

# THROUGH COLOR

Alma Thomas:  
*Iris, Tulips, Jonquils  
and Crocuses*, 1969,  
acrylic on canvas,  
60 by 50 inches.  
National Museum of  
Women in the Arts,  
Washington, D.C.

**Alma Thomas, who overcame barriers of race, gender, and age, achieving artistic success in her seventies, is now poised to enter the postwar canon.**

**by Richard Kalina**

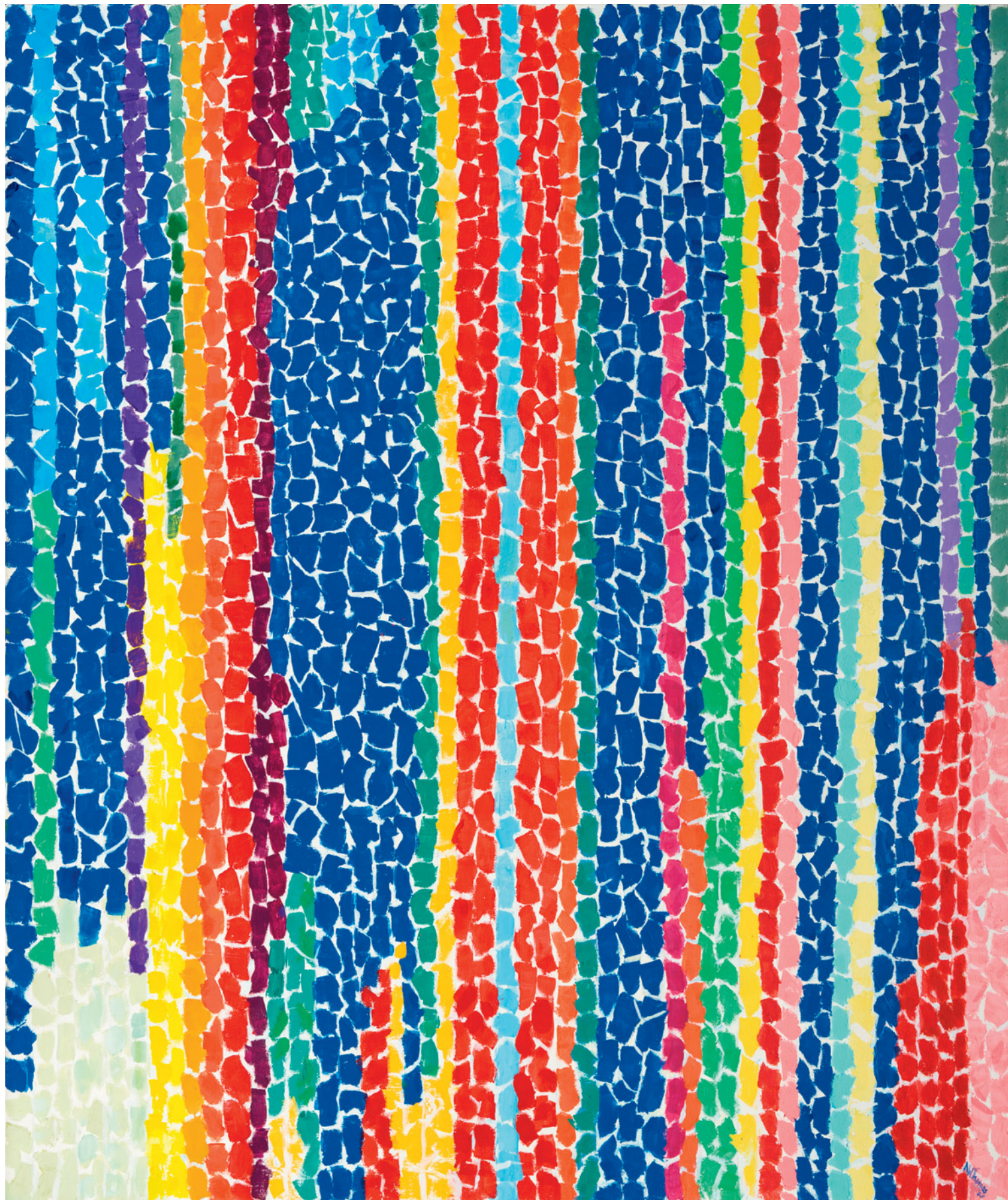
**CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW**  
“Alma Thomas,” at  
the Frances Young  
Tang Teaching  
Museum and Art  
Gallery, Saratoga  
Springs, N.Y.,  
through June 5. The  
show travels to the  
Studio Museum in  
Harlem, New York,  
July 14–Oct. 30,  
2016.

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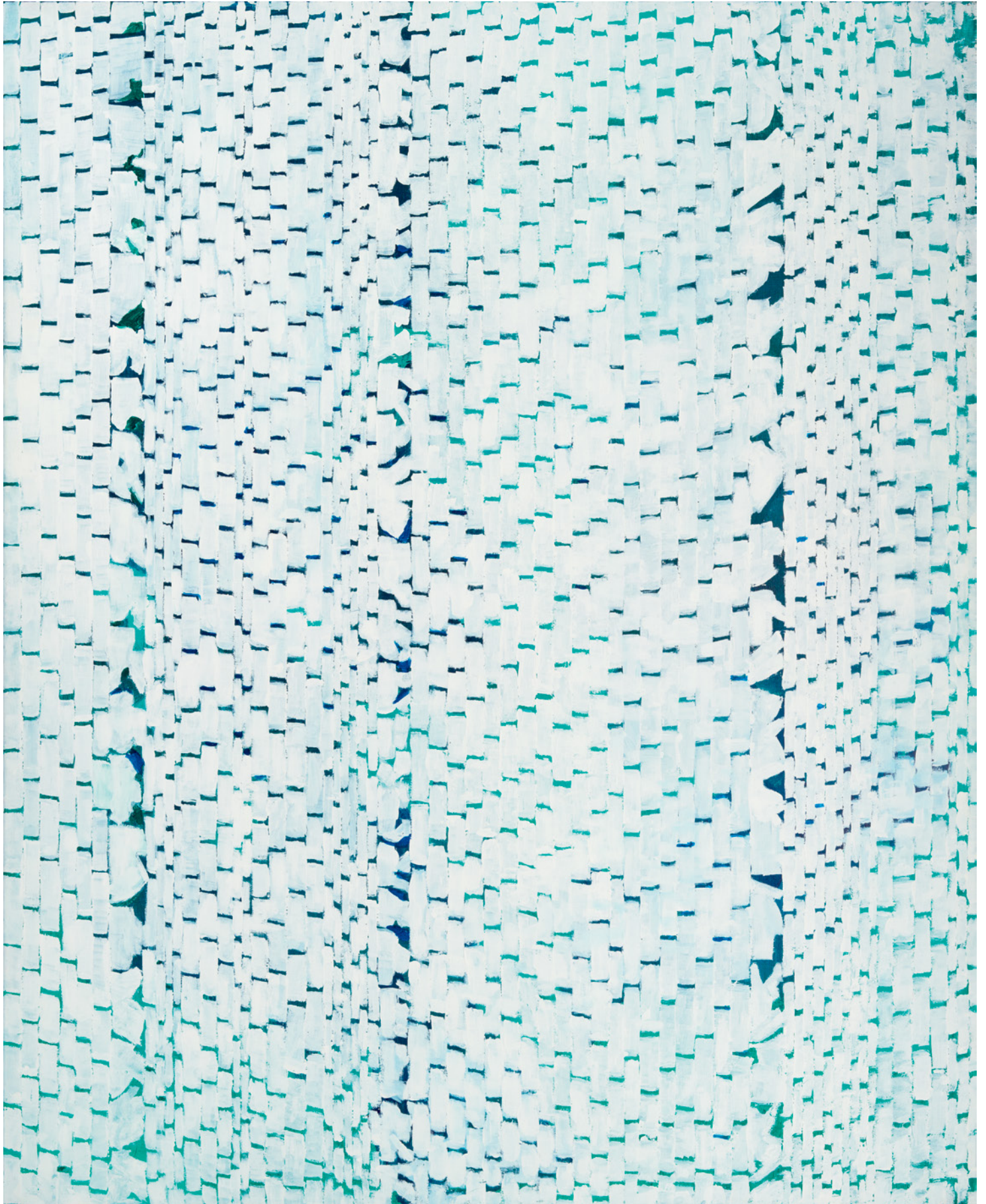
ALMA THOMAS (1891–1978) is an artist on the cusp of reexamination. The subject of a retrospective organized by the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College and the Studio Museum in Harlem, Thomas was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1891. Her family moved to Washington, D.C., in 1907 to escape growing racial tensions in Georgia and to provide Alma and her three younger sisters with a good education. She attended Howard University, where she was the first person to graduate with a degree in fine arts, and later received a master's in art education from New York's Columbia University Teachers College and an MFA in painting from American University in Washington. While she continued to paint seriously after graduation and spent summers in New York, studying at Columbia and going to museums and modern galleries like Alfred Stieglitz's *An American Place*, Thomas focused primarily on teaching art. It was only upon retiring in 1960, at the age of sixty-nine, after working for over thirty-five years in a junior high school, that she committed herself fully to painting. That began her most artistically, critically, and commercially successful period of art-making.

Thomas was scarcely an unknown artist during her lifetime, especially in the Washington art world. She worked if not directly within the circle of the Washington Color School (difficult indeed for an African-American woman in a largely white male environment), then alongside it. Her art was exhibited and well collected; significant examples can be found in the collections of major American museums. In 1972 she was the first African-American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and twenty years after her death she was given a retrospective at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana. A painting of hers now hangs in the White House dining room. Even with her success (which in some ways paralleled that of the Abstract Expressionist painter Norman Lewis), Thomas was consistently underappreciated. Like Lewis, she was a thoroughly abstract artist despite the expectation that African-American artists would or should directly address social concerns and issues of identity, an expectation that continues to exert a strong pull.









## Thomas was a thoroughly abstract artist despite the expectation that African-American artists would address social concerns and issues of identity.

But Thomas stuck to her premises, saying in 1970, “Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man’s inhumanity to man.”<sup>1</sup> Not only did she remain true to abstraction, she remained in Washington, D.C.: Thomas lived in the same attractive Italianate row house in the Logan Circle neighborhood from her arrival in the city until her death in 1978. By staying in Washington, a city where abstraction flourished, she fared better than many other excellent African-American abstract artists, like Herbert Gentry or Ed Clark, both of whom were born in the ’20s and spent considerable time (as did many black writers and musicians) in the more welcoming and congenial atmosphere of France and Scandinavia, thus missing opportunities to consolidate their reputations in the United States.

ALTHOUGH AFRICAN-AMERICAN abstract artists continue to risk even greater marginalization than their nonabstract fellows, the situation is changing. There are, of course, talented and successful practitioners like Julie Mehretu, Jack Whitten, Mark Bradford, Stanley Whitney, and Odili Donald Odita. The expanded nature of abstraction currently, given an atmosphere of artistic pluralism and attendant loosening of stylistic strictures, figures strongly into this change. A reexamination and potential foregrounding of Thomas’s place in art seems to be part of a larger process of historical reconfiguration. To what extent does abstraction today owe its wider historical and referential range to painters who hadn’t been thought entirely central to the enterprise—not just artists like Thomas, but also previously neglected postwar Europeans like Simon Hantaï, whose work has strong affinities with Thomas’s?

While larger forces play into the changing of the historical narrative, an artist’s work, to vie for serious reconsideration, can’t merely check off the right boxes—there has to be that spark of real originality, skill, and passion. The presence of a clearly recognizable style is often telling—a sign of lucidity and invention. This is very much the case with Thomas. Unlike, say, many gestural abstractionists of the ’50s whose work tends to look similar to one another’s, Thomas produced canvases that can hardly be mistaken for anyone else’s. Even though she was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, her artistic maturity coincides with the ending of the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism. She really was an abstract artist of the ’60s and ’70s, and judging by the work itself (in terms of scale, ambition, and sheer verve) you

might guess that she was thirty or forty years younger. Her major paintings, for example, are all executed in acrylic, the preferred medium of post-painterly abstraction. They are resolutely flat and organized in a variety of striped or overall mosaiclike configurations.

A painting like *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses* (1969), even though it reveals some adjustment and overpainting, gives a first impression of immediacy, of a glowing chromatic field composed of short, sure strokes of pure color organized in loose stripes laid down directly on a clean, optically intense white ground. The individual marks evoke the vitality and freshness of Fauve painting. You get the feeling of an early Matisse or Derain, broken up and rearranged into a reasonably orderly array of maculated stripes. There is no doubt that Thomas’s work is solidly grounded in twentieth-century art history—especially in terms of color—echoing not just the Fauves, but Kandinsky, Miró, and Albers.

Thomas’s striped paintings show considerable variation within a fairly strict set of formal boundaries. While *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses* features stripes of quite different widths that at key points break and change color, paintings like *Breeze Rustling through Fall Flowers* and *Wind, Sunshine, and Flowers* (both 1968) keep to a more regularized striping and a more tonally consistent palette. *Wind, Sunshine, and Flowers* does something particularly effective and subtle. Because the strokes—all vertical—are broken and shardlike, the eye tends to read across the tops and bottoms of the small forms and make a visual connection between adjacent rows. Thomas seizes on this optical property and goes in with a small brush and very carefully highlights certain portions of the white spaces, leading the eye to construct—almost subliminally—a series of cascading curls and curves. This increases the feeling of the floral and lends the painting an Art Nouveau or even a Japanese air. With an impressive command of negative space, Thomas pushes at the seemingly straightforward and simple constructions, adding a richness and slowness of read and allowing different modes of perception to be set in counterpoint.

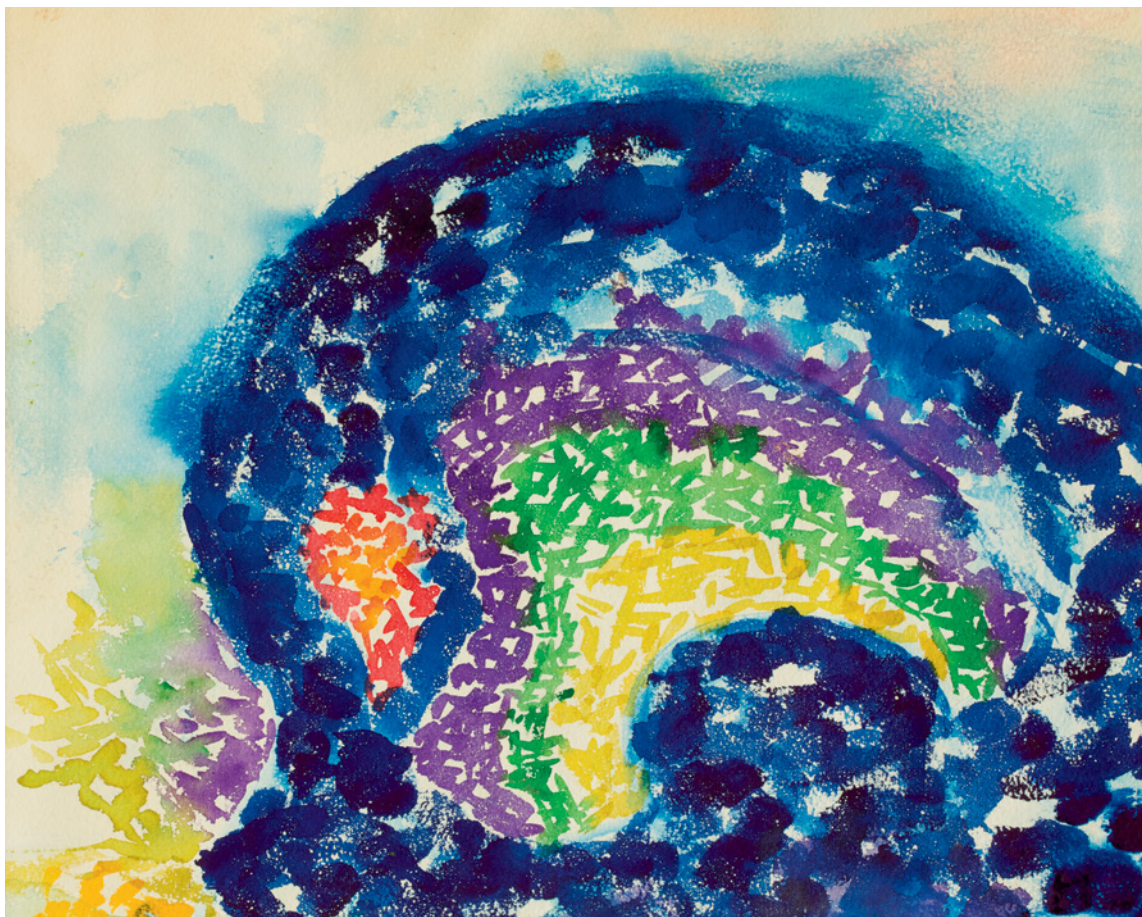
This perceptual complexity, along with the fusion of color and structure, lies, I believe, at the core of the renewed interest in the work not just of Thomas, but also of formally oriented Color Field painters of the ’60s and ’70s, like Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Gene Davis. (All spent considerable time in D.C.) With this in mind, it might be time to remove the implicit “merely” from the appellation “formal.” The formal, it turns out, is a house with many rooms.

*Arboretum Presents  
White Dogwood,  
1972, acrylic  
on canvas, 67½  
by 54½ inches.  
Smithsonian  
American Art  
Museum,  
Washington, D.C.*

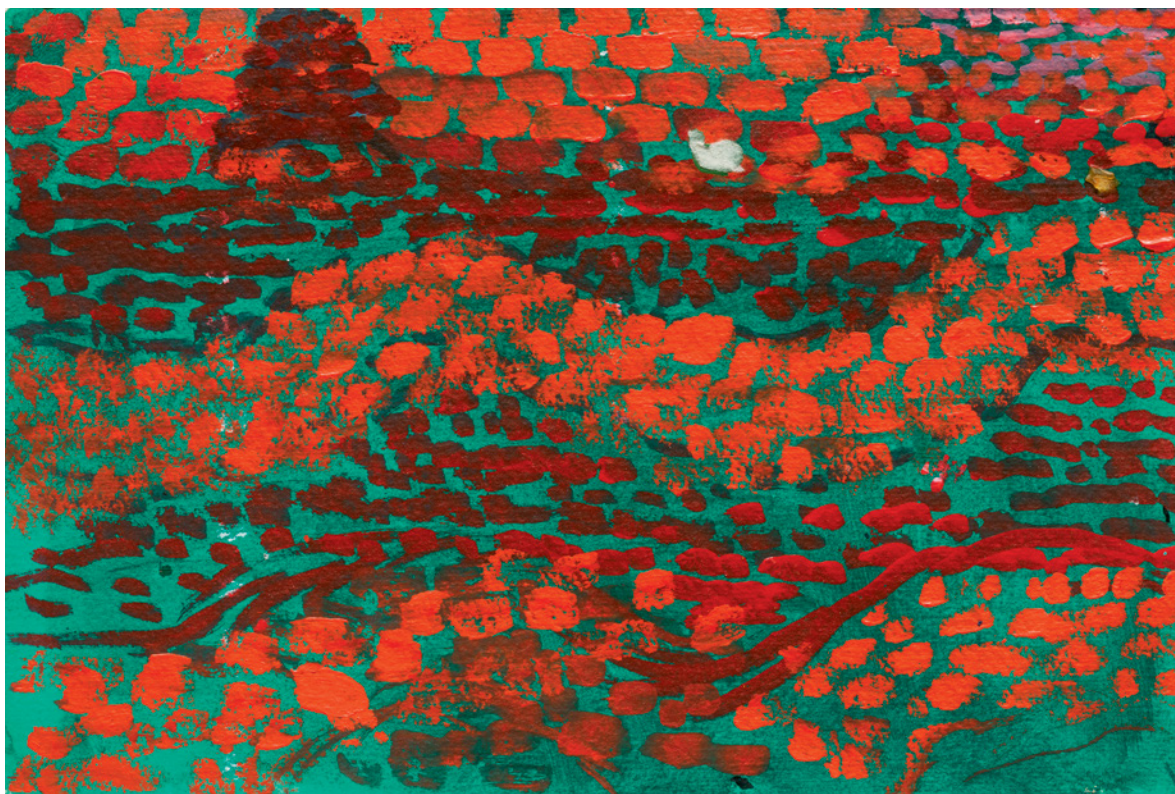


*Untitled (reverie),*  
1960–78, watercolor  
on paper, 9 by  
7 inches.

Artwork this spread  
courtesy Columbus  
Museum, Ga.



*Abstract Color*  
*Study*, 1960–78,  
watercolor on paper,  
8 by 11 inches.







Untitled, ca. 1960,  
watercolor on paper,  
9 by 12 inches.



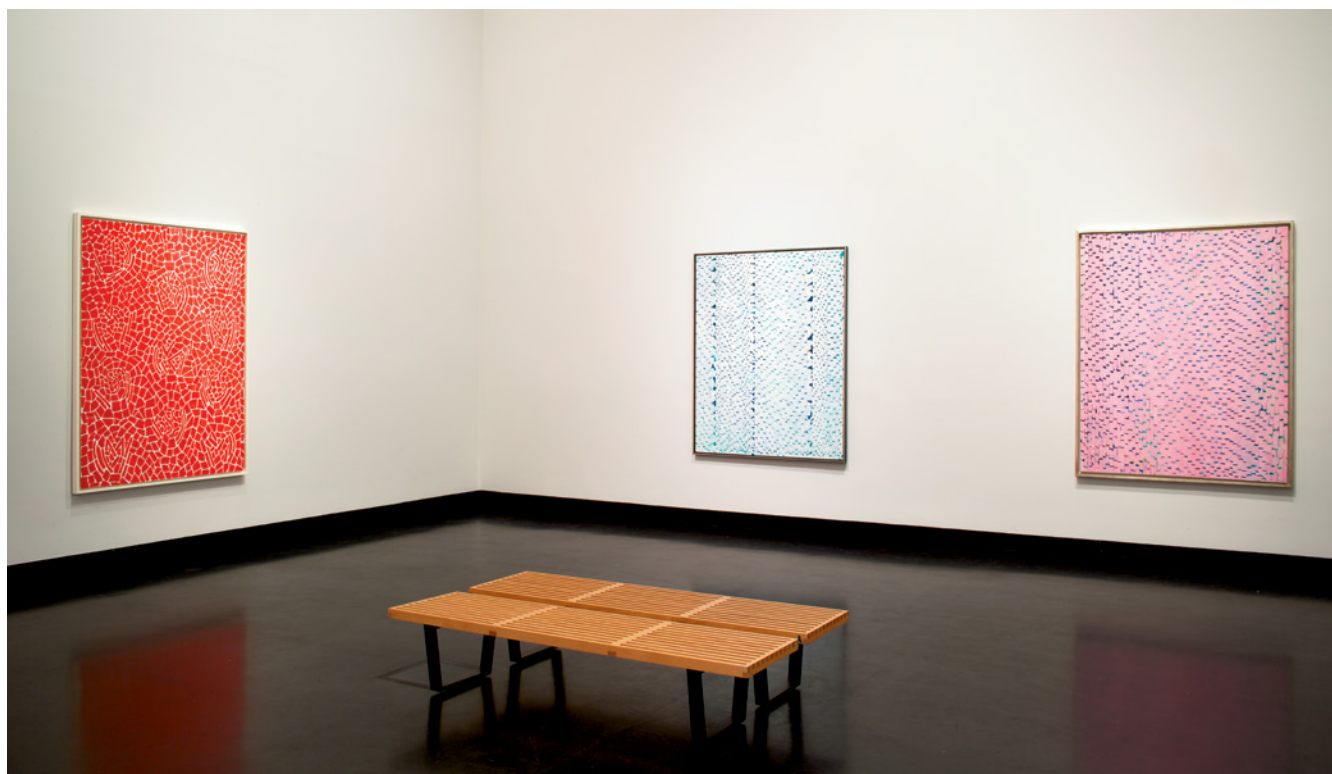
Untitled, ca. 1960,  
watercolor on paper,  
8 by 9 inches.







**Even though Thomas found sources of inspiration right around her—trees, her garden—she was also fascinated by flight and space travel, as were many twentieth-century Americans.**



View of Thomas's exhibition, showing (left to right) *Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish*, 1976; *Arboretum Presents White Dogwood*, 1972; and *Cherry Blossom Symphony*, 1973. Courtesy Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Photo Arthur Evans.

EVEN THOUGH Thomas found sources of inspiration right around her—trees, her garden—she was fascinated by flight and space travel, as were many twentieth-century Americans. (The titles of Thomas's paintings not only provide a key to the individual work and what inspired it, but reflect a sensibility that is poetic, humorous, and observant.) She lived during a period that saw the invention of the first airplanes right through to moonwalks and satellites sent to other planets. It is easy to forget how much excitement and optimism such events created, and Thomas, a woman of her times, shared it. She listened to the regular radio reports of space launches and sketched as the flights progressed. (Radio allowed her imagination fuller play than television.) She tried to picture what scenes and images on earth would look like if viewed from a great distance and at great speed. She said in 1970, "My space paintings are expressed in the same color patterns as my earth paintings with the canvas forming intriguing motifs around and through color composition." In 1978, the last year of her life, she said, "I began to think about what I would see if I were in an airplane. You look down on things. You streak through the clouds so fast you don't know whether the flower below is a violet or what. You see only streaks of color."

Thomas made quite a number of works directly inspired by space flight. *Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset* (1970) places a large circular form in a square canvas. Upon a rich orange background, the circle—executed in the artist's typical vertical strokes—is divided into a deep cadmium-red section, occupying the left two thirds of the circle, followed by a thin yellow band and then a larger section of dark orange with a bit of ocher peeking in on the perimeter (like back-lighting). The painting seems to burn with an otherworldly intensity. *Apollo 12 "Splash Down"* (1970) reads more directly as a landscape (or seascape), with its horizontal striping and its division into areas of sea, sky, and sun. *Starry Night and the Astronauts* (1972), an ambiguous and evocative painting, returns to a more abstract composition, with a field of dark and lighter blue vertical groupings punctuated by a small and rather mysterious vessel-like horizontal shape in the upper-right corner, picked out in a spectrum of red, orange, and yellow horizontal strokes. The gaps between the blue brushstrokes glow with a cool starlike white, and the vessel hovers on the canvas like an apparition.

As the '70s progressed, Thomas's work became more allover and monochromatic. The Tang show presents three separate developments in the monochrome work. In

Opposite, *Starry Night and the Astronauts*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 60 by 53 inches. Art Institute of Chicago.





*Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 72 by 52 inches. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.

*Arboretum Presents White Dogwood* (1972) and *Cherry Blossom Symphony* (1973), a variegated underpainting executed for the most part in deep blues and greens replaces the white ground of her striped paintings. The overpainted strokes, shades of cool white in the former painting and rosy pinks in the latter, resolve themselves into larger vertical divisions rather than stripes, and the play of darker lines formed by the reveals of the underpainting sets up a spatially complex, fieldlike reading. By limiting her means, Thomas allows us to see greater variation in the shape and touch of her brushstrokes and frees the eye to roam in a more unrestricted way over the canvas. The paintings radiate sumptuousness and pleasure. With their layered quality and elegant finish, they feel like the most sensory and French of her paintings, again evoking Matisse, as well as the warm garden-oriented domesticity of late Bonnard.

Another type of monochrome work, represented in this exhibition by *Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish* and

*White Roses Sing and Sing* (both 1976), moves completely away from striping or vertical divisions and gives us arrangements of more or less circular shapes that subtly emerge from an overall field. In earlier paintings, Thomas's marks were read as brushstrokes; in these, the marks are instead small, carefully delineated forms that lead us through complex pattern variations. *Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish* places hundreds of bright-red four-sided polygons (with the occasional triangle) against a bright white ground. This painting seems archaic, like something that could have been found in ancient Greece or Rome. *White Roses Sing and Sing* has a dark greenish background and white and yellow-tinged forms arranged over its surface. Softer and more symmetrical than *Scarlet Sage*, it brings to mind Jasper Johns's Crosshatch paintings of the same period. Thomas's painting feels cellular as opposed to linear, but shares with Johns's pieces a similar touch, palette, and general organization.

Finally there is the work represented by *Hydrangeas Spring Song* (1976), a blue-and-white painting, which moves away from Thomas's typical aggregation of more or less uniform brushstrokes that fill the entire canvas. *Hydrangeas* is instead composed of many distinct, almost hieroglyphic shapes, with some areas of the canvas densely populated and the remaining sectors open but scarcely empty. The Tang show—which also includes three semi-representational paintings from 1964 based on the March on Washington, two small, loosely geometric Hofmann-esque oils from 1959 and 1960, and a large group of beautiful and little-known watercolor studies—of course leaves out much of Thomas's mature production, which reached its full strength in the later '60s. The exhibition does, however, nicely lay out the general parameters of her project, so that the many works that fall in between or overlap the stylistic categories represented are given a clear formal rationale.

Thomas's star is undeniably rising. There is a strong impulse to widen the historical narrative, to undercut the myth of heroic (and youthful) American self-invention, especially in the arena of abstraction. That an African-American woman, dead nearly forty years, who had both a solid local grounding and a nuanced appreciation of modern European and American art could play a role in today's dialogue is heartening. That she began a serious career in her seventh decade is even more encouraging and inspiring. Transcending the barriers of race, gender, and age, as well as countering expectations of content and context, is no small feat. Thomas created art and led life on her own terms. This thoughtful and well-curated exhibition makes the case for a thorough examination of her art and her place in history. The work is beautiful, optimistic, clear, and, almost more than anything, fresh. I think we will be seeing a good deal more of it. ○

1. All Alma Thomas quotes are from the extensive interpretive exhibition wall texts.





*Hydrangeas Spring  
Song*, 1976, acrylic  
on canvas, 78 by 48  
inches. Philadelphia  
Museum of Art.