

Alma Woodsey Thomas

She had her first one-woman show at the age of 68 and developed her signature style seven years later. Despite her belated start, Alma Woodsey Thomas went on to have retrospectives at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the National Museum of American Art, both in Washington, D.C.; she was the first African American woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art; and she exhibited her paintings at the White House on three occasions.

Thomas was born and raised in Columbus, Georgia. In 1907 she moved with her family to Washington, D.C., into the house where she spent the remaining seven decades of her life. After graduating from high school, where she excelled at art, Thomas earned a teaching certificate and, later, a master's degree in art education. Throughout her life, Thomas concentrated on her career; she painted part time while supporting herself by teaching art, notably at Shaw Junior High School, where she worked from 1924 until her retirement in 1960.

Thomas's early art was realistic. However, at Howard University, where she was the Art Department's first graduate in 1924, she became fascinated by abstraction, based on the influence of her professors Lois Mailou Jones and James V. Herring. When she was invited to exhibit her art at Howard in 1966, Thomas decided to experiment with a new approach, the type of painting for which she is best known today: large canvases filled with dense, irregular patterns made by brushes heavily laden with bright colors. Thomas's mature work has been compared with Byzantine mosaics, the pointillist technique of Georges Seurat, and the paintings of the Washington Color School, yet her work is quite distinctive.

A lifelong political activist, Thomas offered weekly art classes to children from Washington's poorest neighborhoods even when she was suffering from severe arthritis. In her 80s, neither a broken hip nor a heart ailment prevented her from continuing to paint.

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