

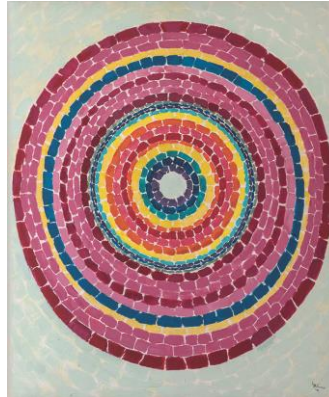
Major Retrospective of Alma W. Thomas at Frist Art Museum Examines Artist's Wide-Ranging Creative Life

Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful

February 25–June 5, 2022



1



2



3

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (January 4, 2021)—The Frist Art Museum presents [*Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful*](#), a comprehensive overview of the artist's long, dynamic life (1891–1978) and multifaceted career that was defined by constant creativity. Featuring more than 150 works, including her joyful and colorful abstract paintings and many objects that have never been exhibited or published before, the exhibition demonstrates how Thomas's artistic practices extended to every aspect of her life—from community service and teaching to gardening and dress. Co-organized by the Chrysler Museum of Art and The Columbus Museum, Georgia, *Everything Is Beautiful* will be on view in the Frist's Upper-Level Galleries from February 25 through June 5, 2022.

This major retrospective follows the trailblazing artist's journey from Columbus, Georgia, to Washington, DC, to becoming the first Black woman to have a solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972, when she was eighty years old. It includes thirty-eight canvases spanning 1922–77, more than sixty works on paper, four marionettes, and a range of sculptures, photographs, and ephemera. "The Columbus Museum collection includes an extraordinary body of material related to Thomas, thanks to gifts from her family, particularly her sister John Maurice Thomas," said Jonathan Frederick Walz, PhD, director of curatorial affairs and curator of American art at The Columbus Museum. "By sharing a selection of these objects, many of which haven't been seen outside of Georgia, we hope to offer new insights into Thomas's diverse body of work."

"*Everything Is Beautiful* not only provides a more complex understanding of Alma Thomas, but also offers an inspiring example of how to lead a creative life today," says Seth Feman, PhD, one of the exhibition's curators and the Chrysler's deputy director for art and interpretation and curator of photography. He notes that, while Thomas has been long adored by collectors and scholars, her talent remained unfamiliar to a wider public for more than three decades after her death until 2009, when President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama included her work among the paintings they installed at the White House.

The exhibition explores Thomas’s relationship to the Washington Color School, the creative communities connected to Howard University, and peers who protested museums that failed to exhibit artists of color. “Throughout her career, the art departments and galleries of historically Black colleges and universities provided Thomas with vital support,” says Frist Art Museum senior curator Trinita Kennedy. “Her closest connections were with Howard University, her alma mater, and the place where she debuted her abstract style—what she called ‘Alma stripes’—in 1966. That exhibition marked the beginning of her meteoric rise in the art world.”

Moving through the galleries, guests will encounter the archetypal spaces where Thomas expressed her creativity, including the studio, the garden, the theater, community sites such as schools and churches, universities, and the art scene that extended from Washington, DC, to New York and beyond through the Art in Embassies Program. Thomas’s presence will also be invoked through recreations of her distinctive dresses with bold, geometric patterns, a new documentary about her life and career, and the music she listened to while she painted. A playlist accessible at the start of the exhibition allows visitors to hear the artist’s favorite songs, including the Ray Stevens hit “Everything Is Beautiful,” recorded in Nashville in 1970. The audio tour was written by The Phillips Collection, and there will also be a touchscreen interactive that offers guests the opportunity to explore Thomas’s past landmark exhibitions.

The Frist is one of four museums presenting this tribute to Thomas. “Here in Nashville, special attention will be given to Thomas’s 1971 exhibition organized by David C. Driskell at Fisk University’s Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery,” says Kennedy. “It was Driskell who brought Thomas to the attention of the Whitney Museum, and the two shows have much in common.” *Everything Is Beautiful* begins with a partial restaging of the 1972 Whitney show, including a recreation of the dress Thomas commissioned to complement her art and wore to the opening.



4

The success of Thomas’s final, remarkable years tends to overshadow her previous decades of devotion to various local organizations, her diverse creative interests, and how she viewed the natural world as an enduring source of inspiration. The titles and forms of Thomas’s beloved abstract paintings demonstrate her interest in flora and fauna, music, space travel, and spirituality.

“Thomas achieved artworld stardom but considered teaching art to be her greatest legacy,” says Kennedy. The Frist will highlight Thomas’s thirty-five-year tenure at Shaw Junior High in Washington, DC, by presenting a concurrent exhibition titled [Nashville Art Teachers:](#)

[Beyond the Classroom](#) that salutes the extraordinary art teachers in our own community and their heroic efforts during the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. It features the work of elementary, middle, and high school art teachers working in Davidson County and will be on view in our Conte Community Arts Gallery from March 4 through August 28, 2022.

“Half a century after Alma Thomas’s exhibition at Fisk University, this retrospective gives Nashvillians a new opportunity to revel in all the beauty that Thomas recognized in our imperfect world and left behind,” says Kennedy.

Program

Thursday, February 24

6:30 p.m.

Presented on Zoom

Free; registration required

Curators' Perspective

Alma W. Thomas: Learning from the Artist-Educator

Presented by Seth Feman, deputy director for art and interpretation and curator of photography, Chrysler Museum of Art, and Jonathan Frederick Walz, director of curatorial affairs and curator of American art, The Columbus Museum

Join the exhibition co-curators to learn more about how Thomas's artistic practices extended to every facet of her life. Drawing from their essays in the accompanying catalogue as well as from the exhibition, Walz will present on Thomas's marionettes and Feman will share more about Thomas's teaching practice.

Details about additional programs will be posted on FristArtMuseum.org and @FristArtMuseum on social media.

Exhibition Catalogue

A full-color, 336-page hardcover catalogue published by the organizing institutions and distributed by Yale University Press opens with a new poem by Ross Gay and features a large collection of new scholarship. The essays incorporate an array of perspectives, including Africana scholar Tiffany Barber on Thomas and performance and self-fashioning and exhibition co-curator Jonathan F. Walz on motion in her art. Other scholarly essays explore Thomas's classroom activities, her church life, the cultivation of her garden, the context of environmentalism, and more topics. Contributors include exhibition co-curator Seth Feman, Vanderbilt University professor Rebecca VanDiver, and many more. The catalogue will be available for purchase in the Frist Art Museum gift shop.

Exhibition Credit

Co-organized by the Chrysler Museum of Art and The Columbus Museum, Georgia

Image Credits

1. Alma W. Thomas. *Air View of a Spring Nursery*, 1966. Acrylic on canvas. The Columbus Museum, museum purchase and gift of the National Association of Negro Business Women, and the artist
2. Alma W. Thomas. *Spring Flowers Near Jefferson Memorial*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas. Fisk University Galleries, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, 1991.2116
3. Alma W. Thomas. *Blast Off*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas. Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Vincent Melzac
4. Unknown photographer. Alma Thomas with two students at the Howard University Art Gallery, 1928 or after. Black-and-white photograph. Alma W. Thomas Papers, The Columbus Museum

Supporter Acknowledgment

Aflac is proud to sponsor *Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful*. The exhibition has also been made possible in part by major support from the **Henry Luce Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts.**

Supported in part by **Ameriprise Financial**.

Spanish translation sponsor: **Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx Studies at Vanderbilt University**

The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by The Frist Foundation, the Metro Nashville Arts Commission, the Tennessee Arts Commission, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

[Read about the Frist's Health and Safety Procedures.](#)

Connect with us @FristArtMuseum #TheFrist #FristAlmaWThomas

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Buddy Kite: 615.744.3351, bkite@FristArtMuseum.org

Ellen Jones Pryor: 615.243.1311, epryor@FristArtMuseum.org

About the Frist Art Museum

Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, the Frist Art Museum is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit art exhibition center dedicated to presenting and originating high-quality exhibitions with related educational programs and community outreach activities. Located at 919 Broadway in downtown Nashville, Tenn., the Frist Art Museum offers the finest visual art from local, regional, national, and international sources in exhibitions that inspire people through art to look at their world in new ways. Information on accessibility can be found at FristArtMuseum.org/accessibility. Gallery admission is free for visitors ages 18 and younger and for members, and \$15 for adults. For current hours and additional information, visit FristArtMuseum.org or call 615.244.3340.
