Biography

Alma Woodsey Thomas was born on September 22, 1891 in Columbus, Georgia. As a teenager, her family moved to Washington D.C. to pursue better education for their children. Thomas began her career as a Kindergarten teacher, but soon decided to further her education. In 1924 she became the first graduate of the new Fine Arts Department at Howard University. After graduating, she returned to teaching, this time as a high school art teacher. She worked as an art teacher for 35 years, even after earning her Masters degree from Columbia University. It wasn’t until she retired from teaching at 69 years old that she started to focus on painting full time. Her work was quickly recognized by the art world and in 1972 she became the first African-American woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. During the last years of her life, Thomas struggled with arthritis and poor vision, but she continued painting, drawing on nature and music for inspiration. She died on February 24, 1978 in the same Washington D.C. home that her family had moved into in 1907.

Her Work

Thomas initially painted realistic images but moved toward abstract painting as her career progressed. Her primary inspirations were her observations of nature and the abstract patterns of light created when shining through flowers and plants. Her paintings reflected this with their bold colors and short jagged brush strokes. From the 1970’s onward, Thomas minimized the number of colours in her paintings and experimented with optical effects. Her brush strokes had the appearance of wedges and commas and created rhythmic patterns that often resembled mosaics. Today, one of her paintings, Sky Light, hangs in the Obama family’s private residence within the White House.
To Learn More

• Examine the Alma Thomas artwork exhibited on the Artist of The Month board in the main hall across from the teachers lounge.

• Look for the following book at the library:

  Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings by Ft. Wayne Museum of Art

  A Life in Art: Alma Thomas 1891-1978 by Merry A Foresta

• Participate in this month’s Art Project inspired by Alma Thomas’ paintings!

Art Project

Alma Thomas took inspiration from nature and music to create colorful abstract art. Now it is your turn! Observe the flowers, trees and grasses in your yard or local park, paying special attention to how the light interacts with the colors and forms. Or use music as your inspiration, allowing the notes, melodies and rhythms to form an image in your mind. Using any medium you like, including watercolor paints, colored pencils, charcoal, pastels, markers or crayons, create an original abstract artwork inspired by nature or music. Focus on color and shape to express your observations of the natural world or a musical experience.