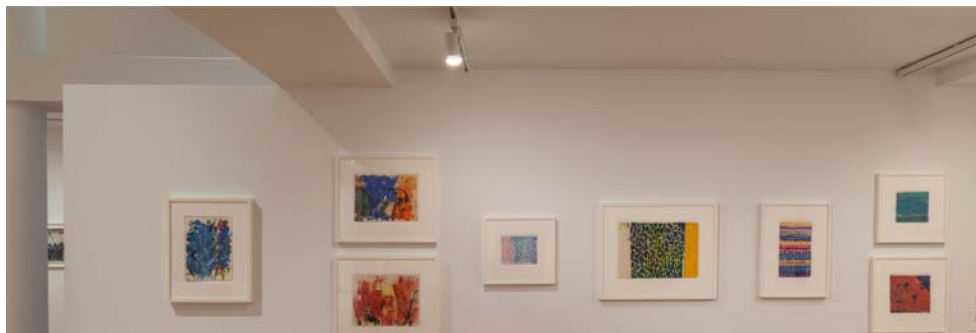
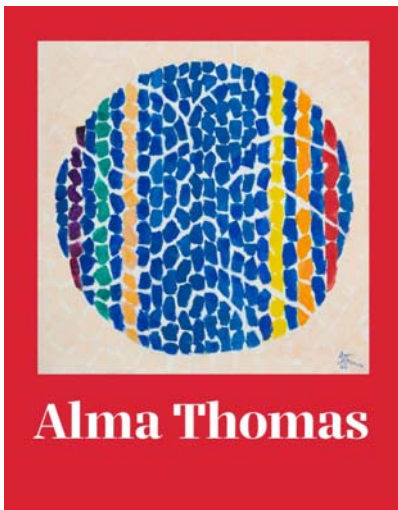
BORN IN COLUMBUS, GA., Thomas was the first person to earn a fine arts degree from Howard University (1924). She taught for 35 years at Shaw Junior High in Washington, D.C., and during that time, earned a master's degree in art education from Columbia University in New York and pursued an MFA in painting at American University. Thomas retired from teaching and devoted herself to painting full time at age 68.

A dozen years later, she was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Thomas died in 1978, but has remained a trailblazer. In 2015, the White House Historical Association acquired her painting "Resurrection." The artwork is the first by an African American woman to be brought into the White House Collection.

The scholarly essays and resource archive published in the exhibition catalog fill in many details of her biography, experiences, and perspectives.

I viewed the Thomas exhibition this spring, the last week it was on view at the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Afterward, I spoke with Berry about the artist and the exhibition. He was away, in Manhattan. I sat in his office at the museum and reached him by phone.

We talked about Thomas's remarkable success in her lifetime, perceptions of her practice, the cache of materials at her hometown museum, and the vision for the exhibition catalog. Since our conversation, the exhibition has opened and closed at the Studio Museum in Harlem (July 14-Oct. 30, 2016) and after originally being slated for publication in July, the catalog is available this month. The shifting schedule is not uncommon in art book publishing. Berry said he doesn't mind the timing, and probably prefers the delayed debut. "I actually like the catalog being almost like another exhibition venue," he said.



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Installation view of smaller works, watercolors and drawings by Alma Thomas from the collection of the Columbus Museum in Georgia, the artist's hometown museum. | Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

CULTURE TYPE: How much of an archive is there at the Columbus Museum in Georgia?

IAN BERRY: They have as good as I've seen. Alma didn't really keep an archive. There was no estate really. She didn't have a family. She gave whatever she had to her sister upon her death and then her sister mostly gave things to the Columbus Museum, which was their hometown museum.

CULTURE TYPE: Most of the watercolors in the exhibition were sourced from the Columbus Museum. What else is in the collection, any large paintings?

IAN BERRY: She did very well in her life, so she didn't really have a lot of art work. She sold a lot of her art work when she was alive, so it's not like there was a big group of things that needed to be given away or found homes. Which is kind of a wonderful. It's a little bit of an unusual story. But it's a wonderful one, that she was actually able to see success in her late years, in her 70s and 80s and be a part of a driving gallery that was selling most of her paintings that she brought in for her shows and was able to see museums take notice. It's a little bit different than some of the other artists I've worked on, where there's a lot of undiscovered work. I'm not sure there's a lot of undiscovered Alma Thomas work. There are certainly people who have paintings and certainly a lot within Washington, D.C., where her gallery was. But a lot of that work is known to the people that love Alma Thomas.

CULTURE TYPE: What were you able to learn from what the museum does have?

IAN BERRY: What they have there, that was so important, is the family pictures which gave us a much better picture of how she grew up seeing the flower garden that she loved so much, that she talks about so much in her writing. Actually, getting to see pictures of that, seeing the tree in front of her house—it's still there in Columbus—and then seeing all these sketches which really give great evidence to how careful and conceptual she was.

CULTURE TYPE: The sketches reveal a lot about her practice, not just her visual approach but her intellectual process.

IAN BERRY: There can be a tendency, with not so thoughtful art history tellers, to put her in a category of sort of genius. What they are not saying in these praise moments is, "Well, there were serious people in other places, but she just had this gift." There is an underlying message there about being a woman, her age, being a black painter, being an abstract painter in Washington, all the different kinds of things that might be loaded into that. I was really happy to see those drawings, which when we put them in the catalog—I hope you saw that wall and case in the show, there will be even more of them in the catalog—really kind of shows her to be formally wise and experimental and organized in a way that discounts and undercuts all those limiting ways one might categorize her. Which is how I think art history has sadly put her, hopefully up until now.

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CULTURE TALK: IAN BERRY ON NEW ALMA THOMAS EXHIBITION CATALOG, AN ENCYCLOPEDIA VIEW OF THE SINGULAR ARTIST



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age, being a black painter, being an abstract painter in Washington, all the different kinds of things that might be loaded into that.”
 — Ian Berry, Director of Tang Teaching Museum

CULTURE TYPE: In 2014, Hemphill Fine Arts in D.C. showed 13 of her studies for paintings. What about that work? You spoke earlier about how some people have described her as an artist and then you said she was actually very organized and experimental. The studies demonstrate that. Were those works something that you pursued?

IAN BERRY: Those are beautiful works and I think maybe three of them have full pages in our catalog. They're great. We are definitely including them. We decided to include them in the catalog rather than the show.



WHERE MY GIRLS AT?: 28+ OPPORTUNITIES TO SEE AND SUPPORT THE WORK OF BLACK FEMALE ARTISTS AND CURATORS THIS FALL



From "Alma Thomas" catalog: ALMA THOMAS, "March on Washington," 1964 (acrylic on canvas), Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York | pre-publication spread, pages 40-41

CULTURE TYPE: Alma Thomas emphasized her desire to focus on color and beauty in her work rather than the injustices in the world. Given this, can you discuss the decision to begin the exhibition with her March on Washington paintings?

IAN BERRY: We wanted to give a little context into the scene in which she is living. We wanted to be sensitive to her words, so each of the section labels starts with a quote, because she had a particular idea about how politics entered art making, particularly her art making. We included the March on Washington for two things. One is the politics and cultural context of where she is living and what she is participating in. The other is also to show her move to abstraction. With that crowd scene you can really see those vertical strokes, those vertical abstract strokes that are making up faces and bodies and signs in that crowd and as you turn the corner [in the exhibition] you see the flower paintings. It's the exact same strokes, just in a different place and so it was an instructive... it's almost like a label. It's sort of an instructive way to see how her painting formally developed.

CULTURE TYPE: Sometimes catalogs are published when exhibitions open, other times they are delayed and include installation images. Can you talk about the timing for this book?

IAN BERRY: We wanted to learn from the show. I know it's a little counter to promotion, but I actually like the catalog being almost like another exhibition venue and we can explore. The catalogs live on so much longer after our exhibitions that I like reflecting on the work, picking new photographs, getting new writings made while the work is there. All of that you can do when the show is there. That's what I like, the opportunity to be with the work more. That makes the catalog even better.



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CULTURE TYPE: What new developments have come about since the exhibition opened that you are including?

IAN BERRY: People have come up to us since the show has been up to us to say, "Hey, guess what? I have an Alma Thomas. Here's my painting." Some of those are going in the catalog. There are also museums that are buying paintings now because of more interest in Alma. The Hood Museum at Dartmouth, for example, just bought a painting and we'll be including that as an illustration in our catalog. Others are doing the same. MoMA, for example, just purchased some work last year that'll be in our catalog also. There will be many, many more works illustrated in the catalog than are in the show. The catalog is much bigger, much more comprehensive.

“People have come up to us since the show has been up to us to say, “Hey, guess what? I have an Alma Thomas. Here’s my painting.” Some of those are going in the catalog.” — Ian Berry, Director of Tang Teaching Museum

FOODWAYS: ARTISTS AND MUSEUMS ARE EMBRACING THE CULTURAL, CREATIVE AND CONVIVIAL ASPECTS OF THE CULINARY EXPERIENCE



HOW MUCH IS THAT PAINTING? 10 BLACK ARTISTS WHOSE WORK GARNERS TOP DOLLAR AT AUCTION



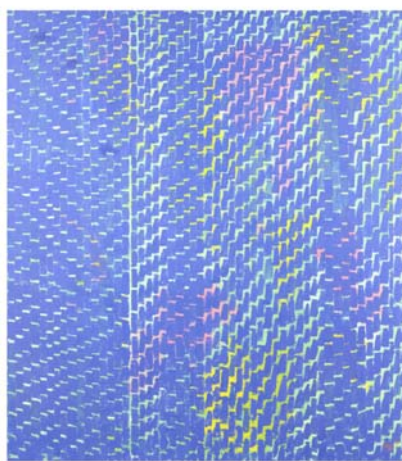
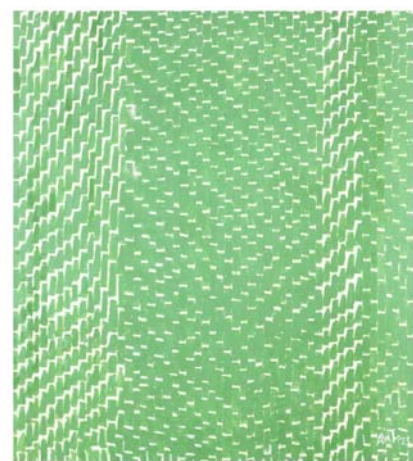
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Culture Type is supported by a 2015 [Arts Writers Grant](#) from Creative Capital and the Andy Warhol Foundation.

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From “Alma Thomas”catalog: From left, ALMA THOMAS, “Spring Grass,” 1973 and “Celestial Fantasy,” 1973 (both acrylic on canvas). | Smithsonian American Art Museum (2) | pre-publication spread, pages 172-173

CULTURE TYPE: What else is planned for the catalog?

IAN BERRY: The other new things are we invited four contemporary artists to make response pieces to the themes of our four sections. We have Leslie Hewitt (Earth), Leslie Wayne (Move to Abstraction), Jennie C. Jones (Mosaic) and Saya Woolfalk (Space) who made pieces for the catalog to go along with those sections. We also commissioned two art historians Bridget Cooks and Nikki Greene to write new essays for us. All of them are of a younger generation. All of them are interesting. They are hopefully gonna bring Alma to the present.

CULTURE TYPE: It’s interesting that all six of the contributors are women. Was that intentional?

IAN BERRY: I hate to say it wasn't because that makes me not very thoughtful. I don't remember us sitting down and saying let's pick six women. But I am happy that it worked out that way. It wasn't our stated goal, but it's a happy outcome.

CULTURE TYPE: In organizing the exhibition and putting together the catalog, what new scholarship on Alma Thomas has emerged that previously wasn't known?

IAN BERRY: There is definitely some biographical information that Bridget Cooks and Nikki Greene and Lauren and I are including that previously hasn't been published before—details of artists that she was involved with within Washington D.C.; some of the connections she had in different salons and relationships; certainly more quotes of her, a few unpublished interviews that we are quoting liberally from. Also, I think that Nikki and Bridget's essays definitely position her in a much more contemporary way in terms of the very fast growing African American art

history telling, particularly in relation to abstract art. We think we've got some really good writing going on that's bringing her to the forefront and getting a very contemporary look at [her work].

CULTURE TYPE: The show is at the Tang and will be at the Studio Museum. Was there a desire to do a broader schedule at venues across the country to give Alma Thomas's work more exposure?

IAN BERRY: A little bit. We were happy for our two venue collaboration. We did talk to a few other venues, but not too hard. The loans are little tricky. These paintings are very valuable and they are fragile and touring anything is difficult for art work. We took that in consideration and then really put our energy into the book as the way it is going to live on for longer. **CT**

This interview has been condensed and edited.

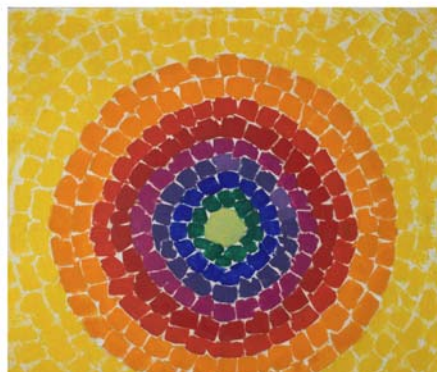
READ CULTURE TALK with co-curator Lauren Haynes about Alma Thomas exhibition

BOOKSHELF

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).



From "Alma Thomas" catalog: ALMA THOMAS, "Untitled," circa 1968 (tape on cut and stapled paper), Museum of Modern Art | pre-publication spread, pages 86-87





Untitled, Study for Resurrection, c. 1966
Acrylic on paper, 22 x 14 in.
The Collection of Nancy and David Barber

Resurrection, 1968
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 in.
Collection of the White House Historical Association

From "Alma Thomas" catalog: From left, ALMA THOMAS, "Untitled, Study for Resurrection," circa 1966 (acrylic on paper), Collection of Nancy and David Barber; and "Resurrection," 1968 (acrylic on canvas), Collection of White House Historical Collection. | pre-publication spread, pages 82-83



Phantasmagoria, 1973
Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Private Collection, New York, NY
Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY

Garden of Blue Flowers Rhapsody, 1976
Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Private Collection, Marina del Rey, CA
Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY

From "Alma Thomas" catalog: From left, ALMA THOMAS, "Phantasmagoria," 1973 (acrylic on canvas), Private collection New York, N.Y.; and Garden of Blue Flowers Rhapsody," 1976 (acrylic on canvas), Private collection Marina del Rey, Calif. | pre-publication spread, pages 186-187



Spring Displays a Rock Garden, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Private Collection, New York, NY
Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY

Spring Displays a Rock Garden, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 in.
Private Collection, Marina del Rey, CA
Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY

From "Alma Thomas" catalog: From left, ALMA THOMAS, "Spring Displays a Rock Garden," 1970 (acrylic on

canvas), Private collection, New York, N.Y.; and "Flowers in Spring," 1971 (acrylic on canvas), Private collection, Princeton, N.J. | pre-publication spread, pages 94-95

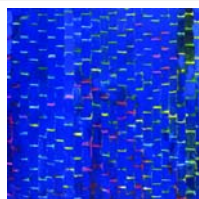
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