"Now, I'm way up there on the moon," exclaimed Alma Thomas in 1971. "I'm telling everyone—stay down there if you want to. I am long gone." The eighty-year old painter had been "long gone" since the late 1960s, when she started her vibrant series of abstract paintings in response to America's Apollo missions including the Art Institute's *Starry Night with Astronauts*, 1972. [See slide 16] Although the rest of the nation may have been preoccupied with the Vietnam War (c. 1961-1975), the moon landing of Apollo II in 1969, as Thomas said, "set my creativity in motion." She elaborated: "I was born at the end of the 19th century, horse and buggy days, and experienced the phenomenal changes of the 20th century machine and space age. Today not only can our great scientists send astronauts to and from the moon to photograph its surface and bring back samples of rocks and other materials, but through the medium of color television all can actually see and experience the thrill of these adventures."

Thomas's jubilant *Space* series resulted, with several paintings containing the word "Snoopy" as part of the title. (The astronauts had nicknamed Apollo 10's lunar module "Snoopy" after the much beloved dog in Charles Schulz's comic strip *Peanuts*.) The Art Institute's luminous painting—*Starry Night with Astronauts*—culminates the series. With the scale of a toy, the spacecraft hovers in the upper right of the painting, its brilliant colors reflecting the intense yellow, orange, and red of the sun. The rest of the picture is taken up by the shimmering sky—aligned patches of varying shades of blue through which chinks of white appear. The spaceship's jewel-like radiance juxtaposed against the vastness of the pulsating blue sky suggests a timeless immensity.

We see here Thomas's mosaic-like use of strokes of vivid color against a white ground. Her technique recalls the groundbreaking pointillism of French painter Georges Seurat (1859-1891), who filled the surface of his paintings with a mass of small, regularized dots and brushstrokes of complementary colors, imparting a radiant shimmer. Thomas explained the method behind her zestful blend of thickly painted patches of color: "The irregular strokes give an interesting free pattern to the canvas, creating white intervals that punctuate the color stripes. There is rhythmic movement obtained, too."

Although her titles are afterthoughts, *Starry Night and the Astronauts* may refer to Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) painting *Starry Night*, 1889, now in The Museum of Modern Art, New York. [See figure 16] Like Thomas, van Gogh's inspiration for the work was sparked by space. "This morning," he wrote to his brother Theo, "I saw the country from my window a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big." Also like Thomas, the Dutch artist depended on color—long swirling brushstrokes of vivid hues—to animate the heavens. "Color," van Gogh declared, "[is] the sole architect of space."
Thomas relied on the enlivening properties of color throughout her late-blooming career. "Color is life," she once proclaimed, "and light is the mother of color." To arrive at her unique and poetic vision of the natural world took the Georgia-born artist some forty years. From a middle-class family whose main belief was the value of education, she was the first to graduate from the newly formed art department at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University in 1924. Ten years later, she received an M.A. from Columbia University in New York City. Soon, she was teaching at a black junior high school in Washington, pursuing her art whenever and wherever she could. (Her kitchen table served as her studio.)

Her inspirations ranged from Asian art at Washington museums to Abstract Expressionism's explosions of color. She also became a major figure in the formation of Barnett-Aden Gallery, the first integrated private gallery in Washington. In the decade before her retirement from teaching in 1960, she took art classes at Washington's American University and met noted colorfield artists, including Morris Louis (1912-1962) and Kenneth Noland (b. 1924). From a conventional realism in the early 1950s evolved the spirited, colorful abstractions we see here.

Her breakthrough came in the mid-1960s, inspired by the view just beyond her window. Art historian James Porter* had just requested a major retrospective of her work for Howard University. She wanted to paint "something different from anything I'd ever done.... ever seen." As she explained: "The display of designs formed by the leaves of the holly tree that covers the bay window in my home greets me each morning. These compositions are framed by the window panes with the aid of the wind as an active designer." Space was already on her mind. Although she had never flown, she began to paint as if she were in an airplane. "You look down on things," she explained. "You streak through the clouds so fast.... you see only streaks of color."
To capture these shifting patterns of light and streaks of color on botanical blossoms, Thomas applied patches of thick bright colors in stripes or concentric circles. In the large painting *Light Blue Nursery*, 1968, irregular patches of vivid color form horizontal stripes that are punctuated by rhythmic white spaces and lines. [See figure 17] Called her *Earth* series, these joyful paintings of the mid-1960s brought her local and national acclaim.


With the sanction of these institutions, Thomas occasionally—and ironically—recalled her segregated Georgia childhood, when “the only way to go [to the library] as a Negro would be with a mop and bucket.” Her real battle, however, was with age. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be caged in a seventy-eight-year-old body and to have the mind and energy of a twenty-five year old?” exclaimed the artist, riddled with arthritis, as she embarked upon her *Space* series. “If I could only turn the clock back about sixty years, I’d show them.” Then she added, “I’ll show them anyway.”

Figure 17.
Alma Thomas.
*Light Blue Nursery*,
1968. Acrylic on canvas.
Slide Sixteen: Alma Thomas

1. Have students make a list (or timeline) of some of the dramatic changes that Thomas might have witnessed during her long life from 1891 to 1978. Consider advances in science and technology and the rights of women and African Americans. Have students imagine the changes that they might experience in the twenty-first century.

2. In *Starry Night with Astronauts*, Thomas depicts in her mosaic-like style the sunlit sky and Apollo 10 spacecraft as seen from the ground. Have students imagine the view of the earth from the Apollo 10 spacecraft and produce paintings using a technique similar to Thomas’s.

3. Thomas has much in common with American artist Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986). Both lived long lives at approximately the same time and both were interested in nature and space. Have students research O’Keeffe’s life and art and compare her work to Thomas’s paintings.

4. The title *Starry Night with Astronauts* may refer to Vincent van Gogh’s (1853–1890) painting *Starry Night*, 1889. Have students look at a reproduction of van Gogh’s work and note similarities to Thomas’s painting. What adjectives describe the sky in each work? What would be the experience of traveling through each sky? How did each artist handle the paint brush and paint?