

CONVERSATION PIECES

A Sense of Place



FAR LEFT: Helen Frankenthaler, *Canyon*, 1965, Acrylic on canvas, 44 x 52 in., The Phillips Collection, The Dreier Fund for Acquisitions and funds given by Gifford Phillips, 2001

LEFT: Alma Thomas, *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers*, 1968, Acrylic on canvas, 57 7/8 x 50 in., The Phillips Collection, Gift of Franz Bader, 1976

CLOSE LOOKING

How Do You Feel?

When you go to different places, you may experience different feelings. Think about how you feel...

- In your home?
- In a park?
- In your school?
- At the gym?
- In an art museum?
- In a church?

Imagine

Close your eyes and imagine your favorite place.

- How do you feel in that place?
- What colors would you use to describe it?

Discuss

Both of these works by Helen Frankenthaler and Alma Thomas evoke a sense of a place. Think about how an artist captures a sense and feeling of a place.

- Write a few adjectives you would use to describe the place Frankenthaler paints.
 - Then, consider the artwork's title, *Canyon*. After learning the title, how does that alter how you view the painting? What has she done with color and composition (the arrangement of all of the parts of the painting) to capture the monumentality of a canyon?
- Write down some adjectives you would use to describe Thomas's work.
 - Then, think about the artwork's title, *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers*. After learning the title, how does that alter how you view the painting? What has she done to capture the essence of a breeze rustling flowers?

MAKE CONNECTIONS

Compare, and think about how the following are similar and different:

- The words you used to describe the two paintings
- How each artist evokes a sense of place
- Each artist's use of color
- The mood of each painting

ART AND SOCIAL STUDIES

As an art teacher, Alma Thomas developed a lesson called “Know Your City.” She took her class to different locations around Washington, DC, talking about what was happening there and how the students felt in those spaces. Then she sent them out on their own to other locations and had them report back to the class.

- Have your students think about how they feel in some of the locations we discussed above.
 - OPTION 1: Have students research a DC location that has personal significance to them.
 - OPTION 2: Connect each work of art to a major historical event happening at the same time or to a contemporary piece of literature or music.



Alma Thomas's house in Logan Circle in DC

EXTENDED ACTIVITY: A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

Both artists use color and abstraction to capture the sense of a place. Let's try a similar approach:

- *Select an object from nature.* It can be a flower, leaf, or anything that you can easily find outside.
- *Place the object on your table.* On a piece of paper do three continuous line drawings, each from a different angle. Think about seeing it from above, from the side, and from an unusual angle.
 - A continuous line drawing is produced without lifting your pen or pencil from the paper.
 - Focus on the object, not on your drawing. Pay attention to the contours and details of the object.
 - Set a time (e.g., 30 seconds) for each drawing.
- *Try to make your drawing more abstract.* Consider trying one of these approaches:
 - Focus in on one section of the drawing and enlarge and/or crop it
 - Color your drawing with non-representational colors
 - Combine all 3 drawings
 - Imagine how your drawing/object might look from really far away, up close, or through a kaleidoscope



Continuous line drawing

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Helen Frankenthaler, *Canyon*, 1965

- In the spring of 1951, Frankenthaler was inspired by a visit to Jackson Pollock's studio. She began diluting and thinning her oil paints to the fine consistency of watercolors, which she applied to unprimed canvases that she laid on the floor. The thin paints soaked through the canvases in broadly spreading stains.
- In the 1960s, Frankenthaler began to modify her technique by using acrylic paint to create more saturated colors and more solidly defined shapes. She also started using cropping as a compositional device.
- During a visit to Frankenthaler's New York studio in April 1953, painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland (brought by art critic Clement Greenberg) saw her painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952). Louis observed, "[Frankenthaler] showed us a way to think about and use color . . . she was a bridge between [Jackson] Pollock and what was possible."
- Although *Canyon* seems non-representational, it conveys her immediate response to nature. Her ideas are expressed in large color shapes and in the ways the colors interact with each other.

Alma Thomas, *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers*, 1968

- Thomas taught fine art at Shaw Junior High School for 35 years starting in 1925. She began her career as a full-time painter upon her retirement, at the age of 70.
- Suffering from arthritis at the time of her retirement from teaching, she considered giving up painting. When Howard University offered to mount a retrospective of her work in 1966, she wanted to produce something new. Thomas explained, "I decided to try to paint something different from anything I'd ever done. Different from anything I'd ever seen. I thought to myself, 'That must be accomplished.'" From the window of her house, she enjoyed watching the ever-changing patterns that light created on her trees and flower gardens. With the holly tree outside her living room window as her initial inspiration, Thomas created a style that would become her signature: small, rectangular shapes of bright, intense colors merged together in curves, lines, and circles.
- Thomas described her subject matter: "I've never bothered painting the ugly things in life. People struggling, having difficulty . . . No. I wanted something beautiful that you could sit down and look at."
- Reflecting on her use of color, Thomas explained, "Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man."