

How Do They See It?

Exploring Point of View with Alma W. Thomas

Have you ever pretended to be someone or something other than yourself? What did that experience look or feel like? African American artist Alma Thomas would often paint images from an imagined point of view. Come along as we explore these images and step into new ways of looking at and experiencing the world around us.

LESSON OBJECTIVES:

- Students will discuss and analyze various points of view.
- Students will exercise critical thinking, visual literacy, and perspective taking skills.
- Students will explore how Alma W. Thomas uses point of view to create unique works of art.
- Students will create a work of art that depicts their chosen subject from a unique point of view.

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVELS: 2nd - 5th

NATIONAL STANDARDS:

VA:Cr1.1.4a Brainstorm multiple approaches to a creative art or design problem.

VA:Cr3.1.2a Discuss and reflect with peers about choices in creating an artwork.

VA:Re7.1.5a Compare one's own interpretation of a work of art with the interpretation of others.

VA:Re8.1.4a Interpret art by referring to contextual information, and analyzing relevant subject matter, characteristics of form, and use of media.

VA:Cn10.1.5a Apply formal and conceptual vocabularies of art and design to view surroundings in new ways through art making.

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.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *They All Saw a Cat* by Brendan Wenzel (ISBN: 1452150133)
- 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.

GUIDED PRACTICE: CLOSE LOOKING

Point of view is the physical position from which a story is told, information is analyzed, and an individual experiences the world. When you change your point of view and take on a perspective or worldview other than your own, you open yourself up to a whole new way of thinking, seeing, and feeling.

Let's look closely at three paintings by the artist Alma W. Thomas. Each painting tells a story from a different point of view.

Figure 1. *Air View of a Spring Nursery*

- What do you see?/What's going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What does it make you wonder?
- How can we find out more?

Sometimes, artists leave us clues to help us interpret what they have created. For example, Thomas would often include a reference to the point of view from which she was working in the artwork's title. This painting is titled *Air View of a Spring Nursery*.

- According to the title, from what or whose point of view are we looking?

Educators: Allow students to answer the previous question before sharing the following quote.

"I began to think about what I would see if I were in an airplane. You streak through the clouds so fast you don't know whether the flower below is a violet or what. You only see streaks of color. And so I began to paint as if I were in that plane. And at that time I hadn't ever been in one!"

-Alma W. Thomas

- How do you think Alma Thomas knew what something would look like from that height if she had never flown?
- How might this subject look differently if you were viewing it from a different point of view?

Figure 2. *Astronauts' Glimpse of Earth*

- What do you see?/What's going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What does it make you wonder?

This painting is titled *Astronauts' Glimpse of Earth*. It is part of Thomas's Space series. Like many Americans, Thomas was captivated by the images of outer space captured from "previously impossible vantage points" during the 1969 Apollo 10 and Apollo 11 missions (Walz, 2021, p. 86).

- According to the title, from what or whose perspective are we looking? What are we looking at?
- How do you think the astronauts felt seeing Earth from this vantage point? What do you see that makes you say that? How would you feel?

Figure 3. *Snoopy Sees a Sunrise*

- What do you see?/What's going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What does it make you wonder?

This image is another work from Thomas's Space series. It is titled *Snoopy Sees a Sunrise*.

- Who is Snoopy? (Snoopy is the name of the lunar module that accompanied Apollo 10 on its mission to the moon!)
- What might it be like to personify an inanimate or nonliving object?

Why might an artist choose to depict a person, place, thing, or experience from a perspective other than their own? Not only does perspective taking allow us to experience the world in a different way, it also increases our ability to understand and even empathize with people who are unlike ourselves. Perspective taking is a skill and, like all skills, it takes practice to master. So, let's practice!

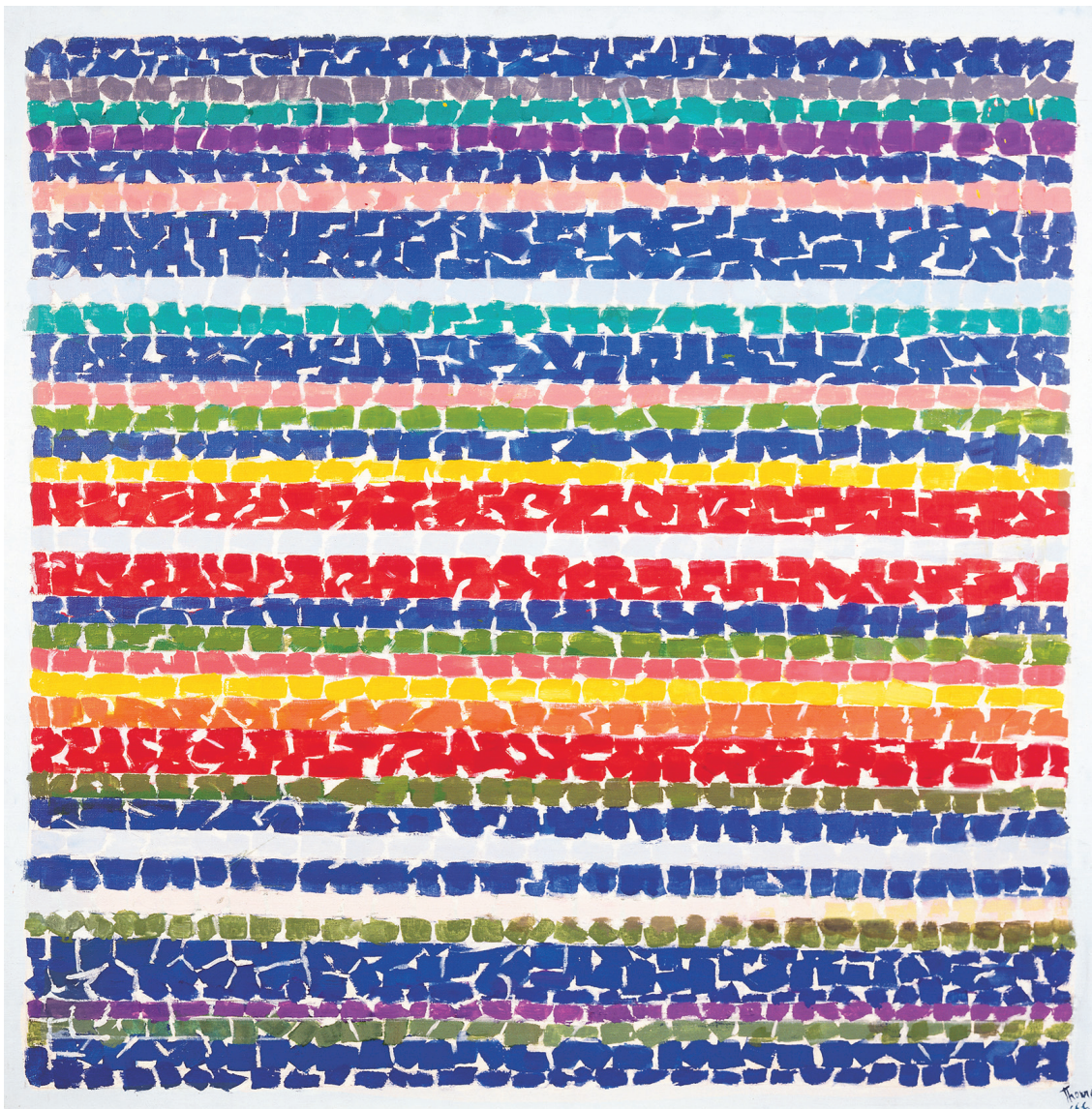


Figure 1. Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978), *Air View of a Spring Nursery*, 1966, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in., The Columbus Museum, museum purchase and gift of the National Association of Negro Business Women, and the artist (G.1979.53)

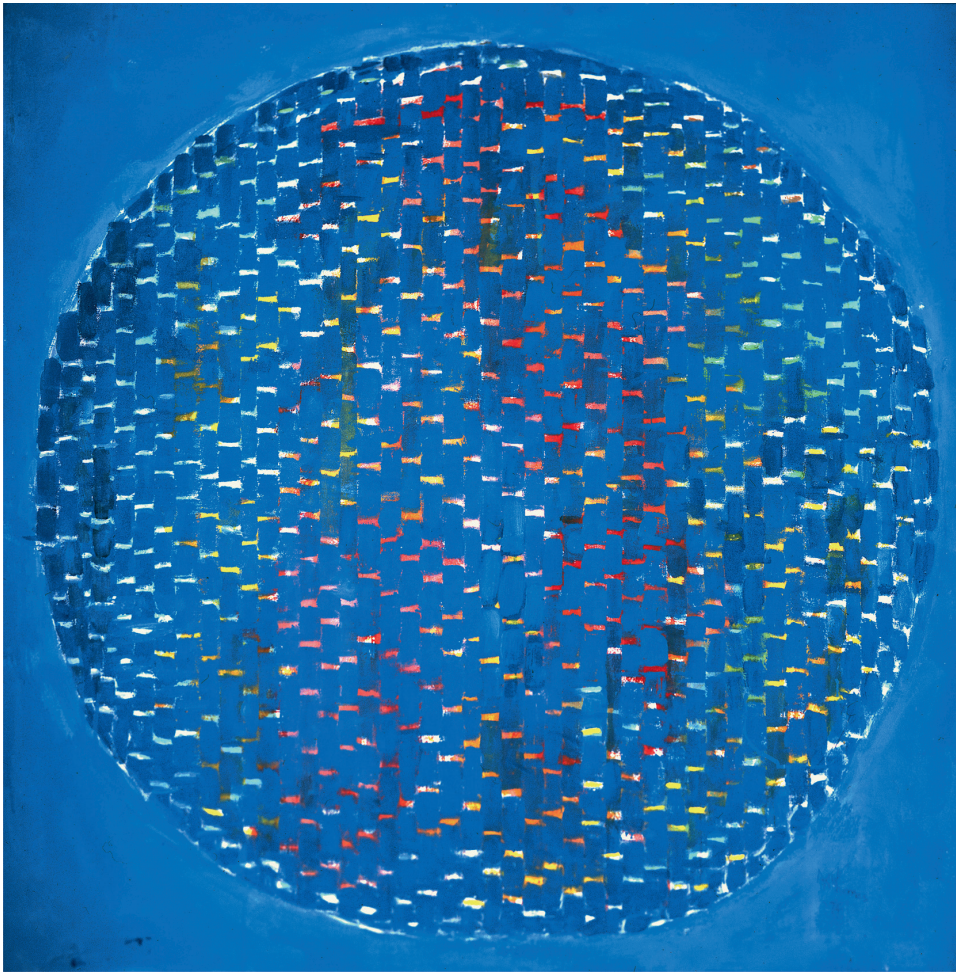


Figure 2. Alma W. Thomas, *Astronauts' Glimpse of Earth*, 1974, Acrylic on canvas, National Air and Space Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Kainen (A19770453000)



Figure 3. 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)

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE: CREATE

Now it's your turn to create a work of art that explores a point of view or perspective other than your own. First, choose a point of view or perspective from which to work. Then, think of a person, place, thing, or experience you would like to explore from that point of view or perspective. Here are a couple of ideas to get you started!

- a gym shoe during a game of soccer
- an egg being scrambled for breakfast
- your best friend watching you give a speech to the class
- a library book when someone new checks it out
- your caregiver when you are feeling sick
- a fly trying to land on your food but you keep shoo-ing it away

Don't forget to title your artwork. Like the titles Alma Thomas gave her works, your title should help viewers understand the perspective you are taking. Once your work is titled, take a moment to reflect on the process using the questions below. Then share your creation with the class!

Reflect:

- What person, place, thing, or experience are you examining? From whose eyes are you looking?
- What is emphasized or considered most important from this point of view or perspective?
- How does this point of view or perspective differ from your own?
- How has your own understanding of the person, place, thing or experience changed?
- In addition to helping us broaden our perspective and experience the world in new and innovative ways, how else does art impact our lives?