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Alma W. Thomas: “The Marionette Show as a Correlating Activity in the Public Schools”

by Jonathan Frederick Walz

Artist and educator Alma Thomas (1891–1978; see Figure 1) was born in Columbus, Georgia, a city on the Chattahoochee River, approximately 100 miles southwest of Atlanta. After Thomas completed the ninth grade, she and her family moved to Washington, DC, in order to seek better economic and educational opportunities. In



Fig. 1. Laura Wheeler Waring. *Portrait of Alma Thomas*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 1/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Vincent Melzac 1977.121.

1924, Thomas became the first person ever to receive a fine arts degree from Howard University. She subsequently taught art in the District of Columbia school system until 1960. While she had been creating artwork seriously since at least her undergraduate days

in the early 1920s, her retirement allowed her to turn her attention to painting full time in her studio. At eighty years of age she became the first African American woman to be granted a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972. Her many art historical milestones are also noteworthy in terms of the interwoven histories of achievement by women and African Americans in the United States. The United States Postal System recognized Thomas's accomplishments by including one of her images on a pane of stamps entitled "To Form a More Perfect Union" in 2005.

But Thomas was much more than just her multi-hued canvases from the 1960s and '70s. Though she declined to describe herself as an intellectual, Thomas maintained a lifelong and capacious curiosity about human cultures and the natural world. She therefore explored in depth and over time many areas of the arts, humanities, and sciences: history and art history, literature, horticulture, architecture, astronomy, activism, and—probably most importantly for the readers of this text—the performing arts. The artist's creativity wove together all these interdisciplinary interests, where they found ultimate form in her finished paintings.

Thomas enjoyed a lifelong passion for the stage. Howard University's Professor James Herring recruited Thomas to change her major and join the Department of Art based on the strength of some of her costume designs for extracurricular dramatic productions. Following performance theorists such as Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, and Richard Schechner, it is interesting to consider not only Thomas's involvement with the performing arts *per se*, but also how she "performed" various aspects of her persona. These everyday "performances" included elegant self-fashioning, media appearances throughout her life, and teaching a holistic classroom curriculum focused on student-centered theatrical productions (see Figure 2). The artist also translated her understanding of performance concepts into two-dimensional visual works such as *Watusi* (1963, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; see Figure 3), named after the 1960s dance; an exuberant portrait of Pearl Bailey (c. 1967, private collection) in the title role of an all-Black production of *Hello, Dolly!*; and *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music* (1976), Thomas's enduring masterpiece that joyously touches upon so many themes of the artist's life and career: aesthetics, gardening, music, performance, natural revelation, and self-actualization.



Fig. 2. Unknown photographer. *Alma W. Thomas at her opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art with dress by Maceo McCray, 1972.* Silver gelatin photograph, 10 x 8 in. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001.



Fig. 3. Alma W. Thomas. *Watusi (Hard Edge)*, 1963. Acrylic on canvas, 47 5/8 x 44 1/4 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Vincent Melzac 1976.137

Much of what we know about Alma Thomas and her involvement with marionettes stems from the fact that she was an ambitious junior high school teacher. That is to say, in pursuit of greater status and better pay, Thomas, who had been hired with a BS in Fine Arts and a teaching certificate, began and completed a master's degree in art education while teaching full time. Extant documents imply that Thomas undertook these graduate studies exactly in order to receive more recognition and higher compensation. As part of her petition to school administrators, she compiled a portfolio

documenting the professional development activities that justified her request for a salary increase. Without these records, very little evidence of Thomas's involvement with marionettes would remain. Somehow, in the dispersal of the artist's estate, these documents were separated and deposited at two different institutions: the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, headquartered in Washington, DC, which holds most of the folders; and The Columbus Museum in Georgia, which possesses four.¹ Mostly unpublished, this subset of Thomas's archive is a treasure trove of information. For example, it verifies Thomas's association with modernist puppeteer Tony Sarg and her collaboration with the Washington, DC branch of the Federal Theatre Project, an initiative of the Depression-era Works Progress Administration (see Figure 4).

Only five marionettes from Alma Thomas productions are currently known to exist: *Tweedle-Dee* and *The Mad Hatter* from *Alice in Wonderland*; *Man* and *Woman*, possibly the two main characters—Martin and Margaret—from *The Three Wishes*; and a stand-alone *Clown*, who performed one-off songs or monologues. The *Alice in Wonderland* puppets—each about twelve inches in height—are smaller than the other three, probably because students built them (under Thomas's supervision) and they were meant to withstand manipulation by beginners. They are very sturdily constructed. *Tweedle-Dee* and *The Mad Hatter* are both quite heavy, with lead weights in the feet, limbs, and torso (see Figure 5).² The blocky heads and hands are carved and painted solid wood. Both sport handmade clothing complete with snap fasteners at various points.³ Their original strings have been lost. The *Clown*, *Man*, and *Woman* are larger in scale, each approximately twenty-four inches tall, and they are much more finely constructed.

¹ Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001.

<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/alma-thomas-papers-9241>

² Alma W. Thomas, "The Marionette Show as a Correlating Activity in the Public Schools" (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1934), 4 and 6.

³ Thomas, "Marionette Show," 5.

**TONY SARG'S
MARIONETTE
SUMMER COURSE**

The Classes are conducted in Tony Sarg's Greenwich Village Workshops on East 9th Street, New York, under personal supervision of Tony Sarg and his able staff. Every phase of the Marionette Theatre will be taught. Particular interest will be given to puppet construction, and puppet manipulation, also the building of scenery and stage properties, stage lighting etc.

There are two courses of 100 hours each. One in July - the other in August. A complete playlet will be produced and presented during the course. The Cost of the course is 50 dollars. Ten dollars on application the balance in two installments. All necessary materials and tools will be supplied free of charge.

For further particulars write Tony Sarg 54 W. 9th New York

Figure 4. Tony Sarg. *Poster for 1935 Marionette Summer Course*, c. 1935. Printed paper. The Columbus Museum, Georgia. Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001. Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas in memory of her parents John H. and Amelia W. Cantey Thomas and her sister Alma Woodsey Thomas. G.1994.20.271

Weights were not used. The heads, torsos, and feet are wood; the fingers are wire that Thomas bound in painted, cotton fabric tape. The clothing is handmade with skilled detailing, the body articulations exhibit sophisticated engineering, and strings—possibly

original—remain attached. Normal wear and tear consonant with use—as well as various printed programs in the archives—indicate that these five marionettes starred in multiple performances during the mid-1930s.

A single, unspecified marionette—still owned by the artist’s youngest sister at the time—appeared in the 1981 exhibition *Alma Thomas: A Life in Art*.⁴ Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, in her essay for the 1998 exhibition catalogue *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*, devoted three short paragraphs to Thomas’s graduate studies and marionette activities; an image of *The Mad Hatter* accompanied the text as figure 8.⁵ However, neither these large-scale posthumous exhibitions nor the 2016 traveling show *Alma Thomas* took Thomas’s Columbia University master’s thesis into consideration.⁶ As the title page indicates, it is a written report of the planning, process, and implementation of a student-led dramatic production of *Alice in Wonderland* using marionettes. The text itself is short, with only eleven pages of exposition and a one-page bibliography. From a twenty-first-century perspective, several basic ideas seem salient:

1. Perhaps not surprisingly—given John Dewey’s promotion of student-driven learning—the text asserts that the impetus for the production came from the pupils (that is, it was not imposed upon them by a teacher).

2. Contemporaneous inspiration arose from, among other occurrences, the 1932 visit to the United States by Alice Liddell Hargreaves, for whom Lewis Carroll penned the original story; and a screening of the 1933 musical romance *I Am Suzanne*, which involves heartthrob Tony teaching the titular character Suzanne to become a puppeteer, in scenes featuring marionettes by famed Italian puppeteer Vittorio Podrecca.

⁴ “Catalogue of the Exhibition,” in Merry A. Foresta, *A Life in Art: Alma Thomas, 1891–1978* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), 56.

⁵ Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, “From Academic Representation to Poetic Abstraction: The Art of Alma Woodsey Thomas,” in Sachi Yanari, ed. *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings* (San Francisco, CA: Pomegranate Communications, Inc., 1998), 23.

⁶ *A Life in Art: Alma Thomas, 1891–1978*, curated by Merry A. Foresta at the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 1981. *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings*, curated by Sachi Yanari at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art, IN, 1998. It subsequently traveled to Tampa Museum of Art, FL; New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ; Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; The Columbus Museum, GA. *Alma Thomas*, co-curated by Ian Berry at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, and Lauren Hayes at The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY, 2016.



Figure 5. Alma W. Thomas and her students. *The Mad Hatter*, 1933/1934.

Carved and polychromed wood, lead, paperboard, and fabric, 11 1/4 x 4 3/4 x 2 in. The Columbus Museum, Georgia. Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas in memory of her parents John H. and Amelia W. Cantey. Thomas and her sister Alma Woodsey Thomas. G.1994.20.14

3. Overseen by Thomas, the ninth-grade students who participated in this project conducted serious research into topics such as color theory, previously staged versions of *Alice in Wonderland*, period furnishings, and lighting design.

4. Distribution of labor for the production fell strictly along gender lines.⁷ This sentence from the thesis is typical: “The work was divided so that the girls made the drop

⁷ This is probably hardly surprising, especially given that the curriculum itself codified and reinforced “gender-appropriate” expectations and boundaries.

curtain and the curtain to conceal the manipulation; the boys made the footlight reflector, the scenery, and the framework of the concealing curtain.”⁸

5. The production truly engaged many, if not most, areas of the school’s curriculum, as a page from related, additional supporting material reveals. The last paragraph discusses observed results: “[T]he pupils learned to accept responsibility, to cooperate with the group, to exhibit self-control when they wanted only to play with the puppets, and to persist when they were compelled to manipulate many times before the dolls would work perfectly. They also learned to be courteous although they were often impatient for the outcome. Perhaps the greatest pupil outcome was the vast pride in achievement and satisfaction which these youngsters obtained from their very obvious success.”⁹

It seems that Thomas’s interest in puppeteering began to wane by the late 1930s, but the marionette-related skills, knowledge, and relationships she had developed, as well as the objects themselves, continued to exert an influence on her life and work. In the 1940s, the National Capital Puppetry Guild began to coalesce as a formal group. Member Ida Jervis invited Alma Thomas to a meeting in her Arlington home, where she asked Thomas to join the organization. Though Thomas declined, she and Jervis became lifelong friends.¹⁰ Conceptual through-lines persisted from Thomas’s marionette productions to her later work as a practicing visual artist. These include, among others, her choice of subject matter for the watercolor *Macy’s Parade*, 1960 (private collection), an indirect reference to her teacher Tony Sarg, whom Macy’s commissioned in 1927 to add inflated character balloons to its annual Thanksgiving Day Parade¹¹; her painted images of the 1963 March on Washington, whose picket signs operate in the same manner as puppets held aloft on poles; and a virtually unknown mobile, possibly from the

⁸ Thomas, “Marionette Show,” 8.

⁹ Thomas, “Marionette Show,” 10–11.

¹⁰ In her role as an important photojournalist on the Jewish and arts and culture scenes in Washington, D.C., Jervis captured what remain the most iconic formal images of Thomas, in 1971. See Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001. Box 5, Folder 36: Of Alma Thomas, 1950s-1960s: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/alma-thomas-papers-9241/series-8/box-5-folder-36>

¹¹ See, for example, Alison Meier, “The Puppeteer Who Filled the Early Days of the Macy’s Parade with Mayhem,” *Hyperallergic.com*, November 23, 2016. <https://hyperallergic.com/339488/tony-sarg-macys-thanksgiving-parade/>

1960s, still owned by a member of the Thomas family (its sophisticated engineering and successful address of gravity and suspension are issues Thomas first tackled in her marionettes). Thomas loved the paintings she created, often referring to them as her “children” and only reluctantly parting with them. The photographic record, such as an unpublished image of a corner of the artist’s living space by Roland Freeman or frames from a filmstrip about her—both from 1973, almost 40 years after the defense of her master’s thesis—suggests that Alma Thomas’s marionettes occupied, and maintained, a similarly high place in the artist’s regard for the rest of her life.