

## MEDIA RELEASE

The Studio Museum in Harlem  
144 West 125th Street  
New York, NY 10027  
studiomuseum.org/press

## CONTACT

Elizabeth Gwinn  
The Studio Museum in Harlem  
egwinn@studiomuseum.org  
646.214.2142

Kate Lydecker  
Polskin Arts and Communications Counselors  
kate.lydecker@finnpartners.com  
212.715.1602

**STUDIO  
MUSEUM  
HARLEM**

## **THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM TO PRESENT MAJOR EXHIBITION OF THE ART OF ALMA THOMAS, JULY 14 – OCTOBER 30, 2016**



Alma Thomas, *Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish*, 1976.  
Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

**NEW YORK, NY, APRIL 22, 2016**—A trailblazer in both her art and her career, the distinguished African-American abstract painter Alma Thomas (1891–1978) will be the subject of a major exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem, on view from July 14 to October 30, 2016. Featuring more than fifty paintings and works on paper spanning all phases of the artist’s evolving practice, *Alma Thomas* will offer the first comprehensive overview in almost two decades of this singular artist’s achievement.

Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, said, “Alma Thomas’s distinctive fusions of vibrant color, dense paint and energetic pattern remain as influential with artists, and as resonant with audiences, as they were in her remarkable lifetime. For many years a teacher by profession, she continues to teach us through her example about the possibilities of art and of African-American life. We are extraordinarily proud that the Studio Museum can now introduce a new generation of viewers to her work.”

*Alma Thomas* is organized by Lauren Haynes, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection, at The Studio Museum in Harlem, and Ian Berry, Dayton Director of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, where the exhibition debuted in February 2016.

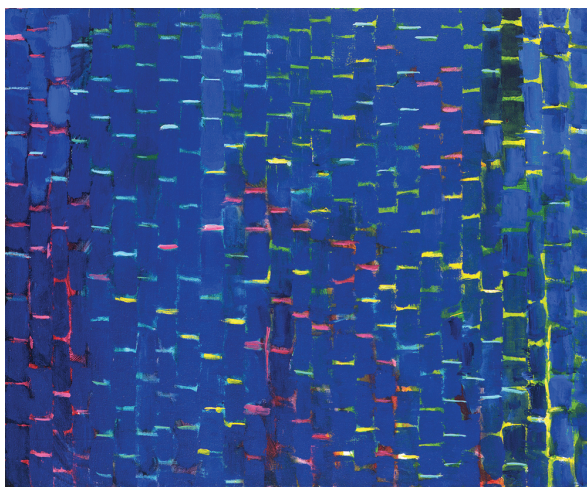
The first graduate in fine arts from Howard University, the first African-American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the first African-American woman to

be represented in the White House art collection, Alma Thomas was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1891. In 1907, she moved with her family to Washington, DC to escape growing racial tensions in Georgia and to pursue better educational opportunities. She graduated from Howard University in 1924 and in 1934 received an M.A. in arts education from Columbia University. Through most of her adult life, when she earned a living as an art teacher at Washington's Shaw Junior High School, she was able to pursue her art only intermittently. But she participated in the late 1940s in Lois Mailou Jones's salons for artists, was instrumental in forming the Barnett-Aden Gallery (at the time one of the country's few private galleries presenting the works of African-American artists), took studio classes at American University (from which she received an MFA in 1960) and circulated with noted Color Field painters including Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. After retiring from Shaw Junior High School in 1960, she at last began to paint full time, at age sixty-nine.



Alma Thomas, *March on Washington*, 1964. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

*Alma Thomas* charts the full course of the artist's career from the late 1950s to her death in 1978. The exhibition's first section, "Move to Abstraction," traces her evolution from a figurative style—as seen in works such as *Sketch for March on Washington* (c. 1964) to a full commitment to color and pattern. The breakthrough came in the mid-1960s, when she sought to paint something entirely different for a proposed retrospective of her work at Howard University and found inspiration in the leaves of a holly tree outside her window. The second section of the exhibition, "Earth," focuses on the resulting "Earth" series of the late 1960s. In works such as *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers* (1968) Thomas used her daily experiences of the hues, patterns, and movements of the natural world within the urban environment as her source material, winning the attention of local and national audiences.



Alma Thomas, *Stars and Their Display*, 1972. Private Collection, Highland Park, IL; Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Alma Thomas lived through both the first flight and man's first steps on the moon. Many of her paintings are speculations of what flowers, gardens, or the earth as a whole would look like from an airplane or spaceship. The exhibition's third section, "Space," presents an extraordinary series of paintings, such as *Starry Night and the Astronauts* (1972), inspired by NASA's Apollo missions to the moon. The final section, "Late Work," includes astonishingly free, almost calligraphic abstractions such as *Hydrangeas Spring Song* (1976). In these late works, tensions emerge between the bright colors, her brushstrokes, and the negative spaces, creating a continual but controlled sense of movement, an almost musical rhythm.

*Alma Thomas* is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue by Ian Berry and Lauren Haynes. Filled with vibrant illustrations, this stunning volume traces Thomas's development as an artist: her

transition from figuration to abstraction, her fascination with the natural world and space exploration, and the mesmerizing mosaic-like paintings she completed before her death. New writings by Bridget R. Cooks, Thelma Golden, Nikki A. Greene and Lauren Haynes focus on different themes in Thomas's work, and the book includes specially commissioned responses by leading artists Leslie Hewitt, Jennie C. Jones, Leslie Wayne, and Saya Woolfalk. Together these bring Thomas's work to a new generation of readers. As the work of many African-American abstractionists is only recently coming into the spotlight, this important book on Alma Thomas profiles a truly pioneering figure.

### **About The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College**

The Tang Teaching Museum is a pioneer of interdisciplinary exploration and learning. A cultural anchor of New York's Capital Region, the institution's approach has become a model for university art museums across the country—with exhibition programs and series that bring together the visual and performing arts with fields of study as disparate as history, astronomy, and physics. The Tang has one of the most rigorous faculty-engagement initiatives in the nation, the Mellon Seminar, and robust publication and touring exhibition initiatives that extend the institution's reach far beyond its walls. The Tang Teaching Museum's building, designed by architect Antoine Predock, serves as a visual metaphor for the convergence of ideas and exchange the institution catalyzes. Admission to the museum is free (donation suggested). Hours are Tuesday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m., with extended hours until 9 p.m. on Thursdays during the academic year and until 7 p.m. Fridays during July and August. For additional information, please visit [tang.skidmore.edu](http://tang.skidmore.edu).

### **About The Studio Museum in Harlem**

Founded in 1968 by a diverse group of artists, community activists and philanthropists, The Studio Museum in Harlem is internationally known for its catalytic role in promoting the work of outstanding artists of African descent. Now approaching its 50th anniversary, the Studio Museum is preparing to construct a new home at its current location on Manhattan's West 125th Street, designed by internationally renowned architect David Adjaye as the first building created expressly for the institution's program. The new building will enable the Studio Museum to better serve a growing and diverse audience, provide additional educational opportunities for people of all ages, expand its program of world-renowned exhibitions, effectively display its singular collection and strengthen its trailblazing *Artist-in-Residence* program.

The *Artist-in-Residence* program was one of the institution's founding initiatives and is the reason why "Studio" is in the name. The program has supported more than one hundred emerging artists of African or Latino descent, many of whom who have gone on to highly regarded careers. Alumni include Chakaia Booker, David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, Wangechi Mutu, Mickalene Thomas and Kehinde Wiley.

The collection includes over two thousand paintings, sculptures, works on paper, prints, photographs, mixed-media works and installations dating from the nineteenth century to the present. Artists represented include Romare Bearden, Robert Colescott, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Chris Ofili, Betye Saar, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker and Hale Woodruff, as well as many former artists in residence. The Studio Museum is the custodian of an extensive archive of the work of photographer

James VanDerZee, the renowned chronicler of the Harlem community from 1906 to 1983.

The Studio Museum's exhibitions expand the personal, public and academic understanding of modern and contemporary work by artists of African descent. A wide variety of on- and off-site programs brings art alive for audiences of all ages—from toddlers to seniors—while serving as a bridge between artists of African descent and a broad and diverse public. A leader in scholarship about artists of African descent, the Studio Museum publishes Studio magazine twice a year and creates award-winning books, exhibition catalogues and brochures.

*Exhibitions at The Studio Museum in Harlem are made possible thanks to support from the following government agencies: The New York City Council; The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; and New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency. Additional support is generously provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.*

## **Hours and Admission**

The Studio Museum is open Thursday and Friday, noon–9pm; Saturday, 10am–6pm; and Sunday, noon–6pm. The museum is closed to the public but available for school and group tours on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Museum admission is by suggested donation: \$7 for adults, \$3 for students (with valid ID) and seniors. Free for children 12 and under. Sundays are free at the Studio Museum, thanks to generous support from Target. For more information visit [studiomuseum.org](http://studiomuseum.org).

###