

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ARTIST

Color Set Free

Alma Thomas and a Career That Began at Sixty-Eight

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA VI-VII • Washington, D.C.

Who She Is

Alma Woodsey Thomas was born September 22, 1891, in Columbus, Georgia, and moved with her family to Washington, D.C. around 1907, in part to escape the escalating racial violence of the Jim Crow South. In 1924 she became the first graduate of Howard University's new fine arts department, then spent the next thirty-five years as a junior high school art teacher in the D.C. public schools — a full career in education that came before, not alongside, the painting career for which she is remembered.

A Late and Sudden Flowering

Thomas retired from teaching in 1960 and, freed to paint full time, developed in her sixties the mature abstract style that made her name: dense, rhythmic mosaics of short, dabbed brushstrokes in vivid color, often organized in concentric or striped patterns inspired by the play of light through the leaves of a holly tree outside her Washington window. In 1972, at eighty, she became the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art — a milestone that arrived not as a young artist's debut but as the culmination of a life spent almost entirely outside the gallery system.

"Through color I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man." — Alma Thomas

Her work later reached an even wider public: two of her paintings, *Resurrection* and *Sky Light*, were selected for the White House permanent collection, and in 2015 Michelle Obama chose *Resurrection* to hang in the family dining room — the first work by an African American woman in the White House's permanent collection. Thomas died in Washington, D.C. on February 24, 1978, at eighty-six.

NC Local Lens

No documented North Carolina connection was found for Alma Thomas in any source consulted for this research pass. Her life centered on Columbus, Georgia, and Washington, D.C., where she taught and later painted for the whole of her career. This entry claims no NC or Cumberland County tie.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Family's move to D.C.: commonly linked to escaping racial violence in Georgia in general terms; a specific triggering incident was not confirmed in this pass.

No NC connection: this entry's absence of an NC tie reflects the sources checked in this research pass, not an exhaustive archival search — flag as a gap for future sessions rather than a certainty.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Alma Thomas," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/alma-thomas-4699>.
2. Ian Berry and Lauren Haynes, eds., *Alma Thomas* (New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2016).
3. "Alma Thomas," The Phillips Collection, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/alma-thomas>.
4. "Resurrection," The White House Historical Association, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/>.
5. "Alma Thomas," National Museum of Women in the Arts, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://nmwa.org/art/artists/alma-thomas/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.