



Welcome to Culture Type!

An exploration of black art through vintage and contemporary books, magazines and catalogs, Culture Type shares invaluable interestingness culled from the published record on black art.

ABOUT
BOOKSHELF
CONTACT

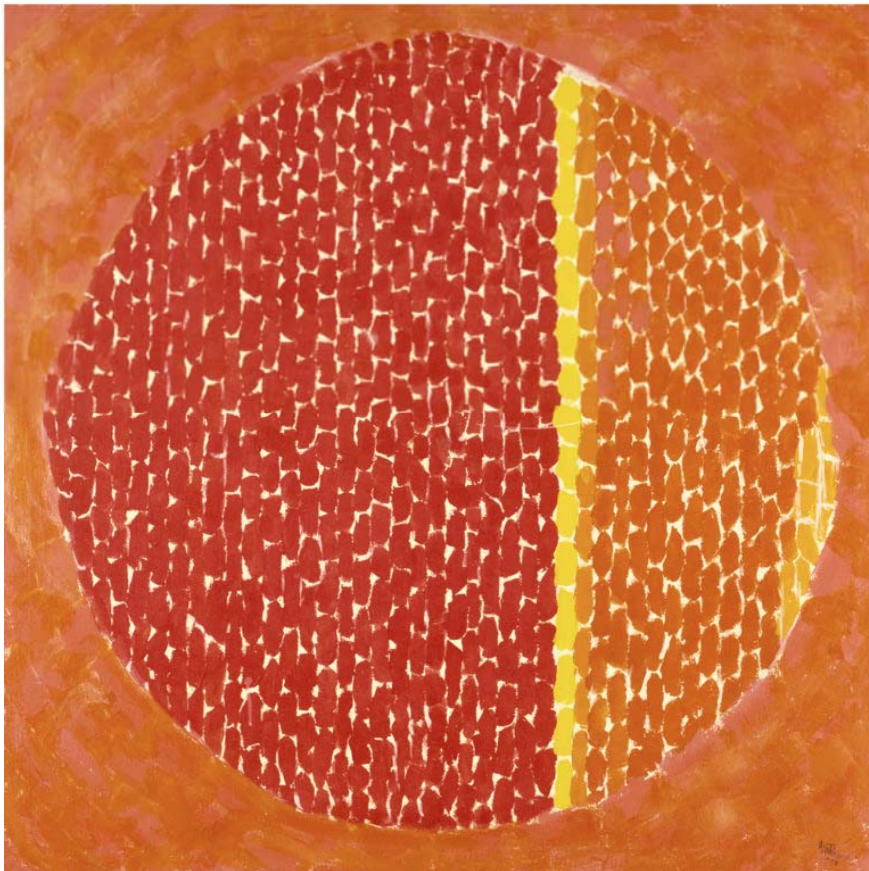
BOOKS & CATALOGS MAGAZINES EXHIBITIONS AUCTIONS BEST ART BOOKS YEAR IN BLACK ART NEWS CULTURE TALKS

Culture Talk: Curator Lauren Haynes on Bringing the Colorful, Abstract Paintings of Alma Thomas to Harlem's Studio Museum

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Sep 7, 2016 · 11:14 pm

No Comments

Like 314 Tweet



ALMA THOMAS, "Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset," 1970 (acrylic on canvas). | Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

CONNECT



SUBSCRIBE

Get Culture Type in your inbox. Submit your email address to be notified of new posts.

Email Address

Subscribe

RECENTLY PUBLISHED



Lorna Simpson Goes to Washington, Gives Inaugural Photography Lecture at National Gallery of Art

Sep 14, 2016



Retrospective: The Latest News in Black Art – Fall Exhibitions Open in New York, Los Angeles

Sep 11, 2016



At Smithsonian, Carl Van Vechten's Photographs Document Familiar Faces, Key Figures From Harlem's Heydays

Sep 10, 2016



Culture Talk: Curator Lauren Haynes on Bringing the Colorful, Abstract Paintings of Alma Thomas to Harlem's Studio Museum

Sep 7, 2016



In First Date Movie 'Southside With You,' Paintings by Ernie Barnes Fuel Connection Between Barack and Michelle Obama

Sep 5, 2016

AT A TIME WHEN MOST ARTISTS are in the sunset of their careers, **Alma Thomas** (1891-1978) was on the rise. Recognized for her expressive abstract paintings, her exuberant use of color and the technical acumen with which she executed patterns, she had dedicated herself to her practice a short dozen years when she was first celebrated by major institutions. In 1972, Thomas was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The landmark show was followed later that year by a retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where Mayor Walter Washington declared Sept. 9 Alma W. Thomas Day. A remarkable year. She was 80.

Born in Columbus, Ga., she was a trailblazer early on. In 1924, Thomas became the first person to earn a fine arts degree from Howard University. She taught for 35 years at Shaw Junior High, a Washington, D.C., public school, and during that time, earned a master's degree in art education from Columbia University in New York, pursued an MFA in painting at American University in Washington, and studied in Europe on a summer tour sponsored by the Tyler School of Fine Art at Temple University. Over the years, her work periodically appeared in exhibitions and she was active in the local arts community, organizing clubs to expose her students to the arts, and serving as vice president of the Barnett Aden Gallery, a black-owned and operated gallery, often cited as the first.

When Thomas retired from teaching in 1960, she was finally able to devote herself to painting full time at age 68. That fall, her first solo exhibition at a Dupont Circle gallery featured her watercolors. Later exhibitions included shows at Howard University (1966) and Fisk University (1971).

THOMAS MADE HISTORY when her work was presented at the Whitney in 1972, and that same year, the museum acquired "Mars Dust," one of the paintings in the exhibition. A year ago, **Lauren Haynes**, associate curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, [gave a talk](#) about "Mars Dust." She opened the program at the Whitney with a candid statement: "Full disclosure. I am a huge Alma Thomas nerd. I love everything she's done." Haynes had lately immersed herself in Thomas's work, co-organizing a concise exhibition that opened at the [Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum](#) and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in February 2016 and is currently on view at the [Studio Museum](#).



POPULAR READING



Lorna Simpson Goes to Washington, Gives Inaugural Photography Lecture at National Gallery of Art



Retrospective: The Latest News in Black Art - Fall Exhibitions Open in New York, Los Angeles



Where My Girls At? 20 Black Female Artists with Solo Exhibitions on View this Fall



Sneak Peak: Smithsonian Curators Preview New African American Museum



Culture Talk: Curator Lauren Haynes on Bringing the Colorful, Abstract Paintings of Alma Thomas to Harlem's Studio Museum



In First Date Movie 'Southside With You,' Paintings by Ernie Barnes Fuel Connection Between Barack and Michelle Obama



Culture Talk: Curator Adrienne Edwards on Her New Exhibition 'Blackness in Abstraction'

COMING SOON: A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT THE SMITHSONIAN'S AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM



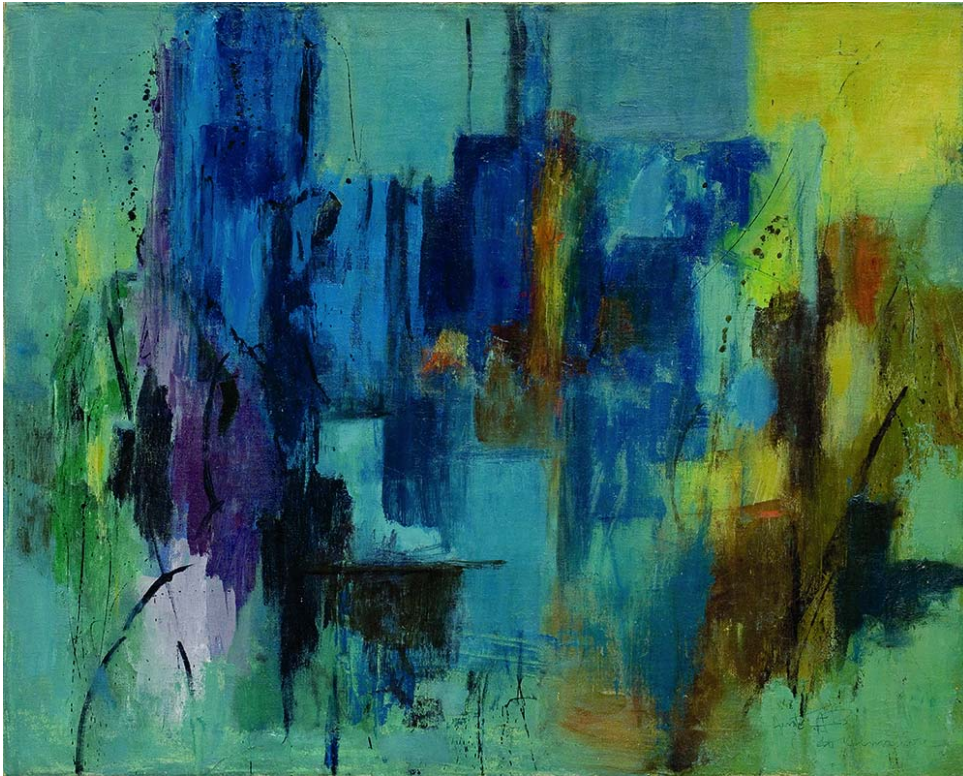
CULTURE TALK: CURATOR LAUREN HAYNES ON BRINGING THE COLORFUL, ABSTRACT PAINTINGS OF ALMA THOMAS TO HARLEM'S STUDIO MUSEUM

"Full disclosure. I am a huge Alma Thomas nerd. I love everything she's done." — Curator Lauren Haynes

The survey—the first in more than two decades—examines Thomas's evolving practice from the late 1950s to her death in 1978. There are four sections, beginning with a pair of representational paintings, loosely rendered depictions of the 1963 March on Washington that chart her Move to Abstraction; a look at her Earth and Space paintings inspired by nature and other-worldly dimensions; and then Mosaic features later works from the mid- to late-1970s that experiment with composition. The larger canvases on loan from the Smithsonian, National Museum of Women in the Arts, The Phillips Collection, Art Institute of Chicago, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery and private collectors, are complemented by a rarely exhibited cache of smaller works—watercolors and drawings from the collection of the Columbus Museum in Georgia, that were donated to Thomas's hometown museum by her sister.

IN ADDITION TO THE THOMAS EXHIBITION, during her 10-year tenure at the Studio Museum, Haynes has organized solo shows featuring **Stanley Whitney** and **Carrie Mae Weems**, along with "[Speaking of People](#)," a group exhibition of contemporary artists inspired Ebony and Jet magazines. She also oversees the museum's collection and acquisitions.

Haynes spoke with Culture Type about her early interest in Thomas, how the exhibition came together, the forthcoming catalog, the Studio Museum's collection, and her [new job at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American](#)



ALMA THOMAS, "Untitled," 1960 (oil on canvas). | Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

CULTURE TYPE: What was the genesis for the Alma Thomas exhibition?

LAUREN HAYNES: I have been a real fan of Alma Thomas's work since I started studying art history. The work is strong and interesting and I love the way she uses color. There's nothing else quite like it. Then, when I got to the museum and saw the two works on paper that the Studio Museum has, seeing the paintings around, I really wanted to figure out how to have an exhibition at the Studio Museum.

I think, simultaneously, Ian [Berry] at the Tang [the museum's director] was thinking about her work and really wanted to have a way to show her work to their audience, as well. Someone who knew both of us and heard us talk about the idea of an exhibition, connected us and said both of you are talking about this Alma Thomas exhibition. So Ian and I talked and felt that we could do a really fantastic exhibition combining the powers of our two institutions.

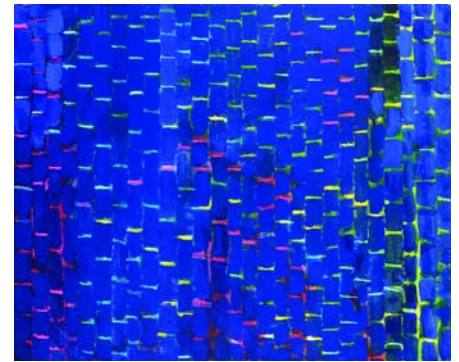
Who connected you?

It was Thomas Lax [a curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art]. Thomas, at the time, was still at the Studio Museum. Because I saw him every day, we talked and he knew what I was thinking. I don't remember how he and Ian started talking about it, but he connected us.

What was the process for acquiring the paintings in the exhibition?

We had an amazing fellow who worked on the exhibition. Abigail Lapin was a Studio Museum summer fellow and she did amazing research helping us figure out where works were, which ones were in different public institutions, and giving us lists—helping us get a bigger picture of what was where. Then Ian and I, separately and then together, began looking at the images and thinking about how we wanted to have the exhibition fit and be in those spaces and really not trying to do a huge retrospective that had 50 paintings and 100 works on paper, but really trying to do a focused look at her work and these sections that we came up with as our guide.

That's how we were thinking of it and then just picking the ones that we really liked and the ones that were a little different and showed different aspects of her practice. Then just going from there and seeing what loans we could



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



'THE FIGURE REMAINS ESSENTIALLY BLACK IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE': KERRY JAMES MARSHALL PREviews HIS MASTER PAINTINGS AT MCA CHICAGO



FOR YOUR SUMMER AGENDA, 49 U.S. EXHIBITIONS FEATURING WORKS BY BLACK ARTISTS

get. That always, obviously, is an important part of any exhibition—figuring out who is available to lend a work and then what institutions don't have plans for them right away and are open to the loan and working within all of that.

The concept of the four themes, was that something you developed at the outset or once you saw what works were available?

It happened as we were looking through the works and really thinking about, "Okay, how are we going to organize and talk about this?" And that seemed to be the themes we were seeing most often.

It is modest in size, very focused and digestible to really get a sense of her evolving aesthetic. You said you wanted it to be focused, but was that also a function of the amount of space you had to show in each venue and maybe the availability of the works?

The availability of the works had some to do with it, but really it was intentional.



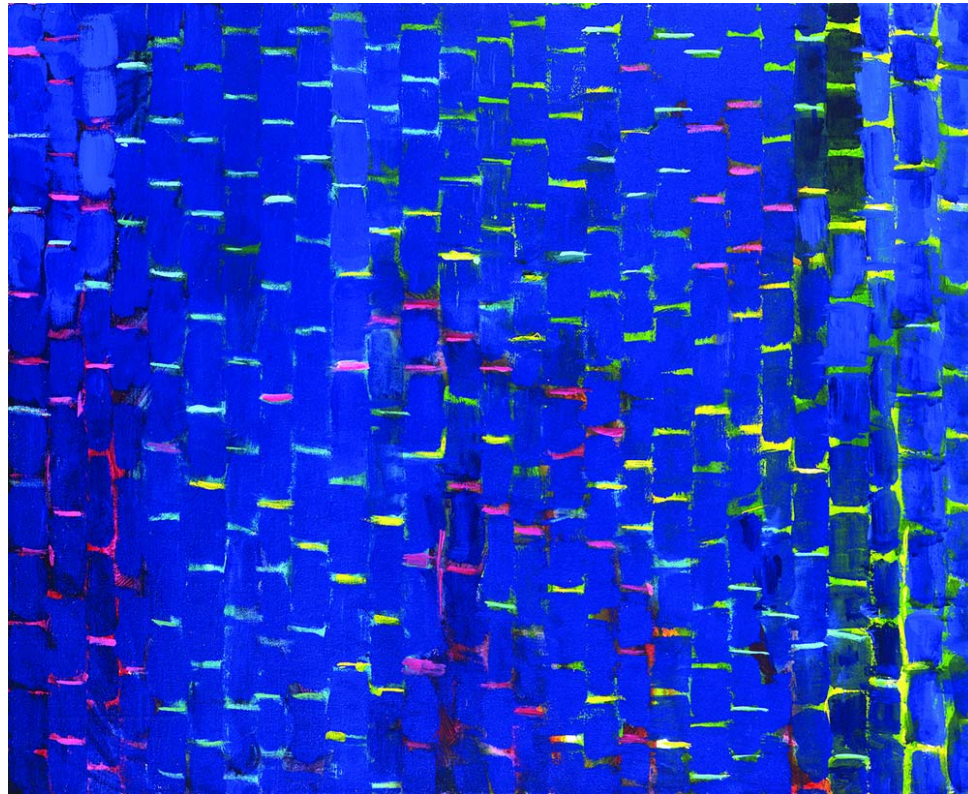
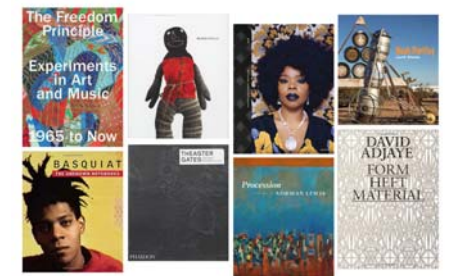
CULTURE TALK: CURATOR ADRIENNE EDWARDS ON HER NEW EXHIBITION 'BLACKNESS IN ABSTRACTION'



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



CULTURE TYPE PICKS: 14 BEST BLACK ART BOOKS OF 2015



ALMA THOMAS, "Stars and Their Display," 1972 (acrylic on canvas). | Private Collection, Highland Park, IL; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

Were the works hard find or a challenge to acquire?

Not even hard to find, but many institutions, rightly so, have various different loan request requirements. Also, some of the works maybe haven't been out on view so they would've needed a lot of conservation that would've taken a good amount of time. There are just a lot of, with any exhibition, a lot of factors that go into the loans and works that you are able to get. The way that the exhibition looks and feels in both spaces is what we were aiming to do. So, it's not just, "Oh, we didn't get these works, so that's why the exhibition is this size." Or, "This is what we could fit, so this is why the exhibition is this size." It really was meant to be a focused look at her work.

Of all the paintings on view, is there one in particular you are drawn to or although it has been with an institution for a while really hasn't been shown that you think is important that it is included in this exhibition?

Probably because I wrote about this section for the catalog, the Space section is one of my favorites. I really enjoy a lot of those works. The Art Institute's "Starry Night and Astronaut" is a standout. That's an example of a work that is on view often. Many people who come from Chicago and see the exhibition talk about seeing it there and missing it there. So it's really exciting to be able to have it here in New York for a little bit.



“The Art Institute’s “Starry Night and Astronaut” is a standout. Many people who come from Chicago and see the exhibition talk about seeing it there and missing it there. So it’s really exciting to be able to have it here in New York for a little bit.” — Curator Lauren Haynes

Is there a reason why you took on the writing for the Space section? Do you have a particular interest in space, science fiction or related subjects?

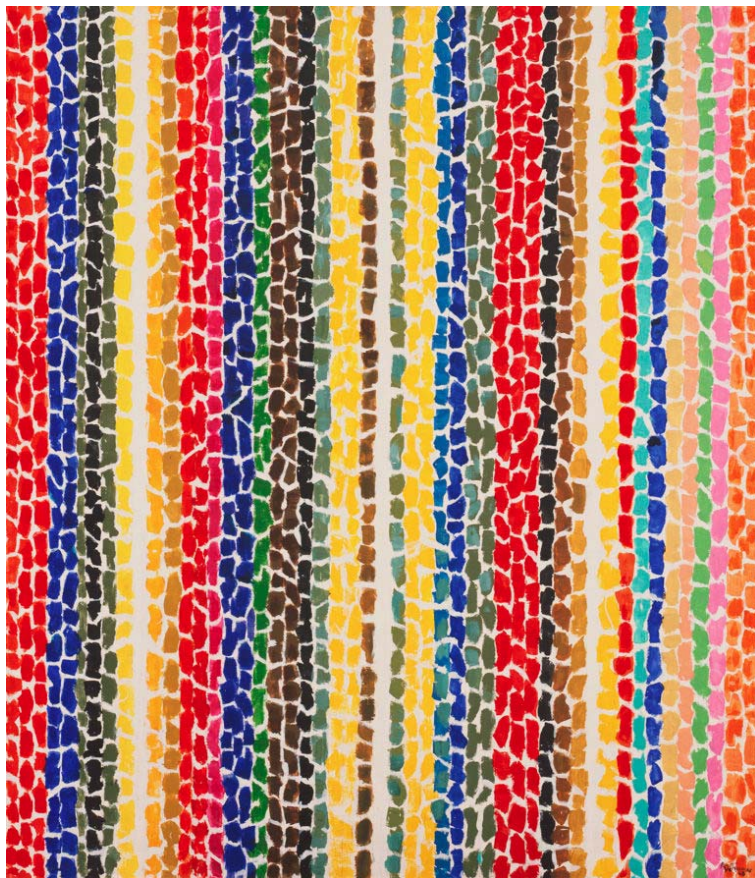
Yes, I’m interested in space and sci-fi. I have early memories of my dad watching “Star Trek” episodes on TV. It probably comes from that. I’m particularly interested in how space and space exploration is depicted in popular culture.

The exhibition is co-organized by the Tang and the Studio Museum and is only being shown at these two institutions. Was there any interest from other museums or an effort to show it in other venues so more people could see this important exhibition? A survey of Thomas’s work hasn’t been presented in a while.

I think there is always hope and desire when you make an exhibition that it will be able to travel to many different places, but a lot of logistical things can get in the way of actually making that happen.

What does that mean?

I mean there’s more planning that goes into the more venues that you have. Loans have to be longer so some public collections don’t necessarily want to lend the works that long. There are the exhibitions calendars that already exist at institutions. Even though they would like to be able to have the show, it just doesn’t really fit in with their calendar—the practicalities of it.



ALMA THOMAS, “Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers,” 1968 (acrylic on canvas). | The Phillips Collection, Washington DC, Gift of Franz Bader, 1976; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

WHERE MY GIRLS AT? 20 BLACK FEMALE ARTISTS WITH SOLO EXHIBITIONS ON VIEW THIS FALL



SUPPORT



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

ARCHIVES

Archives [Select Month](#)

Thomas had a unique career. She taught for more than three decades at a D.C. public school and didn't really focus on her practice until after retirement. Then she had the solo exhibition at the Whitney, the first African American woman to do so. What are your thoughts about the arc of her career, in terms of recognition of her work?

You know she has a really interesting story. She was so involved and invested in Washington, D.C., and the arts community there. Once she started making her own work, she was showing fairly quickly at galleries and then had the Whitney show. She was able to see her work in museums while she was alive, which is something that not all black artists who were making work at the same time that she was really were able to do. That was this amazing, really I think important, part of her story. To see and be able to know that so many of her works are in other museums across the country, I think is really important.

“*[Alma Thomas] was able to see her work in museums while she was alive, which is something that not all black artists who were making work at the same time that she was really were able to do. That was this amazing, really I think important, part of her story.*” — Curator Lauren Haynes

What we hope to do with the exhibition and with the catalog—I think it helps a lot that her work was the first by an African American woman to be purchased by the White House collection—is to go forward and hope that these museums that have the works will put them out and really start to increase the amount of attention that younger generations are having around her work. She is such an important artist for artists as well.

The connection to a new generation of artists is reflected in the exhibition catalog.

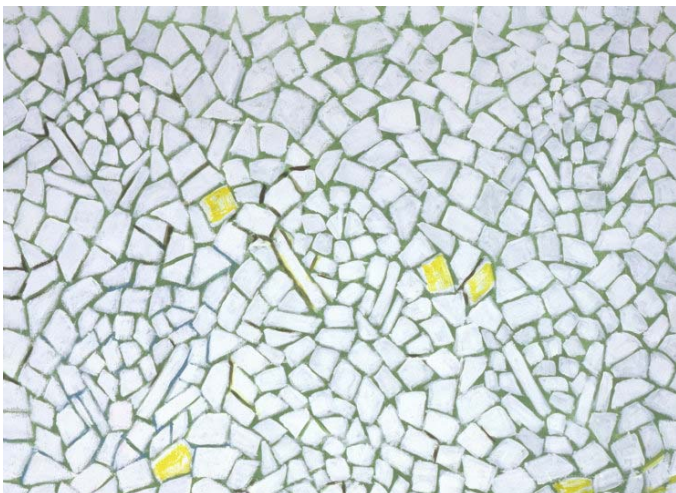
Yes. In the catalog there are four artist responses to her work. We asked Leslie Hewitt, Leslie Wayne, Saya Woolfalk, and Jennie C. Jones to each create a work that we reproduced in the catalog sort of inspired by, influenced by, their connection to Alma Thomas because there are so many artists who in talking about exhibitions they are working on, or artists they are inspired by, Alma Thomas comes up. So many artists across the range are really able to say, “I love her work. It's something that I look at and think about constantly.” That was an important aspect of the project.

The catalog is forthcoming this fall and I understand from Ian Berry at the Tang that it will expand beyond what is presented in the exhibition. Can you say more about the catalog?

We've included images of all the works in the show, but also some additional ones. We also have some additional outside writers writing about the different sections and then an introduction, a preface and really just drawing in more information. We also created a really full archive section that has a lot of reprints, previous/past articles, interviews, her artist statements from the 1970s, all put together in one spot to have it be something that exists past the exhibition as a real strong look at her career and work.

That's good to hear. There was an exhibition at Hemphill Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., a couple of years ago, that showed Thomas's watercolor studies for many of her larger paintings. That kind of stuff will be addressed in the book?

Exactly. We've got some really great reproductions. For a few works, I think we were able to have the reproduction so that the study is on one page and the actual painting is produced next to it to really show her process.





ALMA THOMAS, "White Roses Sing and Sing," 1976 (acrylic on canvas). | Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

I want to talk about Crystal Bridges, where you are headed to become curator of contemporary art. Why Crystal Bridges?

I think after being at the Studio Museum for almost 10 years and really getting a chance to do so many amazing exhibitions and work with so many fantastic artists, I was really excited by the opportunity to go somewhere that is fairly new, a little under five years old. I am really excited about the possibilities and the opportunities that exist and everything that everyone at Crystal Bridges has already been doing and is really excited about doing in the future. It just felt like a really unique opportunity for me.

There are a number of cultural things happening in Bentonville. There is a 21c Museum Hotel there, but...so where are you from?

I was born in a small town in East Tennessee and I was there until I was about 12 and then we moved to New York. But my family, both my parents, are from New York, so I grew up going to the city. But when I was about 13 we moved to New York, to the Bronx.



Okay. I was going to ask you about the transition. You have been in New York for a while, but you are familiar with the South. Did that factor at all into your decision?

It did. My family lives in Atlanta now. My mom and my sister, and her family, and everyone are all in Atlanta so I still spend a considerable amount of time in the South. I think definitely being born and raised for the first years of my life in a small town—I went to Oberlin, so that's also small town—it's not a completely unfamiliar thing for me.

When I visited Bentonville for the first time and really got a chance to spend some time—not just at the museum, but in the city and in the town—there's a lot happening. Not just at the museum, but there is a really engaged and active community and there is this push to make it a really walkable and bike-able town, which is something, as someone who doesn't drive yet, I appreciate.

You are leaving on a high point with the Thomas show up at the Studio Museum. Reflect on the past decade. What was your most rewarding experience or greatest accomplishment at the museum?

That's hard because I have been so busy with the Alma Thomas show and then on various other projects, everything that is happening at the Studio Museum. I have not really taken a moment, yet. But, I don't know if there would have been a more amazing place for me to learn how to be a curator. The artists are amazing that I've

worked with. The shows that I have been able to do and what I've been able to learn.

But also, just the people—the colleagues that I've had that I know will be people who I continue to pick their brains and run problems by and engage with for the rest of my career and life. I don't know if there would have been another place like that. And, you know, at the Studio Museum there's always this idea that once you are there, you're family. It is not as if you leave and no one ever talks you again and you never come back and you are never really a part of the conversation. So that's something that I will be able to hold onto. Even though I will not be there in presence, I will still be a part of this amazing institution that is only beginning to grow for the next 50 years, after this moment.

“*At the Studio Museum, there's always this idea that once you are there, you're family. So that's something that I will be able to hold onto.*
— Curator Lauren Haynes



ALMA THOMAS, “End of Autumn,” 1968 (acrylic and graphite on canvas). | Collection of Richard Grossman and Adam Sheffer; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

At the beginning of our conversation, you said when you first came to the Studio Museum you saw the Thomas works on paper in the collection. Later, overseeing acquisitions and the collection became one of your roles at the museum. Will you discuss the Studio Museum’s collection—the artists represented and maybe some of the unique or important works that are in the holdings?

The Studio Museum wasn't founded as a collecting institution, but very quickly the directors and board from at that moment realized we needed a collecting policy and some guidelines around that because what would happen is artists, people in Harlem, would leave works...

Really, people would just drop off art?

Yeah, so there are some really interesting early works in the collection. ...but to be able to take a hold of what was coming into the collection, guidelines were developed. Then, around the time that Thelma and Lowery Stokes Sims came to the Studio Museum, an acquisition committee was formed. The acquisition committee meets three times a year and so we, the curatorial team, select works to present to the committee and the committee votes and decides what to buy. They are very much open to what we are suggesting.

The collection very much has a relationship to the museum's exhibition history. We try to, whenever possible, and it is not always, but to collect out of exhibitions. We also have a commitment to at least attempt to purchase works by the artists in residence that are on view in their shows because that's really a nice way, whenever possible, to cap off their time at the museum.

“*The collection very much has a relationship to the museum's exhibition history. We try to collect out of exhibitions. We also have a commitment to at least attempt to purchase works by the artists in residence that are on view in their shows.*” — Curator Lauren Haynes

Anything in particular in the collection, a strength perhaps, that stands out?

There are so many ways to think about and to dive into the collection. Technically, my last Studio Museum show will be a collection show that's on view this fall that focuses on works from the 1970s in the collection. Recently, in the last two to three years, we got a few really great gifts that were from that time period. That led me to think about that moment and to see what else was in the collection and to think about this idea of the museum being founded in 1968 and then what did that first decade of art look like after that moment.

What recent gifts sparked your interest in the era?

Some of the works are a David Hammons untitled body print from 1976 and a Frank Bowling painting called “Blond Betsey” also from 1976; a suite of photographs of Arthur Mitchell and the Harlem Dance Theatre by the Earl of Snowden; and some works by Robert Blackburn.

Do you have a name for the exhibition yet?

We have a working title. I don't know if it's 100 percent confirmed yet, but so far we've been calling it “Circa 1970.”

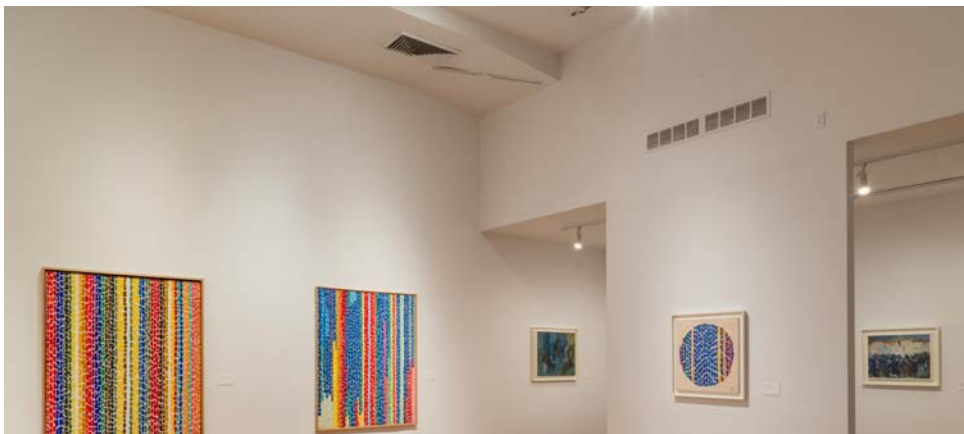
CT

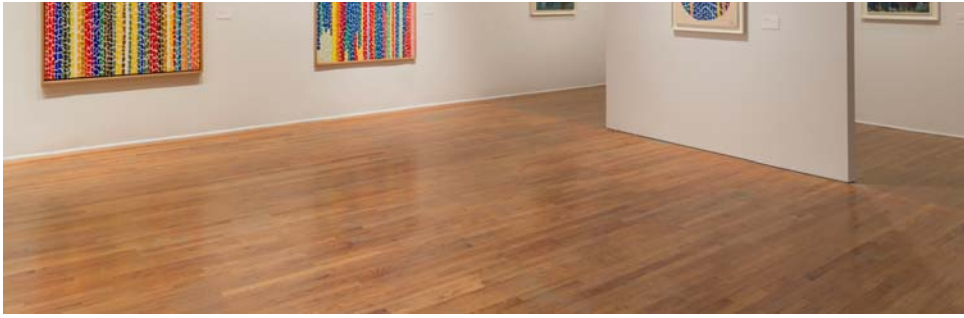
“Alma Thomas” is on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem through Oct. 30, 2016.

IMAGES: Above right, Alma Thomas working in her studio, circa 1968. | Photo by Ida Jervis, Alma Thomas Papers, Archives of American Art. Above left, Curator Lauren Haynes. | Photo by King Texas, Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

BOOKSHELF

A forthcoming Alma Thomas exhibition catalog will go beyond what is on view at the museum and include a more expansive selection of the artist's works. In the meantime, to further explore her life and practice, consider an earlier catalog, “Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings.”

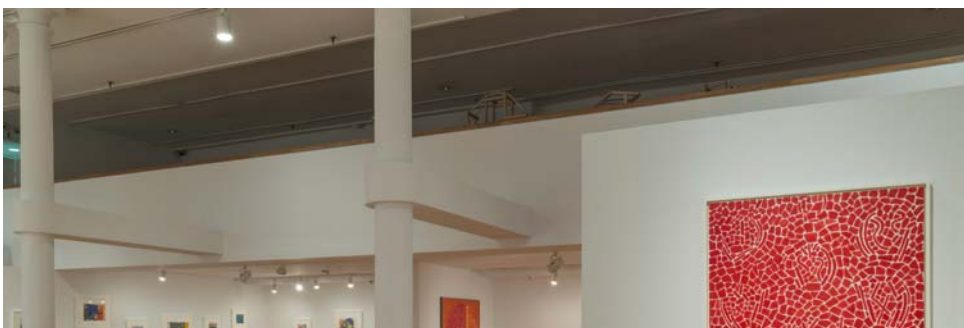




Installation view of Earth paintings by Alma Thomas, including "End of Autumn," second from right. | Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem



ALMA THOMAS, "Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses," 1969 (acrylic on canvas). | National Museum of Women in the Arts; Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

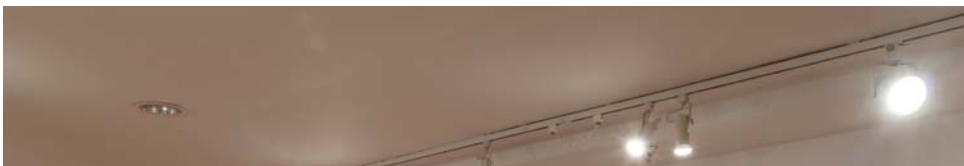


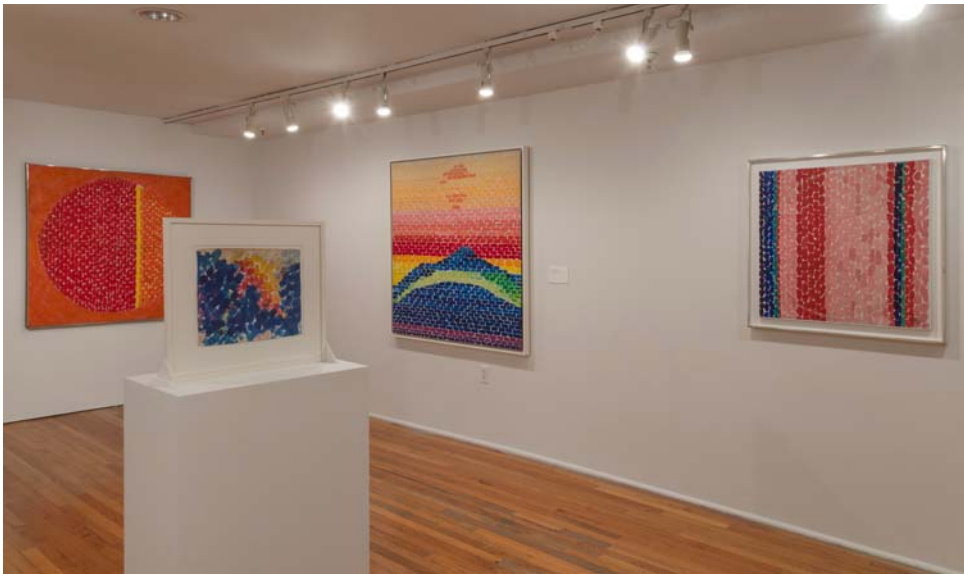


Installation view, including "Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish" by Alma Thomas, at right. | Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

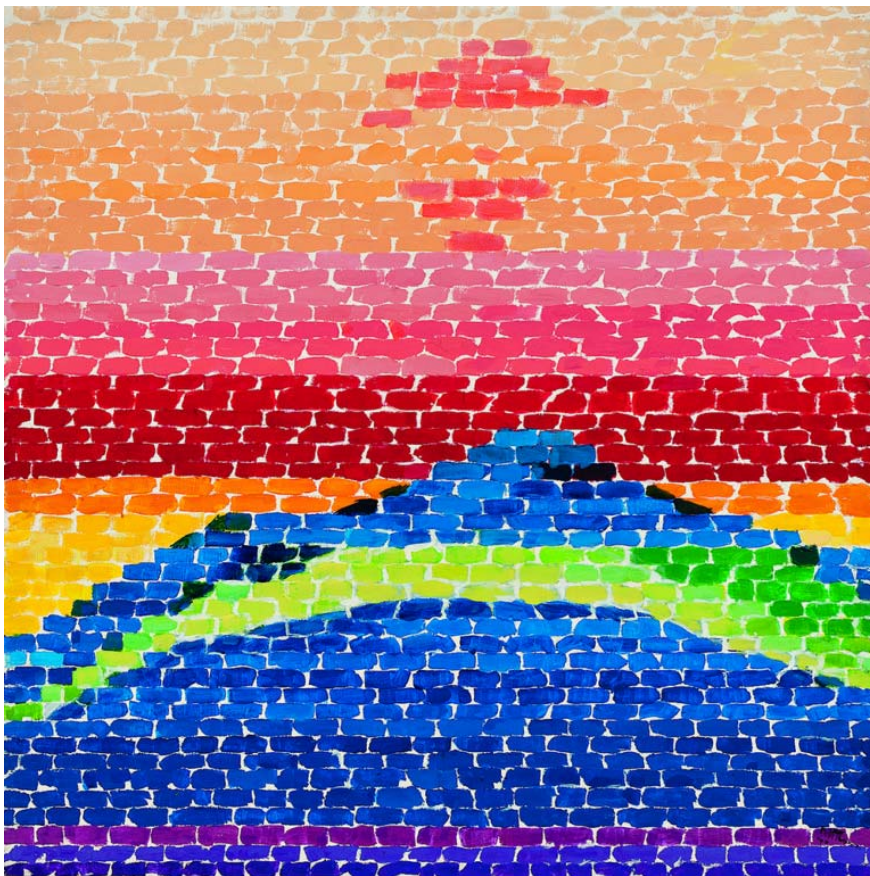


ALMA THOMAS, "Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish," 1976 (acrylic on canvas). | Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

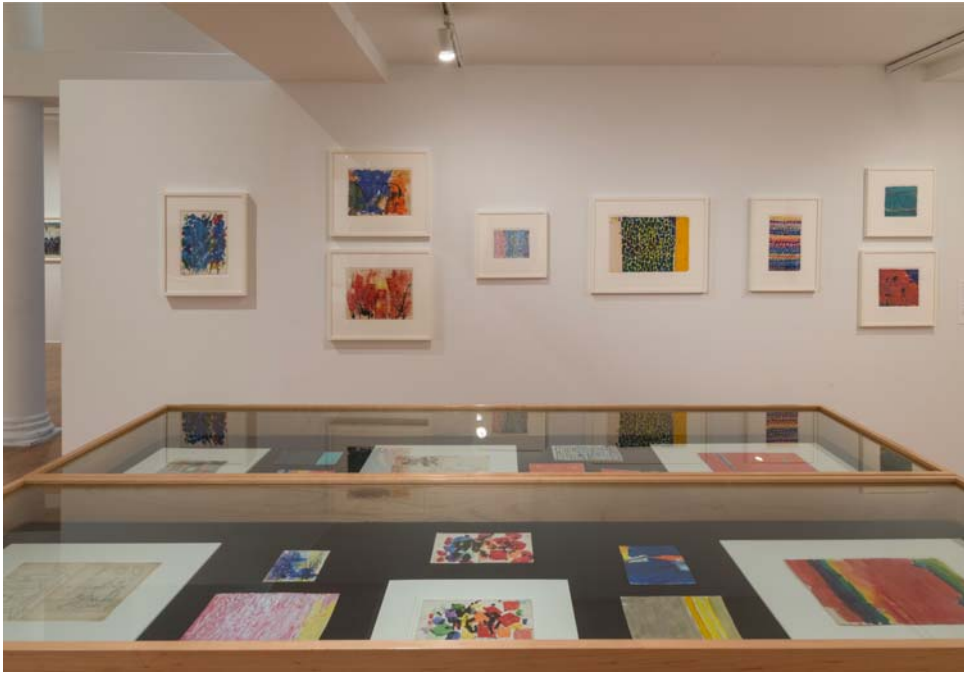




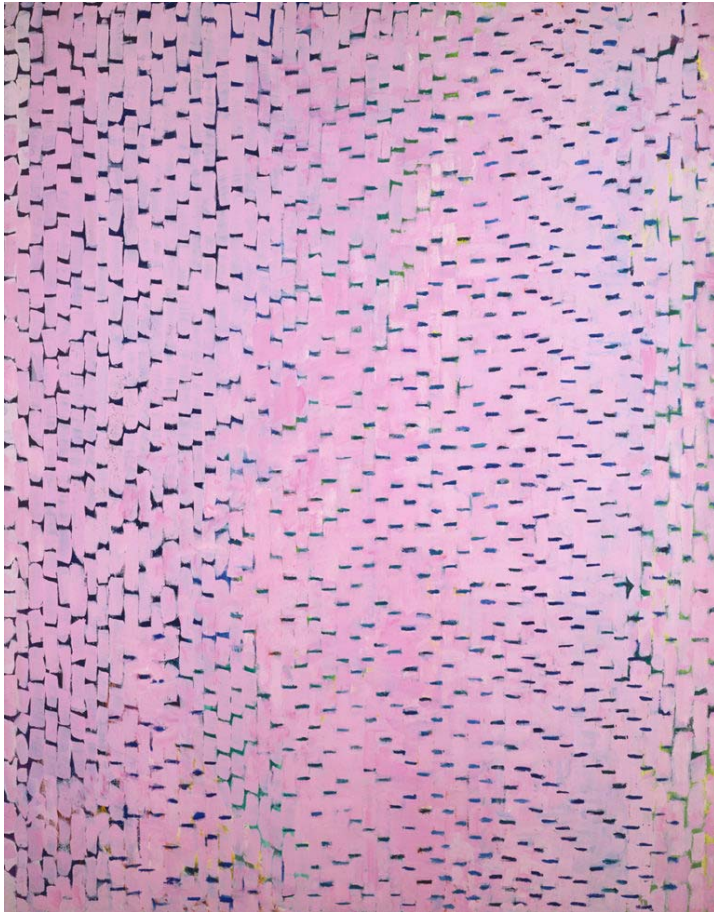
Installation view of including Space paintings "Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset," far left, and "Apollo 12 Splash Down," second from right. | Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem



ALMA THOMAS, "Apollo 12 Splash Down," 1970 (acrylic and graphite on canvas). | Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem



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

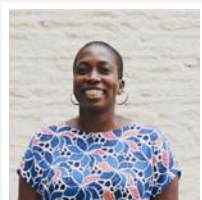


ALMA THOMAS, "Cherry Blossom Symphony," 1973 (acrylic on canvas). | Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, NY; Courtesy Studio Museum in Harlem

2,043 total views, 50 views today

Like 314 Tweet

You Might Also Like:



Studio Museum
Curator Lauren



Culture Talk: Lauren
Haynes on 'Speaking



Alma Thomas is
Given Pride of Place



Culture Talk: Curator
Adrienne Edwards on

Tags: Alma Thomas, Lauren Haynes, Skidmore College, Studio Museum in Harlem, Tang Museum

Previous post

In First Date Movie 'Southside With You,' Paintings

Next post

At Smithsonian, Carl Van Vechten's Photographs