



A Walk Through Color Fields

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OVERVIEW

Project Description

Inspired by art pioneer Alma Woodsey Thomas, students will learn about the power of color to express emotion, and the use of repetition and rhythm to create movement and harmony in their abstract compositions.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will expand their understanding of color mixing.
2. Students will demonstrate creativity and self-expression.
3. Students will learn about a pioneering artist who broke barriers in the art world.
4. Students will use vibrant palettes to depict themes of nature, space, and joy.

Supplies: Per Student

- 9"x12" oil and acrylic paper
- Pencil
- ¼" flat brush
- 1" flat brush
- medium paper plate with dots of 5 bright colors plus black and white
- Paper towel
- AAYF label



Supplies: Shared

- Set of 4-4.5" plastic lids and round objects (shared between two students)
- Water to clean brushes
- Optional: Color mixing chart (1 per table) and a color wheel for reference

KEY CONCEPTS

Snapshot - All about color!

Color-mixing
Expressing emotions
Rhythm, movement, & harmony
Nature, space, joy

Art Vocabulary

Color Field Painting: Large areas of a single color to convey emotion.

Rhythm: refers to the repetition or alternation of visual elements - such as lines, shapes, colors, or patterns - that create a sense of movement, flow, or structure within a composition.

Palette: The range of colors used in an artwork.

Abstract Art: Art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colors, forms, and gestural marks to achieve its effect.

Contrast: The representation of two elements of design in opposite ways, like light and dark color value, or warm and cool.

Tint: Adding white to a color.

Shade: Adding black to a color.

Monochromatic: Having only colors from the same family.

Historical & Cultural Context - About Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891-1978)



- She was known for her vibrant use of colors and interplay of patterns.
- She was a pioneer who broke historical barriers:
 - Artist and world traveler who never married or had children (unusual for women born in the 19th century)
 - Among the first cohort to graduate from the art program at Howard University.
 - She was a key figure in the Washington Color School, a color field painting movement in the 1950s and 1960s.
 - Most of her recognition came in the last decade of her life.
- She was a joyful optimist, inspired by nature and notably by the space program in the 1970s.
- Her work is on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the White House Collection, and others.
- She desired to solely be an artist, rather than a black artist or woman artist. She believed that her creativity was independent of race and gender.

THE PROJECT

Steps

1. Instruct students to pencil in their name & teacher/room number on the AAYF label.
2. Using the slideshow, **help the kids “notice”** things about Alma Woodsey Thomas’s work. Notice:
 - the concentric circles she often uses
 - her bright colors
 - how sometimes she uses solid areas, not just dashed lines
 - how she has slight color variations on adjacent rows sometimes
 - how some of her rows are narrower and some wider
 - how sometimes she uses stripes instead of circles
 - how sometimes she does an under layer of pastel colors and then colors over those.
 - her love of nature and space

3. Using a round container and/or straight edge, make up to 3 **penciled guides** for your painting (for example, 1, 2, or 3 circles, or a circle and a line, etc.). Keep it very simple.



4. Distribute paper plates with white and two colors. Have the kids choose a color and **make their dashed lines** along the guides they drew. Have them try to make them all the same size and slightly or nearly touching one another. Recommend they use a small scrap of paper to test out making marks with their brushes.



5. **Keep making marks** until the paint starts to run out, then flip the brush over and use the paint on the other side before dipping again. Finish the circle or line.

6. **Introduce tint.** Explain what it means and have the kids make a tint from their original

color by adding a little white to it in a small new space on their mixing palette. They can use this paint to make another row of marks on either side of the original row. Again, squeeze them together so they are touching or nearly touching between marks and rows.



7. While kids are working on these two rows, start **distributing more paint colors.** As you distribute, you can talk about the color you are adding and the “recipe” to make that color. You can talk about the “what if’s” of adding this new color to the existing colors. (e.g., What if I add yellow to orange?)

8. Encourage kids to **add new rows of color** - or stripes. Show the kids how you can turn the brush to make narrow marks, and how if you press a little harder, the strokes get wider.

9. As the kids keep painting, **talk more about mixing colors**. Ask:
- What happens if you mix white to your yellow and orange?
 - You get new shade of the original color
 - What happens if you add yellow to green?
 - You get a new shade of the original color, because orange and green already have yellow in them.
 - But...if you add yellow to purple, what happens?
 - You get a shade of brown.
 - Why? Because purple is made of primary colors, red and blue, so you essentially mixed all three primary colors together.
 - Why don't we get quite the colors we expect when we mix paint? Why don't red and blue always make a "nice" shade of purple?
 - Because pigments vary and they are not "pure" colors like the light in an actual rainbow. And there are an infinite number of colors depending on the "recipe" used to make them.

Have students keep mixing new colors using two choices from their plate and apply that color to their work.

10. **Introduce shade**. Explain that a shade is a color with a little bit of black mixed in. Black is very strong, so they should only use a tiny bit. Have them make a shade of their original color on their plate. If they like the color, they can make a row of marks using it.

11. Give the kids freedom to make their own color choices and to mix new colors to finish their painting. You can **talk about the color palettes** Alma Woodsey Thomas used which often were inspired by nature - mostly flowers or space.

12. When you have given the kids a good amount of time to work, you can **introduce the larger brush**. It works well for larger solid areas and is a great way to finish and fill in areas around the work they've already done if the kids have a lot of white space (And they can even put dashed lines over this solid area if they desire).



13. Do they want to **name their work**?
- Notable artworks by Alma Woodsey Thomas: "Resurrection," "Starry Night and the Astronauts," "The Eclipse," "Autumn Leaves Fluttering in the Breeze," "Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto," "A Glimpse of Mars," "Blast Off," "Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset"



14. If there is time, have the kids share their work with the class (see Reflection Questions - Aesthetic Valuing below)

Docent Tips

- Some kids had so much fun mixing colors, they sometimes needed to be reminded to put them on paper, not just on the plate!
- Recommend that students use small scraps of paper to test out brush marks and color mixing
- If time is running short - use the big brush to fill in space. Vary your line length for interest or speeding up the process. Longer lines = faster.
- Remember we are painting short lines, not dabbing and making dots

Helping Hands Tips

- Don't forget to attach the AAYF labels on the backs of their main papers.
- Set up: Each student will receive their main paper, a pencil, a small brush, a large brush, a paper plate with 5 paint colors plus black and white, and circular lids.
- When you distribute the paints on the plates, keep the dabs of paint small and leave room for mixing. You can always add more paint.
- For TK-1, they may need assistance with step 3, drawing the circles and/or lines
- Assist with step 6, distributing additional paint colors.
- For steps 6-12, wander around the room pointing out color and dash choices from individual students

OFF THE CANVAS

Make It Your Own

- Give the kids freedom to make their own color choices.
- Encourage the kids to come up with fun names for their colors, like they do at the paint store.
- It is fun to walk around the classroom, find an interesting color, and have the kids explain to their classmates the "recipe" they used to make the color.

Reflection Questions - Aesthetic Valuing

At the end of the project, make time to have students reflect on their project by asking the following grade level questions. This conversation can be facilitated by docents or classroom teachers.

TK-1

1. What colors do you love seeing most in nature? Where do you typically see them?
2. What colors did you use in your picture and why?

Grades 2-3

1. How is your picture similar to those of Alma Woodsey Thomas? How is it different?
2. What do you remember most about Alma Woodsey Thomas?

Grades 4-5

1. How do colors convey different emotions? What emotions do you think your project conveys?
2. How would you describe the influence of nature, space, and joy in Alma Woodsey Thomas' artwork?
3. How did you use color mixing in your artwork?

If time is short, the following questions are appropriate for **all grade levels**:

1. Are you happy with your project? What do you like best about your project? What might you change?
2. What do you like about your peers' artworks? How is it unique?

About the AAYF Artist

Sandi Arthur believes passionately in the value of art education and has been involved with nearly every aspect of the Adventures in Art program in Torrance and with Hands on Art in Redondo Beach. She also runs an art program called Reaching Out that brings art to children in underserved schools. Sandi has always loved to create, whether it is quilting, photography, tie dye, painting or some other endeavor. Starting in 2006, when her kids began elementary school, she found a wonderful outlet through AIA and HOA and held nearly every position possible from Helper through to Program Chair, Merchandise Design, Supply Chair and has conducted New Docent Training for both programs for several years now.

Art At Your Fingertips is a Palos Verdes Art Center school-based outreach program that brings visual arts education to elementary school classrooms from transitional kindergarten through fifth grade.

Established in 1976, this program reaches 6,000 students annually on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. Run completely by parent volunteers, AAYF's paramount objective is to make every child feel comfortable using art as a means of expression. We thank the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District, PTA, PTO, and Booster Club for their support.

Pvartcenter.org



A Walk Through Color Fields

Learn about Alma Woodsey Thomas and explore the power of color with these resources from the Palos Verdes Library District.

Ablaze with Color: A Story of Painter Alma Thomas

Juvenile Biographies **THOMAS, A. HARVEY**

Learn how Thomas' life experiences inspired her career in the arts.

Women in Art: 50 Fearless Creatives Who Inspired the World

Juvenile Nonfiction **704.042 IGNOTOFSKY**

A collection of fifty illustrated profiles of women in the arts from the 11th century to today. Thomas' profile details her inspirations and impact in the art world and beyond.

The Ultimate Art Museum

Juvenile Nonfiction **708 GIPSON**

Check out Room 108 (Color Fields) in this art museum in a book! This room features artists, such as Thomas, who used color as the star of their abstract compositions.

The Color Monster: A Story About Emotions

Juvenile Picture Books **LLENAS**

A picture book that explores the power of color in expressing and understanding emotions.

The Everything Art Handbook

Adult Nonfiction **751.4 EVERYTHING**

This handbook covers color basics and brushstroke techniques that can be used to convey emotions in your artwork.

Check out these online resources for a closer look of Alma Thomas' works!

National Gallery of Art

<https://www.nga.gov/artists/1926-alma-thomas>

Explore selected works of Alma Thomas

Smithsonian American Art Museum

<https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/alma-thomas>

Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas