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ARTH 3119: American Art

12 October 2022

Alma W. Thomas's World

Alma Thomas was an American artist who created large-scale, vibrantly colorful abstract paintings. She arranged short blotches of color into lines and circles, which she called “Alma’s Stripes;” these stripes served as a medium for experimentation with color (Thomas 4). As a Black woman working in the 20th century, Thomas faced various barriers, but persistently worked around them to create opportunities for herself and her students (Foresta 34). She seemingly saw herself as above racial issues, stating that she was not a so-called ‘Black Artist’ but an ‘American Artist’ (Binstock 59). Thomas was an important member of the artistic community of both Washington, D.C. and the entire U.S. Dedicated to her community and constantly fascinated by the world around her, Thomas’ life and creations reflect her influence on the world and its influence on her.

In 1891, Thomas was born in Columbus, Georgia, where her family lived until she was 16. The Thomases were comparatively wealthy and lived in a Victorian home in the Rose Hill neighborhood surrounded by floral gardens, the vibrant colors of these flower beds inspired Thomas for the rest of her life (Thomas 1). Education was a high priority for the family, but educational opportunities for Black people in Columbus were limited beyond elementary school. The brutality of the 1906 Atlanta race riots sparked unease for the Thomases and, combined with Columbus’s lack of opportunity, prompted them to leave the South. They decided to join family members in Washington, D.C. (Foresta 15). By the time they crossed the Potomac river, Alma’s

mother is said to have instructed her children to shake the Georgia sand off of their shoes (Benjamin 18). Thomas would remain in the house her family purchased in Washington, D.C. for life, filling it with her large-scale paintings and hosting guests from the local artistic community(Thomas 5; Kainen 31).

Thomas spent 35 years teaching art at Shaw Junior High School in Washington, D.C. A passionate educator, she prioritized her students above all else, eschewing her own interest in a career in painting until retirement (Benjamin 22, 25). Her efforts to expose students to the arts began with field trips to museums and galleries, later escalating to the creation of a gallery of works by Black artists in vacant rooms of the school (Thomas 2). Although Thomas postponed her own art career until her 1960 retirement from teaching, her involvement in the D.C. art scene began decades prior during her teaching career. In 1943 she became the vice-president of the Barnett Aden Gallery, which was founded in part by one of her previous professors and mentor figures at Howard University, James Herring (Thomas 2). The Barnett Aden Gallery was Washington, D.C.'s first integrated private art gallery, and serving as its vice-president allowed Thomas to continue spreading the arts in her community while also providing an opportunity to learn about and interact with contemporary American artists (Benjamin 24).

The Washington Color School, also known as the Washington Color Painters, was Washington, D.C.'s best-known contribution to the modern art scene. Gene Davis, Thomas Downing, Kenneth Nolan, Howard Mehring, and Paul Reed, the style's main six artists, filled their canvases with vividly colored paint in non-representational shapes (Binstock 60-62). Their paintings focused on interactions between colors and often used unconventional paint application methods which created flat, even fields of color. Thomas kept a distance between her own work and that of the Washington Color School, often favoring more established painting methods. For

example, the Washington Color Painters were characterized partly by an interest in staining their unprimed canvases with their paints to create deep, flat colors, but Thomas preferred to layer her colors onto a traditionally primed canvas to create lively textures (Kainen 32-33). Further, while the Color Painters' use of color was generally removed from any sort of representation, Thomas often used colors to represent, however abstractly, the natural phenomena which fascinated her.

Alma Thomas explored a range of artistic styles and themes throughout her life, from painting traditional still lifes to sculpting wooden marionettes. When she began taking art classes at American University in the 1950s, she quickly found an interest in abstraction which would inform her approach to painting for the rest of her life (Benjamin 25). Her experiments with abstraction began with still lifes and portraits before turning to the natural themes which characterize her best-known creations. Jacob Kainen, a friend and contemporary to Thomas, characterized her as an "autobiographical artist" whose material came from the things which fascinated her in daily life. These interests began on Earth with flowers and foliage; Thomas often based her paintings on such specific examples as the flower gardens of her childhood or the holly tree outside of her kitchen window(Thomas 1). Later, Thomas's enthusiasm for modern technological innovation made itself known in her Space Paintings series, which took inspiration from the events of the Space Race, energetically reflecting the optimism which surrounded it (Foresta 24). Thomas also drew upon musical themes, arranging her marks with intentional rhythm and giving paintings musical titles such as *Grassy Melodic Chant* or *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music*.

Alma Woodsey Thomas saw the world through a unique lens and used art to express her ideas. She prioritized persistent effort to overcome societal barriers of race and gender in her personal life, yet preferred to make apolitical artwork- a bold choice for a Black woman in the

artistic climate she worked in. Her community-focused activism and networking with other artists exerted a strong effect on the world around her. At the same time, her nature-themed paintings show careful observation of the world. Thomas was a unique figure whose legacy deserves its continued celebration.

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