

SCMA

SMITH COLLEGE
MUSEUM OF ART

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COMPOSING COLOR
PAINTINGS
BY ALMA
THOMAS
FROM THE SMITHSONIAN
AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Smith College Museum of Art announces Alma Thomas exhibition from the Smithsonian American Art Museum

July 24, 2026, through January 10, 2027

Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas from the Smithsonian American Art Museum brings the Smithsonian American Art Museum's unparalleled collection to SCMA, showcasing the groundbreaking abstract painter's distinctive style through works exploring themes of Space, Earth, and Music.

Alma Thomas, *The Eclipse*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1978.40.3

NORTHAMPTON, MA — The Smith College Museum of Art (SCMA) will present *Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas from the Smithsonian American Art Museum*, a major traveling exhibition from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, from July 24, 2026, through January 10, 2027. This landmark exhibition offers an intimate view of the groundbreaking abstract painter's most prolific period, from 1959 to 1978, and creates a rare opportunity to experience SCMA's own painting by Thomas in dialogue with major works from the Smithsonian's world-leading collection.

In a compelling convergence of institutional collecting and scholarship, Thomas's *Morning in the Bowl of Night* (1973)—acquired by SCMA in 2018—will be presented alongside the Smithsonian's extensive holdings, while Thomas's *Untitled*, 1966, watercolor on paper, will be on loan from Sylvia and Byron Lewis Sr., offering visitors a rare opportunity to see Thomas's work in dialogue across collections.

"Alma Thomas's innovative spirit and transformative vision feel especially resonant today. We are thrilled to bring *Composing Color* to SCMA and to showcase our own Thomas holdings within this broader context, offering our community an immersive encounter with an artist who continuously pushed boundaries and embraced the future. We're proud that, much like at SAAM, coming to SCMA to see Thomas's work is free for all visitors," said Jessica Nicoll, Director and Louise Ines Doyle '34 Chief Curator.

The exhibition draws on the Smithsonian American Art Museum's unparalleled collection of Thomas's work—the largest public collection in the world. The Smithsonian American Art Museum began acquiring Thomas's art during her lifetime in 1970, ultimately acquiring more than a dozen works while she was alive and thirteen more works bequeathed to the museum after her death in 1978.

"Alma Thomas is one of the most significant artists of the 20th century, and we are fortunate at Smith to play a role in stewarding her work. In bringing this exhibition to Smith, we hope that Thomas' art and her legacy as a painter, public school educator, and community leader will invite our audiences to find inspiration in her paintings and in the many phenomena, places, and ideas that, in turn, inspired her," said Emma Chubb, Charlotte Feng Ford '83, Curator of Contemporary Art.

In the mid-1960s, Alma Thomas (1891–1978) created a painting style distinctly her own, characterized by the dazzling interplay of pattern and vibrant color. The Washington, D.C.-based artist and teacher was active in the Washington Color School, and her work

challenged conventions while embracing the future. As Thomas herself stated, "Art could be anything. It could be behavior—as long as it's beautiful."

Composing Color is organized around Thomas's favored themes of space, earth, and music, inviting viewers to see the world through her eyes. Her abiding source of inspiration was nature, whether seen through her kitchen window or from outer space. In her work, color is symbolic and multisensory, evoking sound, motion, temperature, and even scent. She often assigned titles that connected natural phenomena, such as flowers or sunsets, to song.

Consciously oriented toward the future, Thomas embraced the technological and social changes of the twentieth century. Her artistic evolution from academic painting to abstraction reflected this forward-facing attitude—her belief in the need for "a new art representing a new era." New research shows how Thomas continued to innovate until the end of her life, adapting her methods to physical challenges from arthritis while maintaining her mastery of color.

The exhibition is organized by Melissa Ho, curator of twentieth-century art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, with support from Maria Eipert, curatorial assistant. At SCMA, the exhibition is organized by Emma Chubb, Charlotte Feng Ford '83 Curator of Contemporary Art.

Credit

Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas from the Smithsonian American Art Museum is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support has been provided by the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Chris G. Harris, the Wolf Kahn Foundation, and Susan Talley.

The exhibition is made possible at SCMA by the support of the Suzannah J. Fabing Programs Fund for the Smith College Museum of Art; the Charlotte Feng Ford, class of 1983, Research and Travel Fund for Contemporary Art; the Ann Weinbaum Solomon, class of 1959, Fund; and the Art Bridges Foundation's Access for All program.



ACCESS
FOR ALL



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About Alma Thomas

Alma Thomas was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1891 and moved to Washington, D.C., in 1907. She lived in her family's rowhouse near Logan Circle for most of her adult life, using its first floor as a full-time painting studio upon her retirement from teaching. Thomas was a vital figure in the DC art scene for decades. In 1924, she became the first student to earn a degree in fine art from Howard University and, in the 1940s, was vice-president of the Barnett-Aden Gallery, a key venue for showcasing modern art in Washington and one of the nation's first racially integrated and Black-owned galleries. In 1972, at age eighty, Thomas became the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/alma-thomas

About the Smith College Museum of Art

As a teaching museum at Smith College, SCMA is dedicated to connecting people to art, ideas and each other by engaging people with firsthand experiences of art, artists and museum practice; collecting, researching, presenting and preserving an expansive collection of art in the service of learning, teaching, and critical dialogue; and by fostering an inclusive and accessible environment that welcomes diverse perspectives and inspires imagination.

Except for select holidays, SCMA and the SCMA Shop are open to the public year-round, Tuesday through Sunday, 11 a.m.–4 p.m. The museum is located at 20 Elm Street at Bedford Terrace, Northampton, MA.

In SCMA's galleries and classrooms, visitors experience a world-class collection of art spanning ancient times to the present and encompassing the arts of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. The Cunningham Center for the Study of Prints, Drawings and Photographs houses and hosts the study of a comprehensive collection of works on paper.

In November 2023, SCMA was awarded support from the Art Bridges Foundation through its "Access for All" grant initiative. In addition to a generous gift from Smith College alumnae Jan Fullgraf Golann '71 and Jane Timken '64, which enabled the

museum to eliminate all admission fees, this funding will expand access to art through a wide range of initiatives.

An accredited member of the American Alliance of Museums and a founding member of Museums10, a regional cultural collaboration, SCMA is also a member of the College Art Association and the New England Museum Association.

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Selected high-resolution images for publicity only are available through direct request from the museum.