

Burst of Fall, A Painting by Alma W. Thomas

Clopper Almon

Alma W. Thomas (1891 – 1978) has become in recent years a well-known 20th century American painter. I, who am no art connoisseur, happen to own one of her paintings, one which there is reason to believe may have been her own favorite of all her pictures. The picture has an interesting story, which I want to pass along in this note.

The picture, entitled *Burst of Fall*, bears the date of 1968 and was indeed bought in the spring or summer of 1968, but since it was obviously painted in the autumn, I suspect that it was painted in 1967. It was bought from the Bader Gallery in Washington for \$300 by Shirley Montag Almon, my first wife, while she was on the staff of the President's Council of Economic Advisers in the Johnson administration. Shirley – whose first eight years of schooling were in a one-room school house – had received her doctorate in economics from Harvard and taught at Wellesley before coming to the Council when I came to the University of Maryland in 1966. She was also a gifted amateur painter herself.

The offices of the Council were in the Old Executive Office Building and the Bader Gallery was nearby at 17th and G Streets, N.W. Shirley was looking for a picture for our living room and often stopped by Bader's on a lunch-time walk to flip through the new pictures stacked in a rack like cards in a card catalog. One day, this one jumped out at her. She brought it home, and I liked it, so Shirley bought it for \$300, about a week's wages. It was unsigned. If I remember correctly, Franz Bader had told Shirley who had painted it and that the painter was a retired public school art teacher. But the name meant nothing and “public school art teacher” was certainly not impressive. We just liked the painting and looked forward to living with it.

When Franz Bader told Alma Thomas that the picture had been sold and paid her, she was irritated with him. It turned out that he had scooped it up along with other paintings on a visit to Alma's studio. Alma had not signed it because she liked it so well that she wanted to keep it. When Bader told her that it was sold, she replied that the fact that it was not signed meant it was not for sale, and he should not have taken it. But she did not demand it back. Instead she said, "I must go see where it is hanging and sign it." So she brought a brush and some black paint and took a cab from Washington out to our house in College Park, Maryland and signed it near the lower right corner, “AW Thomas” with the right side of the A serving as the left side of the W. She and Shirley became good friends, and Shirley visited her for tea in her studio.

A few years later, when Alma was one of three Washington painters at a show at the Corcoran, she borrowed *Burst of Fall* for the show and placed it so that when you came in the front door of the Corcoran, you could see it and only it in the show. Alma received some award during the show and accepted the award in front of this picture, so that her picture in the Washington Post showed her in front of this painting.

Both Alma and Shirley died within a few years, Shirley in 1975 of a brain tumor discovered in 1968, shortly after purchasing this picture.

That is the story of how we came to own the picture. How Alma came to paint it is another story. She was in her "geometrical mosaic" phase and took along some water colors on a visit of several days to a friend. Alma sat inside working on one of her geometrical designs. But outside the window was a tree in glorious autumn colors. It kept saying, "paint me! Paint Me! PAINT ME!" until Alma had to put down her geometrical design and yield to the tree's demand. Back in her studio, she did the 24"x48" acrylic from the water color.

When you look at it, you don't instantly see a tree; but when you know it is there, the tree is very clear. Alma loved it so much she would have never parted with it save for the mix up described above. I think Alma liked it best of all her work, and I certainly do.

