

# Beauty Above:

## Alma W. Thomas's Space Series

Experience the journey to the moon of the Apollo 10 and 11 missions as interpreted by internationally renowned artist Alma W. Thomas, before embarking on a rocket-fueled exploration of your own!

### LESSON OBJECTIVES:

- Students will observe and analyze four paintings from Alma W. Thomas's Space series.
- Students will participate in collaborative discussions.
- Students will research a past, present, or future mission to space.
- Students will create a work of art that helps to tell the story of space flight/exploration.

**SUGGESTED GRADE LEVELS:** 4th–12th

### NATIONAL STANDARDS:

**VA:Cr1.2.7a** Develop criteria to guide making a work of art or design to meet an identified goal.

**VA:Cr3.1.6a** Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.

**VA:Re7.2.5a** Identify and analyze cultural associations suggested by visual imagery.

**VA:Re8.1.6a** Interpret art by distinguishing between relevant and non-relevant contextual information and analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed. (Also **VA:Re8.1.5a**, **VA:Re8.1.7a**, **VA:Re8.1.8a**, **VA:Re8.1.1a**, **VA:Re8.1.11a**)

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY/ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Miss Alma Thomas: A Life in Color <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/almathomas>
- Walz, J. F. (2021). "'Vibratile Offering': Alma Thomas's Moving Pictures" in S. Feman & J. F. Walz *Alma Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful* (pp. 75–91). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- NASA Missions A–Z <https://www.nasa.gov/missions>
- Restored Apollo 11 Moonwalk – Original NASA EVA Mission Video – Walking on the Moon <https://youtu.be/S9HdPi9Ikhk>
- Man on the Moon 50 Years Later: Apollo 11 Liftoff – ABC News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90tPn0JS7VM>
- Interview with an Apollo Engineer [handout](#)

# GUIDED PRACTICE: CLOSE LOOKING

Columbus-born artist Alma W. Thomas found inspiration for her abstract paintings in many things. Nature and her local community often inspired her paintings; about current events and technological innovations she said, “These phenomena set my creativity in motion.” In the 1970s, she began working on her Space series. Many of the works from this series were inspired by images of outer space captured from “previously impossible vantage points” during the 1969 Apollo 10 (Figure 1) and Apollo 11 missions (Walz, 2021, p. 86). In this series Thomas explores a variety of viewpoints, strong geometric designs, and the interplay of color and motion.

Let’s look closely at four paintings from Thomas’s Space series and see what we can discover about both her interpretation of the Apollo missions and the missions themselves.

Figure 2. Begin by looking closely.

- What do you notice?
- How might this artwork connect to ideas or questions about space exploration?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What kind of mood does this image suggest?

Educators: Share the work’s title and other relevant contextual information. (See below for more information about the Apollo 10 and Apollo 11 missions.)

Now that you know a bit more, let’s look again.

- How does this information change the way you look at and interpret or understand this artwork?
- From whose perspective are we experiencing this moment in time?
- What new observations or questions do you have?
- How does Thomas’s style of painting affect the way you interpret the image?

Did you know? While much of Thomas’s work may look random, it is meticulously calculated. She often used tools, like an elastic sewing tape, to guide her placement of the shapes and lines that would dominate each composition. She sometimes plotted out her color scheme by scribing notations directly onto the canvas. For example, “1y” would indicate one vertical stripe of yellow brushstrokes.

Figure 3. Look closely

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Educators: Share the work’s title and other relevant contextual information. (See below for more information about the Apollo 10 and Apollo 11 missions.)

Now that you know a bit more, let’s look again.

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- From whose perspective are we experiencing this moment in time?

- What new observations or questions do you have?
- How does Thomas's style of painting affect the way you interpret the image?

Repeat for figures 4 and 5.

## APOLLO 10

- May 18–26, 1969
- Crew: Thomas P. Stafford, John Young, and Gene Cernan
- Was a “dress rehearsal” for the Apollo 11 mission
- Objectives: to gather data on the moon's gravitational pull, as well as track landmarks and take photos
- Orbited the moon 31 times
- “Snoopy” is the name of the Apollo 10 Lunar Module. (Module did not make contact with the moon's surface.)
- Sent back 12 live color TV transmissions to Earth

To learn more, visit:

[https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/apollo/missions/apollo10.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/missions/apollo10.html)

## APOLLO 11

- July 16–24, 1969
- Completed the national goal set by President Kennedy on May, 25, 1961 to land a person on the moon
- Crew: Neil Armstrong, Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, and Michael Collins
- “Eagle” is the name of the Apollo 11 Lunar Module.
- Armstrong and Aldrin spent a cumulative time of 21 hours and 36 minutes on the moon's surface during which they photographed the lunar surface, gathered lunar surface samples, and launched other scientific explorations.
- 650 million people watched and heard Armstrong's first step on the moon.

To learn more, visit:

[https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/apollo/apollo-11.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/apollo-11.html)

Reflect:

- Why do you think Alma Thomas was so interested in space? How might this interest have influenced her direction and perspective as an artist?
- What do you think you know about space exploration? What do you know about the Apollo missions?
- What does this topic/these artworks make you want to explore?

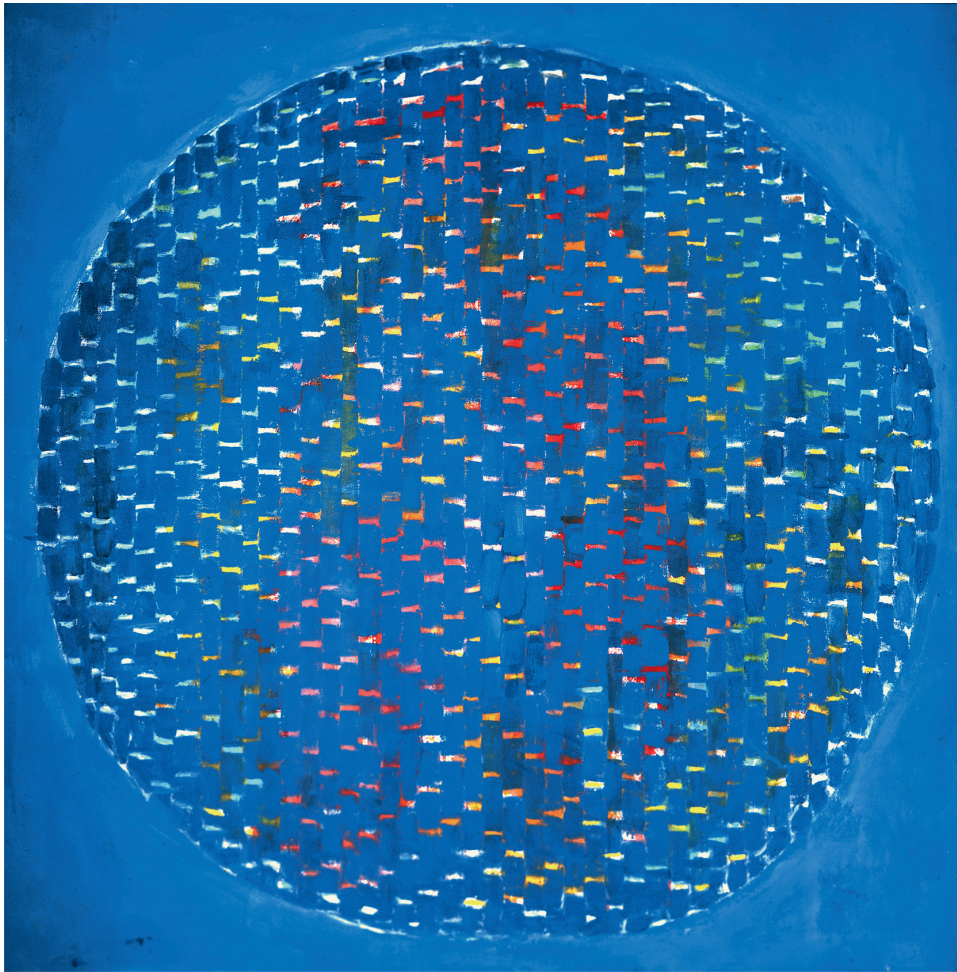
Optional: Read the Interview with a NASA Engineer for another perspective on the Apollo missions! How does this new information/perspective add to or change your interpretation of Thomas's Space series?



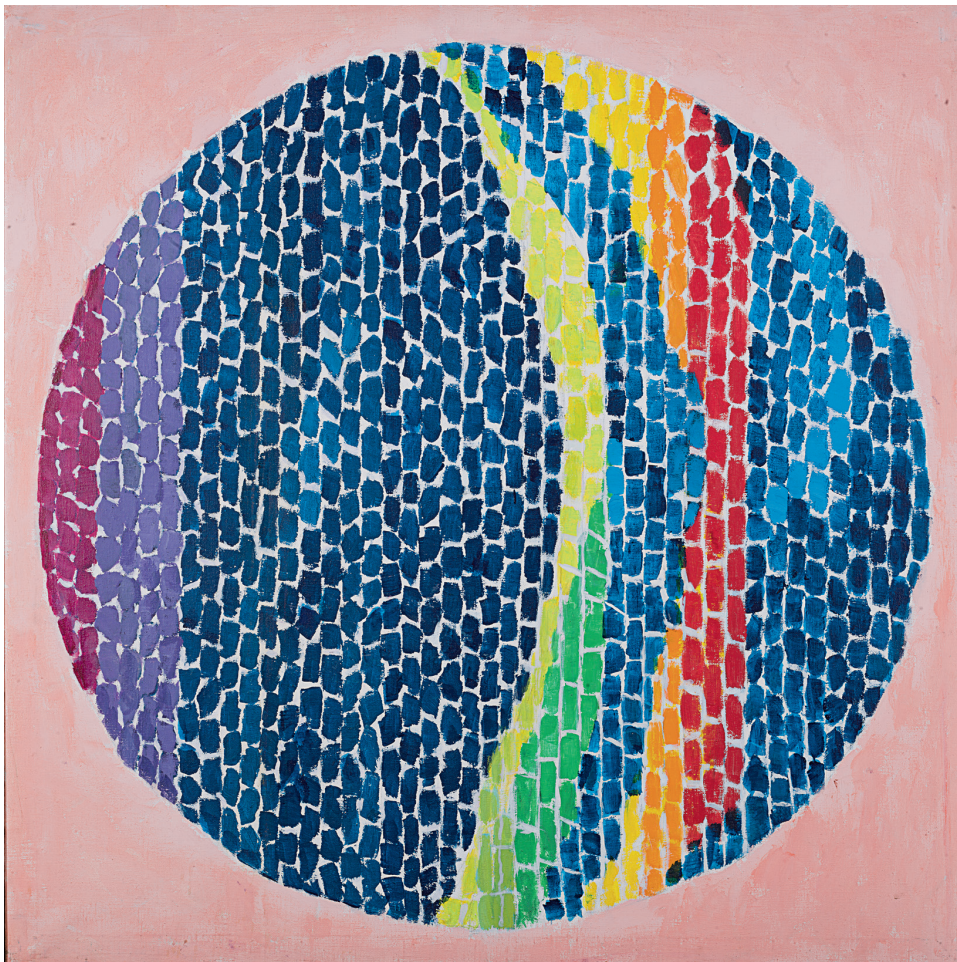
**Figure 1.** National Aeronautics and Space Administration, *Earthrise* (from Apollo 10 mission), 1969, color photograph



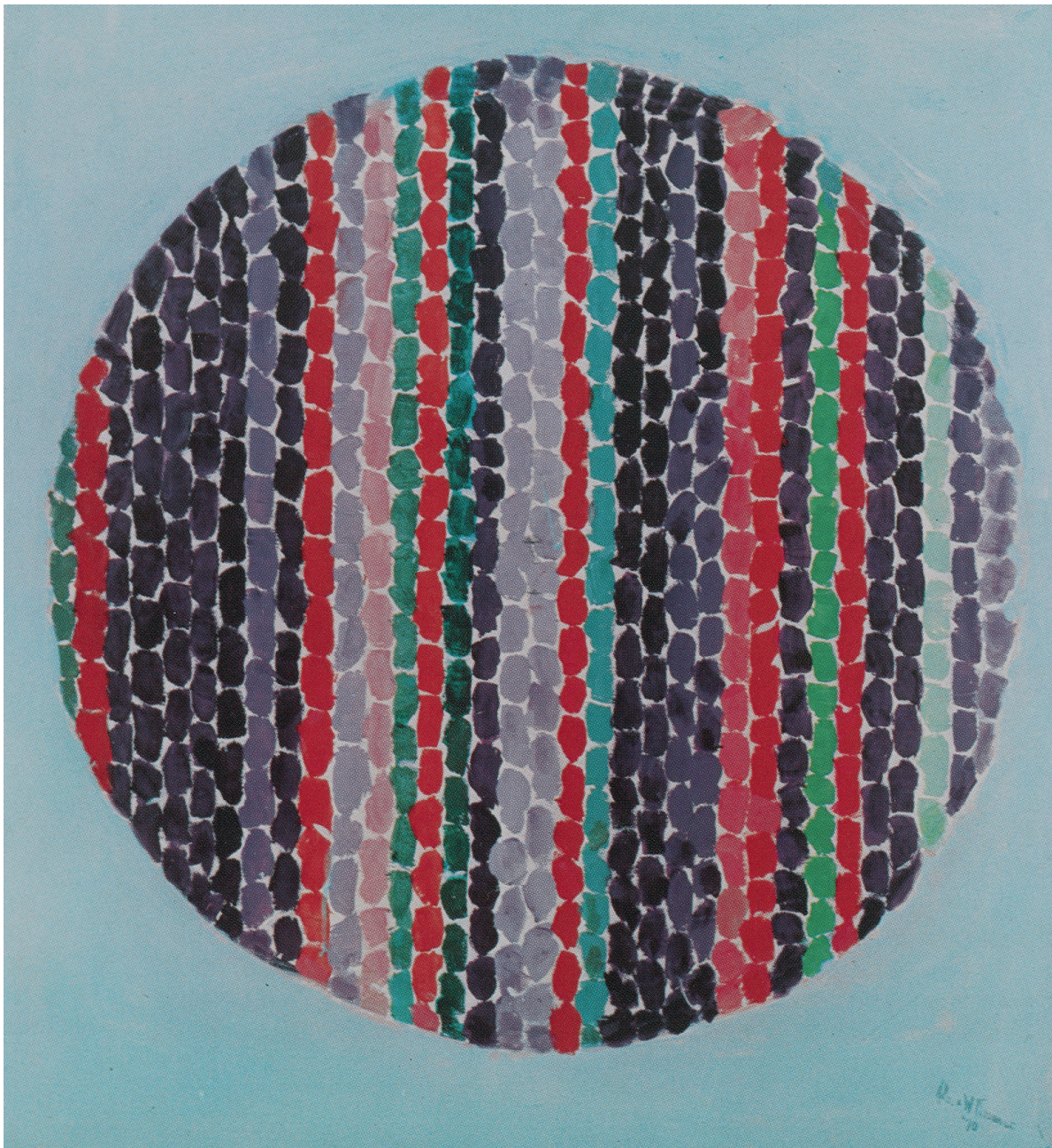
**Figure 2.** Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978), *Blast Off*, 1970, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 52 in., National Air and Space Museum, Gift of Vincent Melzac (A19761790000)



**Figure 3.** Alma W. Thomas, *Astronauts' Glimpse of Earth*, 1974, Acrylic on canvas, National Air and Space Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Kainen (A19770453000)



**Figure 4.** Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978), *Snoopy Sees a Sunrise*, 1970, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in., National Air and Space Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson (A19770452000)



**Figure 5.** Alma W. Thomas, *Snoopy Sees a Glimpse of Jupiter*, c. 1970, acrylic on canvas. The University Galleries at North Carolina A&T State University

# INDEPENDENT PRACTICE: SHAPE THE STORY OF SPACE EXPLORATION

Now it's your turn! You have been invited by NASA to help record the history of space exploration through art.

First stop: NASA! Visit <https://www.nasa.gov/missions> to review a list of the agency's past, present, and future missions. Choose one that captures your imagination and dig in.

As you research, consider:

- What was or is the mission's objective?
- Was/is it crewed? If so, who was/is aboard?
- Who else was involved in getting the mission off the ground?
- How was/is the public able to access information about the mission? How are they reacting to it?
- Did the mission have any unexpected outcomes? If so, what?

Once you have familiarized yourself with your chosen mission's body of information (images, audio, etc.) create a work of art in a style and medium of your choice that helps interpret the mission for a wider audience. (Modification: Students in grades 9–12 may choose to respond with an original dance or musical composition/playlist in addition to traditional visual art mediums.)

As you create, consider:

- What is important for your audience to know about the mission
- How the ideas you would like to express will look in different mediums (or art forms)
- From whose perspective we are viewing this information (If you chose the perspective of a living being, how are they feeling? How can you convey this perspective visually?)
- The available audio and visual material connected to your chosen mission and how that might relate to the piece you are creating
- A title for the work

When you are satisfied with your work, take a moment to reflect on your journey. Then share your findings and finished product with the class!

Reflect:

- How did knowing more about the context of Thomas's Space series affect your interpretation of her work?
- Spend a moment thinking about how and what kinds of information you are able to access as a student in the 21st century. How has this changed from the 1970s when Thomas was creating her Space series?
- Describe your process from idea generation to finished product.
- How does the medium you chose affect viewers' experience/view of the mission?
- How does your work add to or help tell the story of space exploration in the United States?
- If you were to do this project again, what would you do differently?