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## Show at Tang offers look at artistic career of Alma Thomas

Artist began career later in life

By Erin Sickler Published 1:50 pm, Wednesday, March 2, 2016



Installation view of "Alma Thomas" at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, February 6 through June 5, 2016. Tang Teaching Museum photograph by Arthur Evans

"Age before beauty" goes the common saying. Too often, however, cultural outlets seem youth-obsessed. But "[Alma Thomas](#)," the exhibition now on view at the [Tang Teaching Museum](#) at [Skidmore College](#), gives lie to such simplistic divisions as the one

between age and beauty.

Alma Thomas did not achieve her mature painting style until the 1960s, after she retired after more than three decades as a junior high school art teacher. In this concise show, co-organized by [Ian Berry](#) of the Tang and the [Studio Museum](#) in Harlem's [Lauren Haynes](#), the joyful power of Thomas's artistic impact is on full display.

Made up mostly of brightly hued paintings drawn from observations of nature and meditations on space, the exhibition presents Thomas's output in four phases. On beauty, it does not fall short.

Born in Columbus, Ga., in 1891, Thomas spent most of her adult life in Washington, D.C., where she was the first student to graduate from [Howard University](#) as a fine arts major. In the 1950s, Thomas enrolled in painting classes at [American University](#) and studied with [Jacob Kainen](#), an important figure in the postwar Washington art scene. Over the following decade, her work underwent a radical transformation.

### More Information

#### If you go

#### "Alma Thomas"

**Where:** The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs

**When:** Through June 5

The exhibition begins with the small representational painting "March on Washington" from 1964, a scene of protesters carrying placards. Over the course of the 1960s, however, Thomas began to move towards abstraction, drawing on a variety of influences from painter [Wassily Kandinsky](#) to American artist and textile designer Lois [Mailou Jones](#).

Marks are the residue of the physical connection between the artist and the canvas, the evidence of the hand wielding a tool like a brush to lay down a shock of pigment or paint. Like artists before her, Thomas sought to redefine abstract painting for her own ends. Paul Cézanne's late 19th-century paintings reduced the world to basic shapes — spheres, cylinders and cones. Thomas used humble rectangular strokes to build her own complex visual vocabulary. You can almost see the protest signs in her early paintings dance off the canvas to become the blocks of pure color in her later work.

The "Earth" section of the exhibition displays a selection of watercolor studies and untitled

sketches. A color is always viewed in relation to the colors that surround it. These studies demonstrate how Thomas used experiments in color and composition to construct rainbow-hued acrylic paintings like 1969's "Iris, Tulips, Jonquils and Crocuses."

Thomas took inspiration from her garden as imagined from a bird's eye view, but also from space. She listened to news reports of space exploration on the radio and let her imagination wander into new artistic horizons. Thomas's late works, with reduced palettes of one, two or three colors, echo mosaics, as in the vibrant red "Scarlet Sage Dancing in a Whirling Dervish," or loose patterns, like the irregular blue-black shapes on the white background of "Hydrangeas Spring Song."

In 1972, Thomas became the first African-American woman to have a solo exhibition at the **Whitney Museum of American Art**. Her work is held in major art collections throughout the country, but she has never received the recognition of **Washington Color School** painters championed by influential art critic **Clement Greenberg** like **Kenneth Noland** and **Morris Louis**. She died in 1978.

This exhibition, which will include a comprehensive catalog, is an effort towards correcting such oversights. In an era dominated by mediated images and technology, this show is a reminder of what it means to make a mark. Thomas was a painter who certainly left hers. Let it inspire you to make your own.

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