

Alma W. Thomas (1891–1978): Old/Not Old Artist

Nell Irvin Painter (b. 1942)

In exhibition catalog *Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful*, Published by The Columbus Museum and Chrysler Museum of Art, 2021, p. 148-153. This catalogue was published in conjunction with the exhibition *Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful*, co-organized by The Columbus Museum, Columbus, Georgia, and the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia.

From the moment she arrived in New York City in 1972 and hit the big time, Alma Woodsey Thomas's age was a source of wonder—never disregarded, always worthy of remark. Harold Rosenberg (1906–1978), art critic for *The New Yorker*, singled her out by name in a long review. He decreed her work praiseworthy, after a mention of her age: “Alma Thomas, the eighty-one-year-old Black woman artist from Washington, D.C., has brought new life to abstract painting in the nineteen-seventies.”¹ Even the art historian Judith Wilson (b. 1952), one of Thomas's most thorough and thoughtful critics, embedded the artist's age in the lede of her groundbreaking 1979 essay for *Ms. Magazine*: “In 1960, the late Alma W. Thomas retired from teaching and began to take herself seriously as a painter. She was 68 years old.”²

Alma Thomas's age defines the figure of the painter Alma Thomas, and is almost as central to her image as her unique and colorful abstraction. I'm hardly in her league as a painter, but as an old artist, I recognize this fascination with a woman's age, a phenomenon that she and I share. Her age, the geographies and chronologies of race, and successive eras in art history have all influenced how she pursued her art and how her art has been received. Her persona carries the mark of her age, even when she has been characterized as youthful as well as old. As an old woman, I also recognize the freedom that age brings women: freedom to spend your money as you please, because you're more likely when old than when you were young to have money; to

do what you want to do, even if other people don't see your point in wanting to keep on doing it your own way.

In the 1970s, when mainstream critics in New York and Washington discovered Thomas and were fascinated by her advanced age, they were also marveling at the youthfulness of her paintings. “Somehow, Miss Thomas managed to retain a decisive spark of youth,” said Benjamin Forgey (b. 1938) in the Washington *Evening Star*, whose review proclaimed her “A Charming ‘Young’ Painter” (fig. 1).³ In the *New York Times*, James R. Mellow (1926–1997) wondered how such an “elderly woman...embraced total abstraction.”⁴

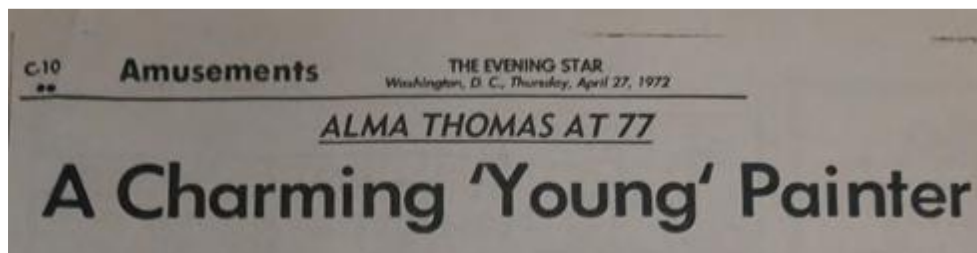


Fig. 1. *Evening Star*, April 27, 1972, page C-10 (detail). Alma W. Thomas Papers, The Columbus Museum

Thomas herself announced that she wouldn't let age stop her: “There's aches and pains all over, but I have to keep going!...The older I become, the younger I feel. Most people grow old and feel old, but as I'm growing old, I'm feeling younger.”⁵ Even though she was “an elderly woman—born in the ‘horse and buggy days,’” Thomas and her gorgeous paintings have inhabited successive art historical generations as she traversed segregated Washington, experienced art in Europe, and broke into the racially and geographically exclusionary art terrain of New York City.

Alma Thomas was, in fact, older—often very much older—than the people who shaped her education and advancement. Only in her 1920s studies as a Howard University student was she

younger than her teachers, notably James V. Herring (1887–1969), who brought her into Howard’s newly established art department as its first student and continued to mentor her until leaving as chair in 1953. That was about the end of her term as a youth. Everyone else in her life as an artist was younger than she, beginning with Herring’s partner, Alonzo Aden (1906–1961), head of the Howard University Art Gallery, who, with Herring, operated the Barnett Aden Gallery out of their home from 1943 (cat. 146). Showing her work very early on and welcoming her into the gallery’s leadership, Herring and Aden encouraged Thomas in her beginnings as a professional, exhibiting artist. Howard University people, some older but mostly younger, were the first to lay down the stepping-stones, offer helping hands, and praise her work to people who could get it shown where showing made all the difference in the art world.

Early in her career she collaborated with Howard people, not just Herring and Aden, but also the major painter and professor Lois Mailou Jones (1905–2000). Jones included Thomas in an artist’s club for schoolteachers, most likely with gestures of condescension. In the early 1950s Thomas broke away from Howard University’s traditions of conventional fine art, of art-making intended to demonstrate Negro artists’ mastery of prevailing standards. The leaders of this academic art of impeccable technique were Jones (cat. 148) and James A. Porter (1905–1970), both born a decade and a half after Thomas. From 1953 until his death, Porter chaired Howard’s art department, where Jones reigned as the artist of acclaim.

Jones and Porter were skilled twentieth-century modernists whose refined work, despite its technical mastery, has not been widely exhibited in decades. It’s as though their expertise has damned their work as passé, especially in contrast with what was carelessly termed Thomas’s spontaneity and naivete. Jones and Porter’s art belongs to the era before the Second World War, when Paris was the center of the international art world. After the war, the center shifted to New

York City, where tastemakers seldom looked beyond Manhattan's confines or anywhere across the color line. When Thomas gained notice in New York City as an artist worthy of attention, it was because of a show at the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston. There her work was exhibited with artists from that city and New York—as though art from Washington was so beneath notice it had to be presented as if it were from elsewhere.

Thomas's first steps out of obscurity took her five miles northwest of mostly Black Howard University to mostly white American University, a shift prompted by Aden at Howard and Ben "Joe" Summerford (1924–2015) at American in the early 1950s. The trip took her from Porter's and Jones's prewar styles to the postwar Washington Color School of the white painters Morris Louis (1912–1962), who taught at Howard; Kenneth Noland (1924–2010); and Gene Davis (1920–1985). Thomas knew Jacob Kainen (1909–2001) not only as her American University teacher but also as a paid, personal hands-on critic. Washington was still very much segregated in the 1950s, so her migration took her into a racial art world that had not previously welcomed Black artists. Even Jones, for all her skill, had had to submit her work incognito to the annual exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art during the 1930s and 1940s, before its desegregation in the late 1950s. Over the course of the decade of the 1950s, Thomas remade herself into the painter we recognize today, nowadays likely to be categorized among color field painters, never alongside African American figurative painters like Porter and Jones.

In addition to moving her from Black to white spaces in Washington, Thomas's purposeful later education reset her artist's clock, placing her in time with artists born in the 1920s and 1930s. A further geographical displacement took Thomas to Europe in summer 1958 with the Tyler School of Art of (mostly) white Temple University. Her passport puts her date of birth as 1894, rather than the actual date of 1891, and her height as 5' 1" (fig. 2).⁶ I don't know how

European art inspired Thomas, but shortly after her return, she began working in the abstraction that has become her signature style.

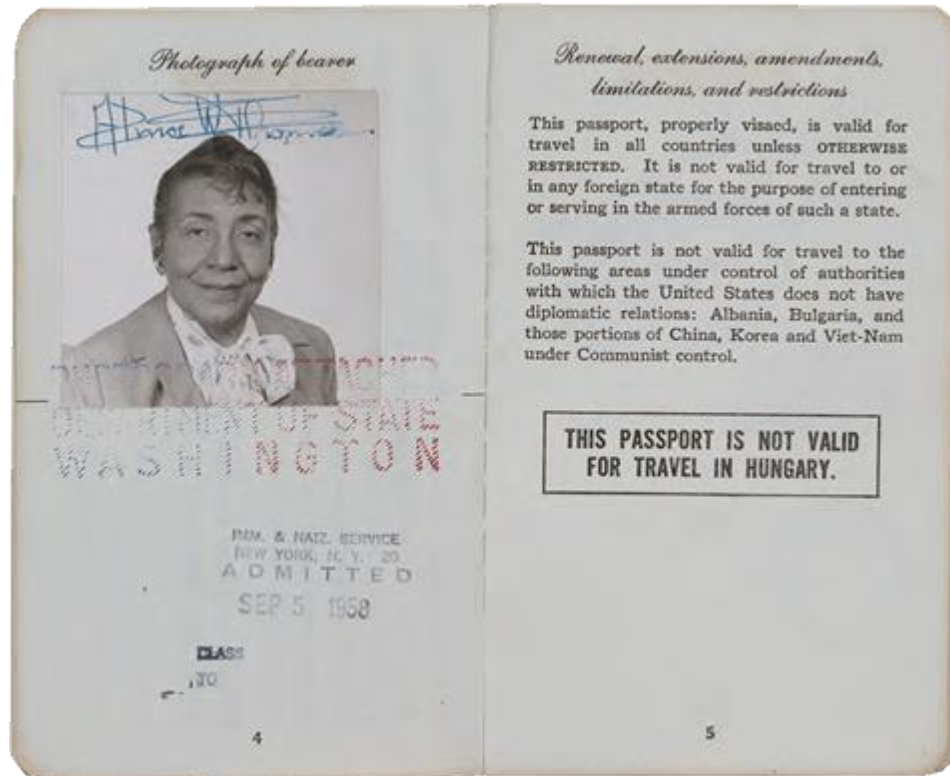


Fig. 2. Alma W. Thomas's passport, c. 1958. Alma Thomas Papers, c. 1894– 2001, box 1, folder 19, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Younger artists and curators advanced the career of the artist Thomas became in the 1960s and 1970s. Howard alumnus David Driskell (1931–2020), teaching at Fisk University, played a leading role by curating exhibitions of her work in the 1970s, which paved her way into the Whitney. The New York gallery director Harold Hart (1926–1997), Thomas's former junior high school student, neighbor, and protégé, helped her bridge the divide between Washington and New York City. Other art world leaders whom she did not know personally improved her fortunes by touting the excellence of her art, notably Edmund Barry Gaither (b. 1944) of the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Boston and the critic Hilton Kramer (1928–2012) in the *New York Times*, and even, in New York, the painter Benny Andrews (1930–2006), who

led the protests that prompted the desegregation of the exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art (cats. 126–128).

Thomas was able to recast herself as a painter in the 1960s thanks to the life she had already led as a teacher, reader, returning student, and pensioner. Teaching provided not only a constant immersion in the arts as practiced on the junior high school level but also a steady income that, as an unmarried woman, she expended entirely as she pleased. She didn't have to explain or share what she brought in or spent. She never married, shrugging off inquiries by saying marriage would just "create a lot of problems," plus, she was "liberated a long time ago."⁷ Thomas's own money paved her way in the world, allowing her to attend summer school at Columbia University Teachers College in the 1930s and financially sustain the Barnett Aden Gallery, where she first showed her work in a professional setting, in the 1940s. She had the money for her European trip in 1958.

The art world doesn't like talk about money, preferring the pretense that good art always makes its way by and of itself. But Thomas's money enabled her to make and show her art over the course of four decades. From the 1940s Thomas's money paid for the art books she bought from Franz Bader (1903–1994), whose gallery represented her from the late 1960s until her death. She had the money to furnish the home inherited from her parents, keep up its garden, and purchase the supplies—stretchers, canvas, paint, brushes—plus the costs of shipping and storing the paintings she made on a heroic modernist scale.

Money sustained Thomas's independence, but money alone was not enough. Age gave her perspective. Age protected her from the peer pressure weighing on younger fellow students. She set her mind on succeeding as a painter and did what she knew needed to be done: attend art

openings and galas, even as the only Black person, and pay attention to what artists beyond the confines of her city were making and saying in international art magazines. Age reinforced her firmness, her ability to stick to her own ways of making art, her steadfast determination to pursue art education even when she was the oldest one in class. And she probably always was the oldest one, starting at Howard University in her early thirties and graduating at thirty-four with the university's first fine art degree. She was forty-four when she received her master of arts from Teachers College, Columbia University. She was still teaching at Shaw Junior High School when she began taking classes at American University in her sixties. She painted steadily as art world politics changed around her.

Thomas was old enough to stay her own course in the 1960s, when Black consciousness reshaped the work of artists, like her esteemed Washington neighbor, associate, and sometime rival Jones. Younger artists, such as Jeff Donaldson (1932–2004), made the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and brought Black Consciousness to Howard in 1970, when he became chair of the art department. Donaldson said Thomas, with her embrace of “beauty,” didn't understand Blackness. While Black Consciousness art announced the importance of Black history, Thomas spoke of history as an impediment that the artist must be released from: “I have always enjoyed the progressive creativeness of the artist as he releases himself from the past.”⁸ In terms of the Blackness of the 1960s, for her this most certainly was true. In the era of Black Consciousness and the art of proud Black identity, she was definitely an old artist. She remained a turn-of-the-twentieth-century “Negro” rooted unwaveringly in the personal and visual aesthetics of her generation. Socially and politically, she emphatically did not adjust to the 1960s.

The formal freshness of Thomas's art stands in sharp contrast with her long-standing assumptions about race, which have not at all stood the tests of time. In the 1960s, Howard University moved away from its famously entrenched intraracial color lines and unrepentant colorism, but Thomas never shed her early twentieth-century preferences for light skin and straight hair. She always prized art for art's sake and continued to speak of the artist using the universal masculine he. When it came to the color bar against Black artists, she would not go there. She never acknowledged racial discrimination (or sexism, for that matter), as the art historian Judith Wilson noted in 1978 (fig. 3).

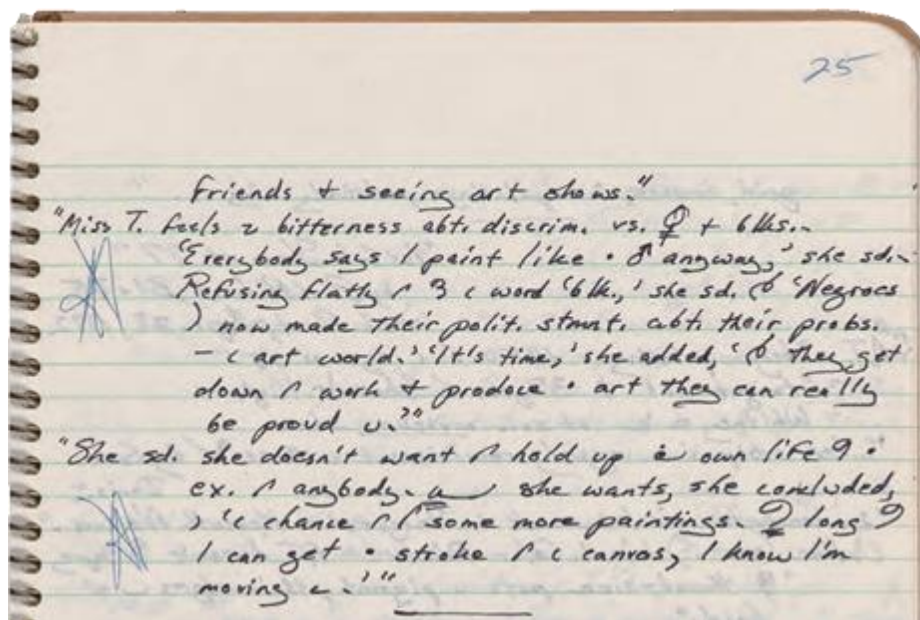


Fig. 3. Judith Wilson (b. 1952), "Alma Thomas: A One-Woman Art Movement," *Ms. Magazine*, Notebook, c. 1978, Judith Wilson Papers, 1966–2010, box 4, folder 2, page 32, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Thomas ignored Black Consciousness all the while benefiting from it, riding the wave of protest that younger artists stirred up. She never, ever denounced discrimination (at least discrimination beyond her hometown of Columbus, Georgia, at the turn of the twentieth century), and except for the 1963 March on Washington (cat. 105) never joined a protest. Fortunately for her art, others responded differently. Quiet protest arose from within the art

world, notably on the part of Driskell and Gaither, who showcased her work by curating exhibitions that introduced Black artists to the big white art world, a world unrepentantly white. Outside existing institutions, protest organizations like the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition led by Andrews in New York, negotiated Black artists into the Whitney. While protest shoved Thomas forward, her own aesthetic conservatism made her race and her sex acceptable in the early 1970s and kept her buoyed long enough for people to focus on the originality and strength of her painting.

Pushed into desegregating its collections and exhibitions, the Whitney selected such abstract artists as Alvin Loving (1935–2005), Melvin Edwards (b. 1937), Frederick Eversley (b. 1941), and Frank Bowling (b. 1934), whose work eschewed angry figurative images against American white supremacy that would rile up the board: better to show work that would fit comfortably within established aesthetic norms that trustees were accustomed to, at least in the early 1970s.⁹ With time, art world tastes continued to change. Between 1972 and now, two more art historical eras have intervened: the first welcoming Black Consciousness art into the mainstream and then deeming it the very definition of Black art, and the second discussing Black art as though it were sociology, its worth found in its analysis of American racism. The latter came as the art world continued to desegregate at the end of the century, realizing that not all Black artists made Black identity art and beginning to make room for more than one type of Black art and a range of Black artists, old as well as young. During the generation when identity art buried Black abstraction, Thomas's work was exhibited locally, as it had been before the watershed Whitney exhibition of 1972.

As Black abstraction is being widely rediscovered and appreciated, Thomas is now being hailed as a major artist, and her art is being discussed in the formal terms once reserved for the

work of white men. Yet her generational autobiography follows her, making her an artist still noteworthy for her age. Once again, as in a *New York Times* review from 2019, she is a young artist remarkable for being old: “Ms. Thomas, an art teacher, . . . took up painting full time after retiring in 1960—and was the first Black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum, when she was 80.”¹⁰ In the sixty years since Alma Thomas began painting full time, aesthetic tastes have changed, barriers in the art world have lowered, and yet one thing has not budged. Thomas, an old woman artist, is still remarkable for being old and for being singular because of being old. In an art world oriented around youth, an old artist’s success seems unusual.

Notes

- 1 Harold Rosenberg, “The Art World: Being Outside,” *New Yorker* (22 August 1977): 84.
- 2 Judith Wilson, “Teacher, Painter, Patron, Pioneer. Alma Thomas: A One-Woman Art Movement,” *Ms. Magazine* (February 1979): 59.
- 3 Benjamin Forgey, *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), Alma Thomas Papers, c. 1894–2001, box 2, folder 52, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Alma Thomas Papers).
- 4 Thomas R. Mellow, *New York Times*, 29 April 1972, Alma Thomas Papers, box 2, folder 52.
- 5 Alma Thomas to Harold Hart, and Hart to Judith Wilson, in 1978. Judith Wilson Papers, 1966–2010, box 4, folder 3, page 11, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Judith Wilson Papers).
- 6 Alma Thomas passport, Study Abroad Trip, 1958, Alma Thomas Papers, box 1, folder 19.
- 7 Harold Hart quoted in Judith Wilson Papers, box 4, folder 3, page 7.
- 8 Alma Thomas in *Alma Thomas* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1972), 3, in Judith Wilson Papers, box 4, folder 1.

- 9 See Jonathan P. Binstock, “Apolitical Art in a Political World: Alma Thomas in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s,” in *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*, ed. Sachi A. Yanari (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1998), 54–70.
- 10 Jillian Steinhauer, “Alma Thomas,” *New York Times*, 11 October 2019, C15.