

Starry Night and the Astronauts, 1972
Alma Thomas



Alma Thomas (American, 1891–1978)

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Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 53 in.

Gift of Mary P. Hines in memory of her mother, Frances W. Pick

“Now, I’m way up there on the moon,” exclaimed Alma Thomas in 1971. “I’m telling everyone—stay down there if you want to. I am long gone.” The 80-year-old painter had been fascinated with space exploration since the late 1960s when she started her vibrant series of **abstract** paintings in response to America’s manned **Apollo** missions to the moon (1969–1972).

The moon landing of Apollo 11 in 1969, which occurred during the height of the Vietnam War (c. 1961–1975), inspired Thomas’s art for years to come. She elaborated: “I was born at the end of the 19th century, horse and buggy days, and experienced the phenomenal changes of the 20th-century machine and space age. Today not only can our great scientists send astronauts to and from the moon to photograph its surface and bring back samples of rocks and other materials, but through the medium of color television all can actually see and experience the thrill of these adventures.” The Apollo 10 mission, which served as a test-run for the flight of Apollo 11, provided the world with the first live televised color images of the moon.

Space had preoccupied the Georgia-born artist well before the moon landing. Although she had never flown, Thomas began to paint in the mid-1960s as if she were in an airplane, capturing the shifting patterns of light and streaks of color on a group of plants and flowers in her garden. “You look down on things,” she explained. “You streak through the clouds so fast.... You see only streaks of color.”

Thomas’s painting *Starry Night and the Astronauts* contains no obvious references to an actual space expedition, relying instead upon abstract elements. To evoke the night sky, she filled the large canvas with vertical strokes of blue, ranging in tone from sky blue to indigo. In the upper right-hand corner, she added a small figure of red, orange, and yellow to suggest the Apollo 10 spaceship. The brilliant colors used to depict the spacecraft reflect the intense yellow, orange, and red of the sun. The rest of the picture is taken up by the shimmering sky—patches of varying shades of blue through which appear flakes of white.

Thomas explained the method behind her zestful blend of thickly painted patches of color: “The irregular strokes give an interesting free pattern to the canvas, creating white

intervals that punctuate the color stripes. There is rhythmic movement obtained, too.” Her technique recalls the groundbreaking **pointillism** of French painter Georges Seurat (1859–1891), who filled the surface of his paintings with a mass of small, regularized dots and brushstrokes of **complementary colors**, creating a radiant shimmer. Thomas used a **mosaic**-like effect, placing strokes of vivid color against a white ground. Visible traces of the unpainted canvas and flecks of white paint create the sensation of flickering light. The entire surface appears to glimmer, suggesting the beauty of outer space and the sense of wonder many felt at the time of the first space flights in the 1960s and 1970s.

The title *Starry Night and the Astronauts* may refer to Vincent Van Gogh’s (1853–1890) 1889 painting *Starry Night*, now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Like Thomas, Van Gogh’s inspiration for the work was sparked by space. “This morning,” he wrote to his brother Theo, “I saw the country from my window a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big.” Also like Thomas, the Dutch artist depended on color—long swirling brush-strokes of vivid hues—to animate the heavens. “Color,” Van Gogh declared, “[is] the sole architect of space.” Thomas said, “Color is life and light is the mother of color.”

About the Artist

Alma Woodsey Thomas, the eldest of four daughters, was born in 1891 to John Harris Thomas, a successful businessman, and Amelia Cantey, a sought-after dress designer. Thomas and her family lived in Columbus, Georgia, until 1907, when the family relocated to Washington, DC following the Atlanta race riots of 1906. They were able to take advantage of Washington's increased opportunities for Black cultural life and stronger educational system.

In high school, Thomas dreamed of becoming an architect and of building bridges; upon graduation she prepared for a career as a teacher at Miner Normal School, specializing in early childhood education. Later she received her MA in art education from Columbia University's Teachers College in New York City. In 1921, Thomas entered the department of home economics at Howard University with the desire to pursue a career in costume design. She transferred into the newly formed fine arts department where **realism** was at the core of instruction. In 1924, Thomas graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, the first Howard University student (and possibly the first African American woman) to hold that degree.

Thomas began teaching art at Shaw Junior High School in 1925. Washington DC schools were legally, **racially segregated** until 1953, and Shaw only served Black students when Thomas began teaching. It continued to primarily serve African American students through the end of segregation and Thomas's retirement from Shaw in 1960. Thomas's connections to other Black artists enabled her to play an active role in the Washington art scene and helped her to bring art opportunities to Black children and the community at large. She continued to pursue her art whenever and wherever she could. Her kitchen table often served as her studio.

Thomas's inspirations ranged from Asian art to **Abstract Expressionism's** explosions of color. She also became a major figure in the formation of Barnett-Aden Gallery, the first racially integrated private gallery in Washington. In the decade before her retirement from teaching, she took art classes at American University and subsequently developed pro-fessional relationships with members of the Washington Color School, including Gene Davis (1920–1985), Morris Louis (1912–1962), and Kenneth Noland (1924–2010), whose luminous, **color-field** paintings strongly influenced her. She began painting with acrylics and quickly developed her own signature style, methodically layering small bars of bright colors that she applied thickly onto light, spacious backgrounds.

Her breakthrough came in the mid-1960s, inspired by the view just beyond her window. Art historian James Porter had just requested a major retrospective of her work for Howard University. She wanted to paint “something different from anything I'd ever done.... ever seen.” As she explained: “The display of designs formed by the leaves of the holly tree that covers the bay window in my home greets me each morning. These compositions are framed by the window panes with the aid of the wind as an active designer.” To capture these shifting patterns of light and streaks of color on blossoms, Thomas applied patches of thick bright colors in stripes or concentric circles. Called her *Earth* series, these joyful paintings of the mid-1960s brought her local and national acclaim.

Her *Space* series reinforced her reputation. Upon its completion in 1972, Thomas became the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at a major art museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Later that year the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC presented the eighty-year-old artist with a major retrospective. Prominent art critic Harold Rosenberg (1906–1978) declared that her paintings “brought new life to abstract painting in the 1970s.” Forty years later, Thomas was the first Black woman to have her work displayed in the White House. One of her paintings was hung by the Obamas in the Old Family Dining Room.

With these successes, Thomas occasionally recalled her segregated Georgia childhood, when she said “the only way to go [to the library] as a Negro would be with a mop and bucket.”* She experienced other challenges later in life. Thomas embarked on her *Space* series while working with painful arthritis. “Do you have any idea what it's like to be caged in a seventy-eight-year-old body and to have the mind and energy of a twenty-five year old?” exclaimed the artist. “If I could only turn the clock back about sixty years, I'd show them.” Then she added, “I'll show them anyway.”

Explore More Artworks: Learn more about the work of Alma Thomas and thousands of other artists by searching the museum's collections page by name, title, or keyword at www.artic.edu/collection. Below are suggestions of artists and artistic movements that relate to Thomas. What connections and differences do you find?

Washington Color School: Kenneth Noland; Post Impressionism: Vincent Van Gogh; Pointillism: George Seurat; Barnett-Aden Gallery artists: Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Howard Bearden

*Some older quotes by artists use language that is no longer considered acceptable today but was standard for the time, such as Thomas's use of the word Negro here.

Glossary

Abstract Expressionism (n)

A movement characterized by monumental canvases and bold new visual vocabularies and techniques that emerged in New York City after World War II to become the first American style to have worldwide impact. Inspired by **Surrealism**, with its emphasis on the subconscious, Abstract Expressionists emphasized spontaneous personal expression, replacing representation with drips of paint, vibrant areas of color, or dynamic brushstrokes to express innermost feelings.

Apollo programs (n)

U.S. lunar exploratory program that resulted in NASA's Apollo mission of July 1969, which landed Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon. Apollo derives its name from the Greek god who was identified with the sun.

color-field painting (n)

The often monumental works of certain **Abstract Expressionist** artists and their successors who were interested in the expressive qualities of vast areas of color. Its principal artists, such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, lived in Washington, DC, and the name Washington Color School was sometimes applied to their paintings.

complementary colors (n)

Colors that have the maximum contrast to one another and are opposite each other on the color wheel. The complement of one primary color (red, blue, yellow) is formed by mixing the remaining two primary colors (the complement color of red is green, created from mixing blue and yellow).

mosaic (n)

Picture or decorative design made by setting small colored pieces, such as tile, in mortar or cement.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) (n)

Established by President Eisenhower in 1958, this organization was designed to implement space policy and direct US efforts toward scientific exploration and commercial uses of space.

pointillism (n)

Use of small brushstrokes and dots of varied colors to form a single hue when blended in the viewers' eyes.

racial segregation (n)

The practice of restricting people to certain areas or institutions (such as neighborhoods, schools, churches) or facilities (restrooms, restaurants, drinking fountains) on the basis of race. Racial segregation was legal across many areas in the United States, primarily in the South starting in the late 19th century. Washington DC was a key civil rights battleground. The Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional there in 1953, then struck down segregation across American public schools in 1954. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed the remaining forms of legal segregation, though it has persisted in a variety of contexts including schools and housing.

Realism (n)

General term describing the intent to depict the appearance of the world with accuracy and objectivity. Also refers to a movement in 19th-century France that concentrated on the unidealized representations of "real and existing things," in the words of Realism's leader Gustave Courbet (1819–1877).

retrospective (n)

Comprehensive exhibition of an artist's work created over a period of years.

Space Race (n)

Competition following World War II between the United States and Soviet Union (Russia) to develop space vehicles.

Surrealism (n)

Group of writers and artists led by French poet André Breton (1896–1966) in Paris in 1924 who embraced the act of spontaneous creation. To unleash their creativity some Surrealists used as their model Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud's (1856–1839) theory of psychoanalysis, probing the world of dreams, fantasies, and the subconscious in their art. Many Surrealists produced fantastic, meticulously rendered forms, while others combined ordinary objects in strange and startling ways.

Classroom Applications

Paper Mosaic

In *Starry Night and the Astronauts*, Thomas depicts in her mosaic-like style the sunlit sky and **Apollo 10** spacecraft as seen from the ground. Have students imagine the view of the earth from the Apollo 10 spacecraft and create their own mosaics using a technique similar to Thomas's. Discuss with younger students how Thomas used color and pattern to depict the vastness of space and the intense, fiery power of a **rocket** launch. Ask students to consider or imagine how we observe and perceive similar events made possible through technology, such as the view from an airplane or train. Have students create such a scene using colored construction paper torn into irregular shapes and sizes to mimic the artist's brushstrokes.

Create a Timeline

A great number of changes and scientific advances occurred during Alma Thomas's lifetime that affected both our understanding of the universe and the ways in which we perceive and experience it. Have students make a list, or timeline, of some of the dramatic changes that Thomas might have witnessed during her life from 1891 to 1978. Consider advances in science and technology and the rights of women and African Americans. Students today still live in a time of tremendous discovery and change. Create a class timeline of significant scientific and technological events that have occurred during your students' lifetimes, illustrated with images either drawn or clipped from books (photo-copied), magazines, or internet printouts. Discuss how these events have changed our understanding of outer space and the world around us. Older students may then conduct independent research on the implications and consequences of a particular event or on the career of a particular scientist.

Segregation in the Nation's Capital

Though civil rights was not a focus of Thomas's work, she experienced the inequities of segregation in Georgia and in her adoptive home of Washington DC where institutions and businesses such as schools, theaters and restaurants were racially segregated by law until 1953. Gordon Parks was the only Black photographer to work for the Farm Security Administration documenting America during the Great Depression. He focused on documenting segregation in Washington DC and did so in the time that Thomas lived there. Ask students to research Parks and his 1942 work, *Washington D.C., government charwoman*. What do you think Parks hoped to communicate? Why? What else did you learn? What do you wonder?

Great Space Race

Ask older students to consider Alma Thomas's interpretation of the **Apollo** launches within the competitive context of the international **Space Race**. Have students research primary sources to analyze the impact of scientific knowledge and technological capabilities on the American and Soviet reactions to and interpretations of the launches. What did the launches mean to Americans? The Russians? How does Thomas's painting reinforce or contradict these various interpretations? How does her response to the thrill of the Apollo launches speak to the complexity of the space race? Compare Alma Thomas's perception of space and the **Apollo** launches to other accounts, including photographs, written texts, and movies. Analyze and evaluate each interpretation. Which aspects of the launches and outer space are emphasized? How does the artist/writer communicate this to us?

Create a Scale Model of the Earth, Moon, and Sun

Discuss with students the idea of ratios and scales. Have students individually develop a working scale for the distances and diameters of the earth and moon (for example: 1 cm to 10,000 km). As a class, create a scale model of the earth and moon.

Distance between earth and the moon: 384,000 km
Diameter of earth: 12, 756 km
Diameter of the moon: 3,476

If you have space, consider adding the sun to the model. Discuss how you would have to adjust the scale to create the model (for example: 1mm to 10,000 km).

Distance between earth and the sun: 150,000,000 km
Diameter of the sun: 1,392,000 km

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