



Alma Thomas, American, 1891–1978

Morning in the Bowl of Night, 1973

Acrylic on canvas

Purchased with the Hillyer-Mather-Tryon Fund; the Madeleine H. Russell, class of 1937 Fund; the Kathleen Compton Sherrerd, class of 1954, Acquisition Fund for American Art; and the Dorothy C. Miller, class of 1925, Fund Image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART ACQUIRES PAINTING BY AMERICAN ARTIST ALMA THOMAS (1891–1978)

May 25, 2018, Northampton, MA — The Smith College Museum of Art has acquired *Morning in the Bowl of Night*, 1973, a painting by the historically significant American artist and teacher Alma Thomas (1891–1978), who lived and worked mainly in Washington, D.C. and was active in the art movement known as the Washington Color School.

Using bright, primary colors and geometric royal blue shapes that cover the surface of the painting from edge to edge, *Morning in the Bowl of Night* at once embodies and departs from what in the 1960s became Thomas’s characteristic, bold approach to abstraction. The title of the painting is taken from the first verse of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* by the Persian poet, mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam (1048–1131) (as translated by Edward FitzGerald; published 1859).

“Alma Thomas’s work stands as an incredible contribution to the dialogue about abstraction in late 20th-century American painting, and she also stands as a figure of great importance given the fullness of her life in art and in education,” commented Thelma Golden (Smith class of 1987), director and chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Thomas’s career and body of work are emblematic of how artists embraced abstraction during the political and social transformations of the mid-20th century, including the civil rights and feminist movements in the U.S. and anti-colonial and independence movements around the world. Abstraction provided these artists with a broadly resonant visual language, offering a way to be taken seriously as artists regardless of gender, ethnicity or geography — groupings that traditionally marginalized them within modern art’s predominantly white, male and Euro-American inner circle.

Sharing her perspective on the new SCMA acquisition, Emma Chubb, Charlotte Feng Ford ’83 Curator of Contemporary Art at SCMA, stated: “I’m thrilled to see this work of art join Smith’s permanent collection. The history of modernism — like the history of the United States — is multiple, cosmopolitan and diverse, even though that’s not historically how the story has been told. Alma Thomas’s life and work underscore how absolutely essential women, African Americans, and African American women were to the development and elaboration of modernism during the 20th century. Not only will this acquisition enable students, faculty and visitors to discover Thomas’s innovative approach to abstraction firsthand, but the painting’s reference to the poetry of Omar Khayyam will also, I hope, catalyze new research on a less-studied aspect of Thomas’s work: her engagement with Islamic and Byzantine art.”

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born on September 22, 1891, in Columbus, Georgia, Thomas moved with her parents and three younger sisters to Washington, D.C. in 1907. In 1924, Thomas was the first student to receive a degree in fine arts from Howard University. She received her Master's in Education from Columbia University in 1934 and taught art full-time at Shaw Junior High School, in Washington, D.C., for 35 years. She studied painting at American University from 1950 to 1960.

Thomas had her first solo exhibition in 1959, at the age of 68. Her subsequent move into the abstract paintings that became her signature style was catalyzed by an invitation from the artist and historian James A. Porter of Howard University. Porter asked Thomas to produce new work for a 1966 solo exhibition. Reflecting on this, Thomas said, "I thought about the art critic who was very hard on the painters, and I said I have to do something unusual, something that has not been done."

In 1972, Thomas was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Other solo shows during her lifetime include those held at the Carl Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk University (in 1971) and the Corcoran Gallery of Art (in 1972). Thomas continued to paint until her death in 1978. In 1981, the National Museum of American Art (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) organized a retrospective, *A Life in Art: Alma Thomas, 1891–1978*. In 2016, the exhibition *Alma Thomas* opened at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Morning in the Bowl of Night by Alma Thomas will go on view at SCMA in late July 2018. For more information, and announcement of the specific date, see the museum's website, smith.edu/artmuseum.



Smith College Museum of Art is widely recognized as one of the leading academic museums in the nation, contributing meaningfully to Smith College's mission to educate women of promise for lives of distinction and purpose. Housed in state-of-the-art museum facilities within the Brown Fine Arts Center, SCMA's collection, numbering more than 26,000 artworks, spans from antiquity to the present and supports learning across the college's curriculum. Additionally, SCMA is a valued resource for the broader community, attracting an average of 36,000 visitors each year, including more than 3,000 students from regional schools. SCMA mounts a dynamic schedule of changing exhibitions and a wide variety of public programs. These range from lectures and gallery talks to family-friendly community days and a free monthly program for all ages from 4 to 8 p.m. on Second Fridays that features hands-on art-making and guided gallery conversations.

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