

Impact Statement

Ciel Ha, Grade 11

Behind the Curtain, 2026

Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

Studio S Fine Arts, Bellevue, Washington, USA

Unsung Hero: Vivien Thomas

The Unsung Hero I chose for my artwork is Vivien Thomas, a surgical technician and researcher whose story deeply stood out to me. I chose him because his life represents the idea that someone can make an extraordinary difference without being the person receiving recognition. Thomas was highly skilled and knowledgeable, but because of racial discrimination, he was denied many opportunities that should have been available to him. What I admire most about him is his perseverance, because even when society placed him in the background, he continued developing his talents and using them to help others. This idea of being talented yet unseen became the foundation of my artwork.

Rather than simply painting a portrait of Vivien Thomas, I wanted to visually tell the story of what it meant to be him. A part of his story that stood out to me was the fact that Thomas taught a doctor how to perform an important procedure from behind him, while he himself could not become a doctor because of the racial barriers of his time. From this, I developed the central idea of my artwork, *Behind the Curtain*.

The sheer fabric covering the artwork is one of the most important parts of my painting. I chose to portray sheer material because it allows the viewer to see what is underneath, but not completely clearly. This represents how Thomas's intelligence and contributions were always present, even when discrimination prevented him from receiving the recognition he deserved. The curtain becomes a physical representation of the barrier between being capable and being seen. I also incorporated my own hands into the artwork. This was an intentional choice because I wanted myself to become part of the process of telling Thomas's story. My hands are shown creating, arranging, and adding layers to the canvas, so they represent me bringing a story that was once overlooked into the light. In a way, I am reaching behind the curtain and helping Thomas's story become visible to others. The painted layers throughout the artwork are another important part of my artistic process. I tried to paint paper, fabric, drawings, and other materials because I wanted the artwork to feel as though there were multiple parts of Thomas's story hidden beneath the surface. Each layer represents a different part of his journey, including his knowledge, dedication, and the obstacles he had to overcome.

The papers and anatomical drawings in the background represent the years of studying, experimenting, and developing knowledge behind Thomas's accomplishments. I wanted

these elements to appear as though they had accumulated over years of hard work. They are not simply decorative details; they create a world of knowledge underneath the curtain. The more closely the viewer looks, the more they discover, just as learning about Thomas reveals more of his story. Creating this piece also changed how I think about being a hero. I used to associate heroes with people who are publicly recognized for their accomplishments, yet Thomas showed me that recognition is not what makes someone heroic. Sometimes the most meaningful work happens quietly, when nobody is watching.

As an artist, I hope to use my own talent to make sure that someone else's talent is not forgotten. I hope to share this artwork with my school or homeschool community and through online platforms so that others can learn about Thomas and reflect on the people in their own lives who work quietly behind the scenes. Ultimately, my artwork is about more than a curtain. It is about what happens when someone's potential is hidden, yet their impact remains visible.

Vivien Thomas worked behind the curtain, but his impact reached countless lives. His story reminds me that I do not need to be in the spotlight to make a difference. Sometimes, the work we do quietly can become the very thing that changes someone else's life.