

ALMA THOMAS

Thirteen Studies for Paintings

October 11–December 20, 2014

H E M P H I L L

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Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
9" x 35 3/4"  
AWT-106



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, *Study for Azaleas Sway with the Breeze*, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
16" x 50"  
AWT-109

Reference: *Azaleas Sway with the Breeze*, 1969, Collection unknown



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, *Study for Breeze Rustling through Fall Flowers*, 1968, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
16" x 49 1/2"  
AWT-112

Reference: *Breeze Rustling through Fall Flowers*, 1968, Phillips Collection,  
Washington, D.C.



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
11" x 50"  
AWT-110



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
12" x 17"  
AWT-105



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
watercolor on paper  
6" x 8 1/2" on 18" x 12" paper  
AWT-102



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
10 3/4" x 14 1/4"  
AWT-103



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
15" x 22"  
AWT-104



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1970  
acrylic and pencil on paper  
6" x 7 3/4"  
AWT-101  
Pictured left: front; right: back



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, *Study for Earth Sermon: Beauty, Love and Peace*, 1971, c. 1971  
acrylic on paper  
12" x 58"  
AWT-107

Reference: *Earth Sermon: Beauty, Love and Peace*, 1971, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
18 1/2" x 34"  
AWT-108



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, c. 1968  
acrylic on paper  
18" x 52"  
AWT-111



Alma Thomas  
Untitled, *Study for Resurrection*, 1966, c. 1966  
acrylic on paper  
24" x 24"  
AWT-113

Reference: *Resurrection*, 1966, Private collection

# ALMA THOMAS

*Thirteen Studies:  
Form, Expression, and Process*

by David C. Hart, Ph.D.



*Alma Thomas in her studio, ca. 1968 / Ida Jervis, photographer. Alma Thomas papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978) created abstract work exclusively in the last two decades of her life. She rejected the expectation that black identity must be expressed through representational art and embraced more varied forms of expression instead. *Thirteen Studies for Paintings* illuminates the tension between formal structure and the vitality of the painterly mark. The studies, which were owned by her former student, dealer, and friend, Harold R. Hart, expose Thomas' deftness with color and detail the roots of her abstractions. Possibly the first time these studies have been shown publicly, this exhibition provides insights into Thomas' working process.

Alma Thomas arrived on the art scene rather late in life, attaining recognition as a professional artist only after retiring in 1960 after 35 years of teaching art at Shaw Junior High School in Washington, D.C. She thrived in an art world that commonly excluded both African-Americans and women. She became an influence in Washington's modern art community and it also influenced her. Her professional life included several notable firsts. In 1924 she was the first graduate from Howard University's fine arts program. In 1943, Thomas served as vice president of the Barnett-Aden Gallery, the first D.C. gallery to break the color barrier and among the first to exhibit modern American art in Washington.<sup>1</sup> Thomas achieved national acclaim in 1972 with her solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the museum's first show devoted to an African-American woman.

Thomas was a close friend of Harold Hart's family; she taught Harold at Shaw and nurtured his interest in modern art. After Hart became the director of the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, where he would later mount two solo exhibitions of Thomas' work, he was instrumental in arranging her exhibition at the Whitney in 1972.<sup>2</sup> As executor and recipient of the bulk of Thomas' estate, Hart possessed the largest number of the artist's works of any private dealer, and he was an important source for the purchase of her work until his death in 1997.<sup>3</sup>

Several local artists influenced the broader shift from representational to abstract painting while Thomas was working to develop her personal style. By the mid-1960s, Thomas' exposure to Jacob Kainen and Joe Summerford, both advocates of color field painting and color theory at American University, and later to Washington Color School artists such as Gene Davis and Morris Louis, led her into abstraction and inspired compositional structures based on stripes and concentric circles. Unlike the works of Color School artists known for hard-edged forms and saturated canvas, Thomas' finished paintings and studies are characterized by irregular, expressive dabs of paint that remain on the canvas surface.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas made both watercolor and acrylic studies, sometimes as many as twenty, before painting a canvas.<sup>5</sup> Eight mosaic-like, vertical-striped works from the late 1960s to early

1970s compose the majority of this exhibition (catalog nos. AWT-105, -106, -107, -108, -109, -110, -111, and -112). The vertical striped works were advanced studies; this can be determined by the use of pressure sensitive tape (still present on AWT-108, -109 and -111) and the appearance of three studies (AWT-108, -110, and -111) in photographs of Alma Thomas in her studio taken in 1968 by Washington area photographer Ida Jervis, located in the Archives of American Art.<sup>6</sup> In one photograph Thomas affixed studies to the tops of unpainted stretched canvases, indicating how she used the studies in the process of painting. Furthermore, the high degree of similarity in terms of colors and types of painted forms (especially the width of rows of painted stripes or concentric circles) between four works in this exhibition and finished works in collections clearly indicate these studies are preparations for specific works: AWT-107 is a study for *Earth Sermon--Beauty, Love and Peace*, 1971 (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.); AWT-109 is a study for *Azaleas Sway with the Breeze*, 1969 (current collection unknown);<sup>7</sup> AWT-112 is a study for *Breeze Rustling through Fall Flowers*, 1968 (Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.) and AWT-113 is a study for *Resurrection*, 1966 (private collection).



Untitled, Study for Resurrection, c. 1966  
acrylic on paper, 24" x 24"

The color palette is similar and vertical dabs of paint shift color from top to bottom in both AWT-111 and *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils and Crocuses*, 1969 (National Museum of Women



Untitled, Study for Earth Sermon: Beauty, Love and Peace, 1971

in the Arts, Washington, D.C.), but the patterns of forms are not as unified as the four others identified above. This suggests AWT-111 may have been a study for another painting. Smaller works in the exhibition are likewise similar to other styles and series in which Thomas worked. *Untitled*, 1970 (AWT-101) and the drawing on its reverse echo paintings Thomas made in the Space series inspired by the landing of the Apollo 11 lunar module in 1969. A similar combination of warm and cool colors (navy blue, red, yellow, and lavender), a circular format, and vertical stripes of color are found in *Snoopy Sees a Sunrise*, 1970 (National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.) from this series.<sup>8</sup> AWT-104 was painted more loosely and it used different forms, but it shares its palette—cool, saturated blues and greens beside surging reds and yellow—with another Space painting, *Atmospheric Effects I*, 1970 (National Museum of American Art).

*Thirteen Studies for Paintings* enriches our knowledge of the development and execution of Alma Thomas' significant body of work. The exhibition of several studies for her large-scale works invites us to better know those larger works by seeing their lineage. These visually striking studies offer insight into the range of her formal experiments, and provide an occasion to appreciate the fineness and clarity of her process.

David C. Hart, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Art History at the Cleveland Institute of Art in Cleveland, Ohio and the nephew of Harold R. Hart.

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<sup>1</sup> Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, "From Academic Representation to Poetic Abstraction: The Art of Alma Woodsey Thomas" in Sachi Yanari, ed., *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*. Fort Wayne, IN: Fort Wayne Museum of Art, 1998: 22-26.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Hart, Interview by Michael Chisolm, 19 January 1989, transcript, Archives of American Art Oral History Program, Smithsonian Institution: 85-86.

<sup>3</sup> Alma Thomas Papers. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [1542:1255-8]. Hart, 1989: 140.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Kainen, "Alma W. Thomas: Order and Emotion" in Yanari, 1998: 32.

<sup>5</sup> Merry A. Foresta, *A Life in Art: Alma Thomas, 1891-1978*. Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981: 22.

<sup>6</sup> See *Alma Thomas in her Studio*, ca. 1968. Ida Jervis, photographer. Alma Thomas papers, Image gallery online [<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/alma-thomas-her-studio-5764>]. Accessed July 31, 2014. There appear to be seven studies for paintings in this photograph. Of those three are included in *Thirteen Studies for Paintings* (identified here by catalog number): AWT-108, appears above the artist's head, AWT-110 appears on either side of the artist's feet behind an unidentified study, and AWT-111 appears on the upper right of the photograph.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas papers, Box 5, File 16: "Exhibition Announcements and Catalogues, 1969."

<sup>8</sup> Yanari, 1998: 101.

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Untitled, *Study for Resurrection*,  
1966  
c. 1966  
acrylic on paper  
24" x 24" (in multiple parts)  
AWT-113



This exhibition is accompanied by  
the essay *Thirteen Studies: Form,  
Expression, and Process*, by David  
C. Hart, Ph.D., Associate Professor  
of Art History at the Cleveland  
Institute of Art.

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