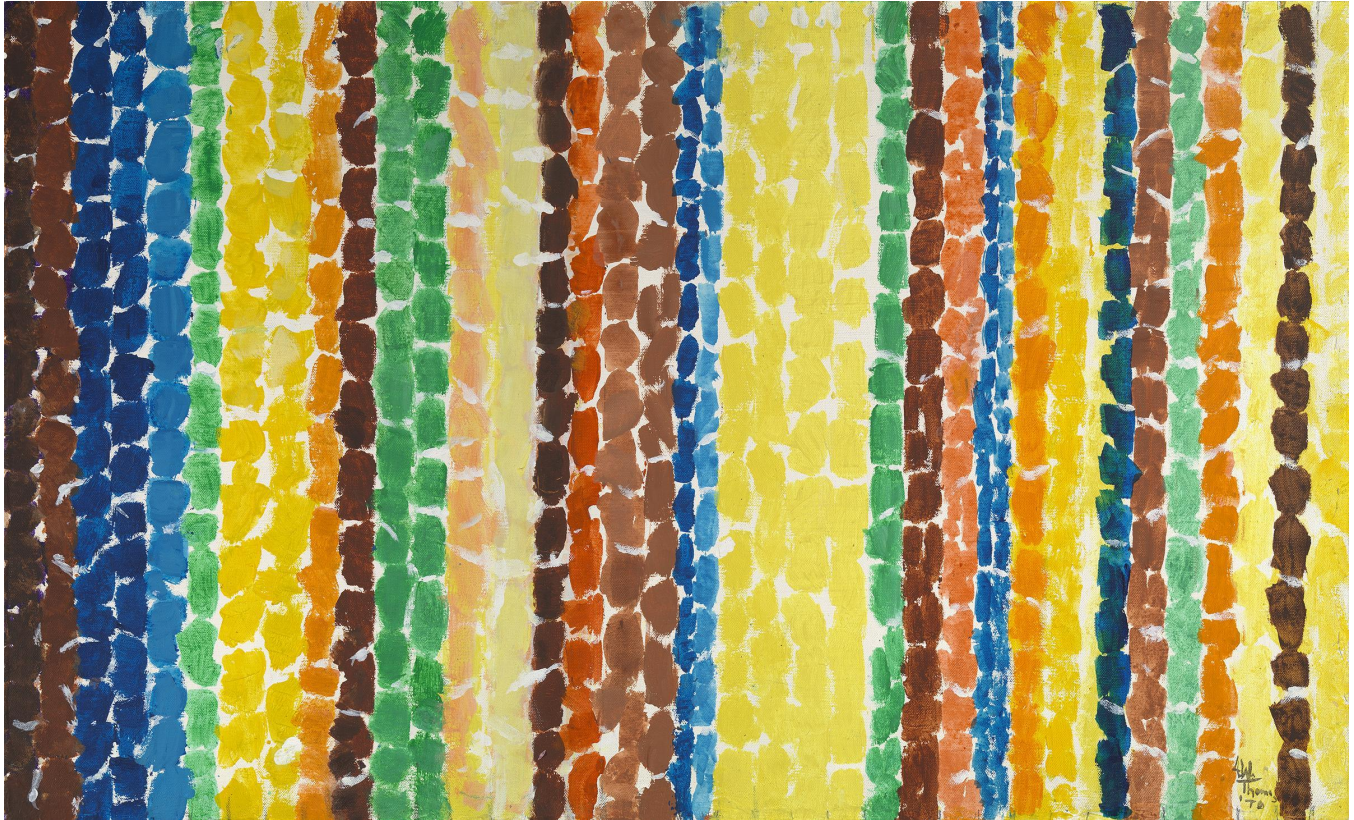


**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Acquires Work by Abstract Painter Alma Thomas**

Painting Complements Works by African American and Women Artists and Artists of the Washington Color School



*Forsythia and Pussy Willows Begin Spring*, 1970, Alma Thomas (American, 1891–1978) acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

**Richmond, Virginia** — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) recently acquired *Forsythia and Pussy Willows Begin Spring* (1970), a painting by African American artist Alma Thomas (1891–1978).

“We are delighted that *Forsythia and Pussy Willows Begin Spring* has joined VMFA’s Modern and Contemporary art holdings,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s Director and CEO. “Alma Thomas was a major contributor to 20th-century art. Her nature-based paintings significantly influenced artists who came after her, and her vibrantly colored canvases resonate with viewers today.”

Born in Columbus, Georgia, during the Jim Crow Era, Alma Woodsey Thomas and her family moved to Washington D.C., where more educational and economic opportunities were available for African Americans. By 1921, Thomas enrolled in art instruction courses at Howard University and, by 1924, became the program’s first graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree in fine arts. After receiving her Master of Arts degree in education from Columbia

University in the 1930s, Thomas taught at Shaw Junior High School in Washington D.C. for 35 years before retiring in 1960 and devoting herself to painting full time.

Thomas had earlier eschewed abstract art in favor of figurative and still life painting. By the 1960s however, when studying at American University in Washington D.C., she admired and responded to the abstract paintings created by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and other contemporaries in the Washington Color School. This loosely affiliated group of painters applied luminous colorful hues by staining and soaking their raw canvases with thinned oil or acrylic paint.

In 1972, Thomas became the first African American woman artist to have a solo exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. She was also the first African American woman artist to have her work acquired and displayed in the White House after former First Lady Michelle Obama selected two paintings, *Watusi (Hard Edge)* and *Sky Light*, installed on loan to the White House in 2009, before the landmark acquisition in 2015 of Thomas's 1966 painting *Resurrection*. Thomas's works are featured in many museum collections including the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art. Her work is the subject of the current nationally touring retrospective entitled *Alma Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful*.

"Acquiring a painting by Alma Thomas has long been a priority for the museum. We patiently waited for an iconic work and are delighted to bring this vibrant visual echo of Thomas' garden into our collection," said Valerie Cassel Oliver, VMFA's Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. "*Forsythia and Pussy Willows Begin Spring* will complement VMFA's existing holdings of work by African American and women artists, artists of the Washington Color School, as well as the canon's celebrated masters of abstraction Norman Lewis, Henri Matisse and Wassily Kandinsky, whom Thomas noted as significant influences."

The painting, from Thomas's *Earth* series, is a classic example of the unique painting style she developed after encountering the work of the Washington Color School. Her technique of placing precise dabs of vibrant color in a succession of vertical, hyphenated stripes conveys the beauty of a colorful flower garden. The palette of warm browns, fresh greens, bright blues and sunny yellows evokes the blooming flowers, petals, grass, tree trunks and clear skies the artist could see from her bay window, which overlooked the garden at her home at 1530 Fifteenth Street in Washington D.C.

"Alma Thomas applied her radiant colors in a series of vertical, staccato brushstrokes in *Forsythia and Pussy Willows Begin Spring* to capture, in abstract terms, the beauty and rhythms of the natural world, including the flowers in her garden," said Dr. Michael Taylor, VMFA's Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Art and Education. "The white gesso ground that breaks up both the lines and bold touches of color not only helps to organize the composition's rendering of the diverse shapes and colors of the natural environment, but also illuminates the scene and suggests sunlight peeking through the flowers and leaves. We believe that this joyful painting will be a landmark purchase for VMFA and an iconic work for our visitors to see and enjoy."

For more information about the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the museum's collections, visit [www.VMFA.museum](http://www.VMFA.museum).

### **About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts**

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia,

lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The museum has undertaken an exciting \$190 million expansion and renovation, anticipated to be complete in late 2025. International architectural firm SmithGroup is charged with designing a 105,000-square-foot wing for contemporary art, African art, photography, special exhibitions and events; a new 40,000-square-foot collections center to accommodate an expanded conservation department and collections storage; and 45,000 square feet of renovations to the museum's 1936 building, 1970 building and Leslie Cheek Theater.

**The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit [www.VMFA.museum](http://www.VMFA.museum).**

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