

Review: Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful

edited by Seth Feman and Jonathan Frederick Walz. The Columbus Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2021. 336 p. ill. ISBN 978-0-300-25893-6 (h/c), \$65.00.

Reviewed January 2022

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<https://doi.org/10.17613/5r09-0178>



Alma W. Thomas: Everything is Beautiful, edited by curators Seth Feman and Jonathan Frederick Walz, is everything a reader would want it to be. From the lifting, declarative title to the breadth of its essays to the variety of works represented in illustration, it pays esteemed tribute to this beloved American artist. The first fine arts graduate from Howard University, the first black woman artist to have a solo show at The Whitney Museum, and a multifaceted, creative, and independent woman, Alma Thomas is overdue for the attention she receives in this monograph.

The catalog essays are comprehensive in their coverage of Thomas's life, without feeling over-expansive. Creating a historical panorama, essays by Rebecca Bush and Walz, specifically,

reach from Thomas's enslaved grandparents, to a family with members educated at the (then new) Tuskegee Institute, to a homelife nested in the values of W.E.B Du Bois, to the seeming incongruity of painting natural abstractions during the time of the Black Panthers. Other essays flesh out Thomas's participation in the life of her city: decades spent teaching in a public school as well as acting as a community art teacher to neighborhood children, frequent visits to local gardens (not to mention her own lush backyard garden), and friendships with notable D.C.

artists such as David Driskell and Jacob Kainen. (Her sphere of influence and activity in the city is illustrated on a large color map of 25 key locations.) Essays and photographs also amplify what is known of her work in costume design and marionette puppetry, including one formerly unknown extant puppet discovered in the research for the exhibition. Each essay, accompanied by useful notes and citations, exudes care and warmth towards Thomas as a subject (and frequently towards Walz and Feman as editors), lending the entire volume a good feeling.

Touchingly, Feman and Walz acknowledge the era into which the catalog and exhibition come into the world—during a time of pandemic, loss, uncertainty, and isolation. But a catalog such as this is a true respite. It is sweet to learn that the title, *Everything is Beautiful*, comes not from an ecstatic expression murmured in the presence of Thomas's work, but from the title of one of her favorite songs by Ray Stevens from 1970. It is triply sweet to stumble onto the generous three-page foldout of Thomas's delightful triptych, *Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music*, 1976, towards the end of the book. It is not hard to embrace a catalog such as this one, at a time such as ours.