



Alma W. Thomas  
Everything Is Beautiful  
July 9–October 3, 2021

# ALMA W. THOMAS

*Everything Is Beautiful*

Alma W. Thomas, *Untitled*, ca. 1968,  
Steve and Lesley Testan Collection,  
as curated by Emily Friedman Fine Art



Artist and educator Alma Thomas (1891–1978) lived a lifetime of firsts. The eldest of four sisters, she was the first graduate in fine art from Howard University in 1924 and likely the first African American woman to earn such a degree. In 1943, she became the founding vice president of Barnett Aden Gallery, the first private art gallery to exhibit works by artists of all races in Washington, D.C. She received her first retrospective at Howard University in 1966, just six years after retiring from teaching art at Shaw Junior High School for thirty-five years. In 1972, at eighty-one years old, she was the first Black woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her long list of firsts continues this summer at the Chrysler Museum with her largest retrospective to date: *Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful*. This show marks the first time the Chrysler Museum has dedicated an entire exhibition of this scale to an African American woman artist.

Co-organized by the Chrysler Museum of Art and The Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia, *Everything Is Beautiful* includes fifty canvases by Thomas spanning 1922–1977, nearly sixty works on paper, several sculptures, numerous photographs, and a range of ephemera. A number of her late-career paintings on view have never been exhibited or published. The exhibition focuses on Thomas's wide-ranging creativity and persistent search for beauty, not only to provide a more complex understanding of the artist but also to offer an inspiring example of how to lead a creative life today. Visitors will encounter the archetypal spaces where Thomas moved and worked, including the studio, the garden, the theater, community

sites like schools and churches, and the art scene that extended from Washington, D.C. to New York and beyond through the Art in Embassies program.

*Everything Is Beautiful* began to take shape several years ago through a collaboration with The Columbus Museum. Thomas was born in Columbus, Georgia and spent the first sixteen years of her life there before migrating with her family to Washington, D.C. After her passing, Thomas's sister, John Maurice Thomas, donated a treasure trove of materials to The Columbus Museum that has not yet received sustained attention beyond that institution. Included was Thomas's student work of the 1920s, marionettes from the 1930s, costume designs, sketches, ceramic sculpture, home furnishings, and dozens of works on paper. The objects provide the foundation for *Everything Is Beautiful* and dramatically transform our understanding of the artist and how she interwove her creative activities as part of her artistic journey. As the exhibition reveals, Thomas's imagination and ingenuity were well developed long before her retirement from Shaw Junior High School and her creativity extended far beyond the painting studio to encompass clothing design, innovative teaching, and backyard gardening.

Thomas has been long adored by collectors and scholars, but her talent remained unfamiliar to a wider public more than three decades after her passing. That changed in 2009 when President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama included her work among the paintings they installed at the White House. *The New York Times* celebrated "a big, wide selection" of modern and contemporary masters while appreciating the addition of "paintings by little-known



figures like Alma Thomas, the African-American Expressionist painter." The tide turned immediately. A few days later, art critic Holland Cotter offered *Times* readers a thorough description of Thomas's life and work. Within a few years, Skidmore College's Tang Teaching Museum and The Studio Museum in Harlem partnered to present a thoughtful and highly regarded exhibition that focused on the works Thomas made in the last two decades of her life. Seemingly overnight, the market for Thomas's works exploded, with record-breaking auction prices and her works joining the collections of institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Although Thomas has enjoyed more exposure and admiration, it is safe to say she remains "little-known." The story often told about Thomas brushes over her many decades working as a teacher, community organizer, gardener, and artist. Instead, the focus has been on her decision to retire from classroom teaching in 1960 and her remarkable rise to stardom in the art world during the last two decades of her life. Her 1972 show at the Whitney has even taken on mythical status, celebrated as a triumph over racism, sexism, ageism, and provincialism. The exhibition at the Chrysler opens with a partial restaging of Thomas's Whitney show, including seven large canvases, several works on paper, and a recreation of the dress Thomas commissioned to complement her art. Notably, the section

also includes photographs and documents that put Thomas's Whitney exhibition in context. The Whitney curators selected Thomas after many years of artist-led protests, particularly those led by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, that demanded more inclusion of women and African American artists.

While Thomas's success in the art world in her 70s and 80s is well worth celebrating, concentrating only on her final, remarkable years tends to disregard the richer arc of her long life. Moreover, it fails to appreciate how her diverse creative interests and devotion to various local communities played a part in her singular artistic vision. Often overlooked is how Thomas viewed the natural world as a site of community connection and an enduring source of beauty, harmony, and regeneration. She saw parks and gardens as spaces of interaction and exchange, and she possessed a deep understanding of how flowers, her painted "impressions" of the natural world, and her memories of nature could be used to create and support a broad social network.

Thomas surrounded herself with beauty in her neighborhood and at home. She often observed her backyard garden from her kitchen studio window and used it as inspiration for her paintings. Other areas of her home also served as sources of inspiration. The exhibition includes objects that will transport visitors to a corner of Thomas's home, including books, her paint set, homemade jewelry, artwork by herself and others that she looked at daily, and a reproduction

ABOVE: Alma Thomas, *Snoopy Sees a Sunrise*, 1970, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson

OPPOSITE PAGE: Ida Jervis, *Alma W. Thomas in the studio*, 1968, Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution



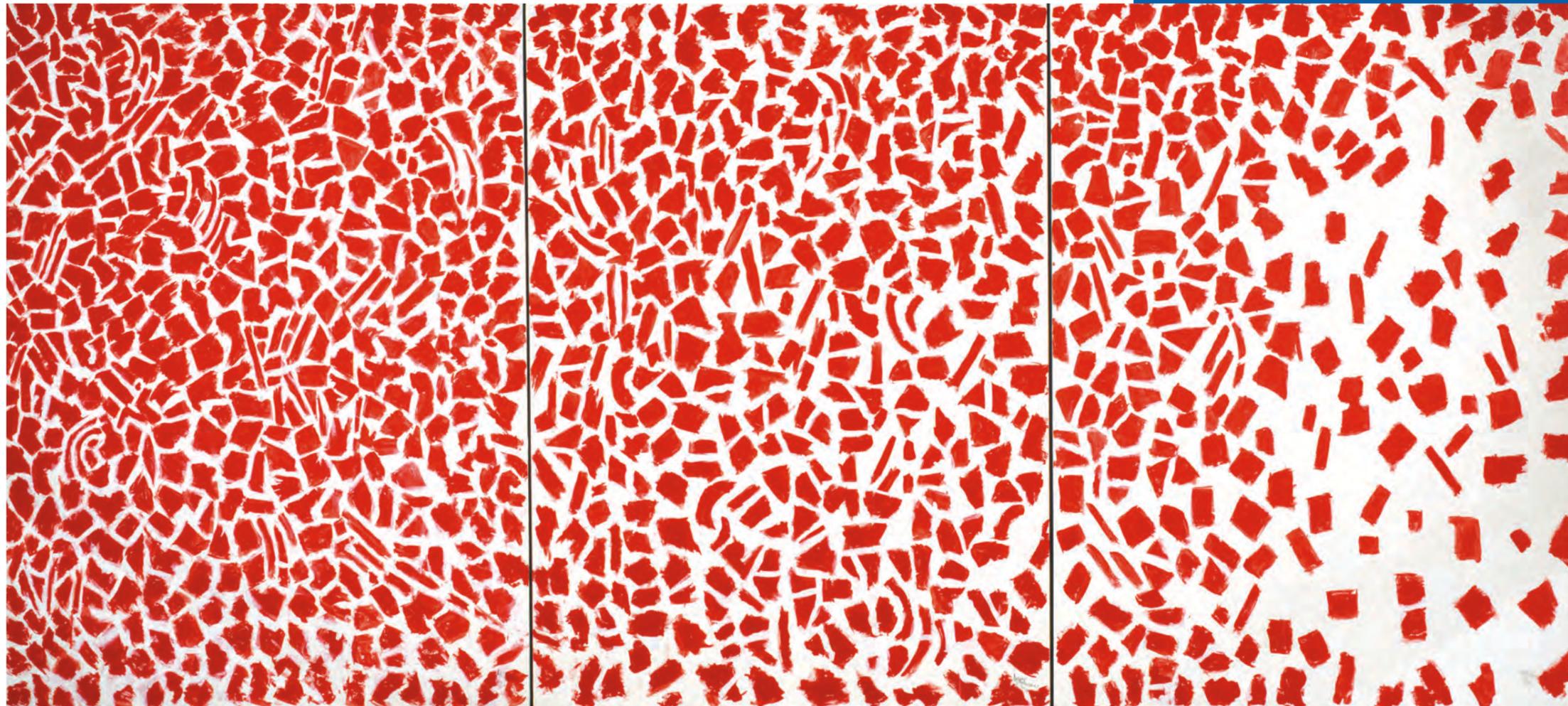
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of her house dress and favorite Saarinen chair. In this installation, visitors will discover how she found her creative voice through formal training, extensive study of art and culture, and a constant exploration of abstract forms through dozens of small works on paper.

An eclectic mix of handmade marionettes, photographs of Thomas teaching, paintings inspired by her faith and her favorite songs, and a selection of works made by her students will acquaint visitors with Thomas's dynamic artistic persona and the community sites where she was most active, including Shaw Junior High School. She worshipped and ran programs for children at St. Luke's Episcopal Church and maintained a strong commitment to her alma mater, creating costumes for Howard University's theatrical performances and taking her students to visit the university art gallery. The exhibition also acknowledges her relationship with Columbia University, where she received a master's degree in education with a thesis on puppetry arts, and the National Theatre, where she saw countless performances, including Pearl Bailey's starring role in the first all-Black cast of *Hello, Dolly! Everything Is Beautiful* emphasizes how Thomas leveraged her artistic interests to bring these distinct worlds together.

The final section of the exhibition returns to the art world, situating Thomas among numerous artistic circles in Washington, D.C.—from Howard University to the uptown gallery scene and from American University to sites in Europe and Africa through the Art in Embassies program. The show presents Thomas's work alongside her peers, establishing Thomas as an integral member of several collaborative and sometimes competitive groups. Thomas was often treated as a late-blooming artist who looked to others for inspiration. This section proves that other artists looked to Thomas as often as she looked to them.

The show culminates in what might be described as Thomas's magnum opus, *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music*. Painted in 1976, just two years before she died, the monumental work measures more than six feet tall and thirteen feet wide and shows



BELOW: Alma Thomas, *Clown*, ca. 1935, The Columbus Museum, Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas in memory of her parents, John H. and Amelia W. Cantey Thomas and her sister Alma Woodsey Thomas

ABOVE: Alma Thomas, *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music*, 1976, Smithsonian American Art Museum, bequest of the artist, 1980.36.2A-C

how Thomas continued working with extraordinary ambition all the way to the end, even after her Whitney exhibition. Along with rarely seen late works on paper, the enormous painting shows Thomas not only pushing herself but doing so by adapting to and making the most of her physical changes. She was beset with bouts of crippling arthritis starting in the 1960s and was increasingly impaired as she aged. Her broader brush strokes, wavering lines, and looser forms create luminous and expressive works that convey optimism and her persevering sense of beauty.

*Everything Is Beautiful* blends Thomas's bold abstract canvases from the 1960s and '70s with ephemera, photographs, sculpture, and works by other artists to evoke a sense of the world in which Thomas developed and pursued her belief that focusing on beauty can change the world. She worked persistently to establish a successful artistic career in the decades leading up to the Whitney show, and she opened many new creative pathways in the years after. This exhibition looks at the long span of her creativity so as to celebrate a full lifetime of accomplishments. 

—Seth Feman, PhD,  
Deputy Director for Art & Interpretation  
and Curator of Photography

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Local sponsorship at the Chrysler Museum of Art is provided by the Presenting Sponsor Dollar Tree.

