

From Spring to Space

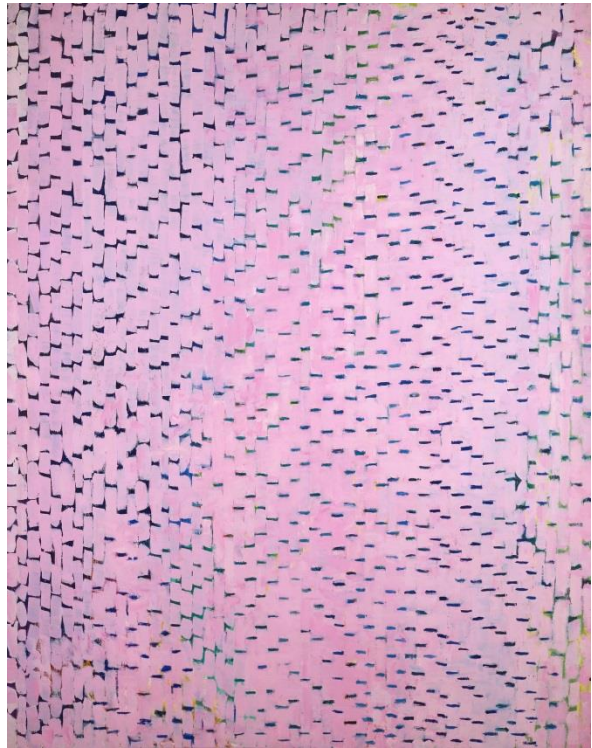
By Judith H. Dobrzynski

Alma Thomas
Tang Teaching Museum
Through June 5

Hanging in the last gallery of “Alma Thomas,” a large evocative abstract painting titled “Cherry Blossom Symphony” (1973) seems to place viewers amid hundreds of the delicate pink flowers. Or hovering above them, looking down on a sea of pink. Composed not of discernible petals, but of rosy-hued daubs of paint piled on under-layers of blues, greens and reds, it’s a marvel, the conceptual equivalent of a warm spring day.

“Cherry Blossom Symphony” is one of several wonders here at Skidmore College’s Tang Teaching Museum, which has gathered 18 paintings and 27 works on paper to showcase the talent of an underappreciated artist. Inspired by nature and influenced by Matisse and Kandinsky, Thomas (1891-1978) created exuberant works long on pattern, rhythm and, most of all, color. As she once said, “color for me is life.”

Thomas was African-American, but that was no play on words. Though she sometimes touched on racial matters, her identity did not define—or limit—her work. She also said, another time, “through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man’s inhumanity to man.”



Alma Thomas (1891-1978), *Cherry Blossom Symphony*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 69" x 54", signed and dated

Thomas was born in Columbus, Ga., during what some historians have called the most oppressive decade of the Jim Crow South. Her family departed in 1907 for better lives in Washington, D.C., where Thomas seemed to flourish. She earned a teacher’s certificate and taught art for a few years. Then she attended Howard University, graduating with the first degree in fine arts it ever conferred, and went on to earn a master’s in art education from Columbia University Teachers College. Returning to the capital, she took a job teaching art at Shaw Junior High School, where she remained until she retired at the age of 69.



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Having always dabbled in making art, Thomas now started to take painting classes at nearby American University. She joined the Washington art scene, associating with Morris Louis, Sam Gilliam and other members of the Washington Color School, though she was not really one of them. Their art was about formalism (line, color, and other purely visual elements of a composition); hers had more life. Franz Bader, one of the most prominent and influential dealers in Washington, gave her numerous exhibitions and sold many of her paintings.

In 1972, a dozen years after her retirement, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented a solo exhibition of her work—its first-ever show devoted to an African-American woman. (From it, the museum bought “Mars Dust,” from 1972, a beguiling red with blue work structurally akin to “Cherry Blossom Symphony” that was on view when the Whitney inaugurated its new building last year with a celebration of its permanent collection.)

The Tang exhibition opens with some early works. Two abstract canvases, “Yellow and Blue” (1959) and “Untitled” (1960), hint at her way with color, but are derivative and undistinguished. If Thomas had stopped there, she would not have merited this exhibition. But three figurative paintings nearby show her coming into her own.

In “March on Washington” (1964), Thomas deployed blocks of color as protest signs and loosely rendered protesters, whose featureless faces are much like the trademark daubs she would later use in her abstract works. The two other figurative works (c. 1964) are oil sketches for “March on Washington” that show her experimenting with space: One devotes more of the canvas to the signs, the other to the people. In the final version, the people won.

It’s all uphill from there. Her evolution takes place before your eyes in the trove of works on paper in the next gallery (c. 1960-1978). In them, Thomas experiments, working out spatial and structural issues. Many can stand alone as sumptuous watercolors.

Thomas painted abstractions of what she saw, often from the windows of her home. Her “earth” works, four on view here, generally look like grids of vertical stripes in bright colors. They are actually shimmering, aerial abstractions of rows of flowers in her garden, which she considered a relief from daily indignities she and her neighbors suffered.

Thomas was also enthralled with space exploration, so she imagined the cosmos seen from space. Still mostly abstract, still latticed in structure, her visualizations are hotly colored visions of the heavens and the earth. Perhaps the best, “Starry Night and the Astronauts” (1972), reveals just a corner of light—a blood red, orange and yellow sunset—on a deep blue-black canvas.

The last gallery contains, for me, her finest works. Alongside “Cherry Blossom Symphony” there is the similarly patterned, equally subtle “Arboretum Presents White Dogwood” (1972), softly colored in white and blue. “White Roses Sing and Sing” (1976) and “Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish” (1976) are brighter in color and bolder in pattern. They are her “mosaics,” fashioned from irregularly shaped “tiles” of paint.

“Alma Thomas,” which will move to the Studio Museum in Harlem this summer, shows her to be a spirited artist who got better and more innovative with age.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/alma-thomas-review-1456869006>



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