

# Archibald Motley



*Jazz Age Modernist*

A. J. MOTLEY, JR.  
1948



## By Stephen May

**N**EW YORK CITY — Archibald J. Motley (1891–1981), a leading figure in the Chicago version of the Harlem Renaissance, was a creative, independent painter of national importance. A complex and diverse artist, he stood at the crossroads of the central movements in Twentieth Century American figurative painting.

Through sensitive portraits, imaginative renderings of African tribal myths, Southern landscapes and his best-known works, genre

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Page Above: Motley's choice of a nocturnal setting adds drama to "Gettin' Religion," 1948.

Wearing a beret after his sojourn in Paris, Motley presented himself as a confident, active painter in "Self Portrait (Myself at Work)," 1933.





scenes that convey the lively social life of Chicago's Bronzeville during the Jazz Age and beyond, he sought to communicate the universality of the African American experience.

In recording everyday life in Bronzeville, Motley was profoundly influenced by the rhythms, vibrant color and dissonant and melodic harmonies of jazz. Motley's paintings bring us the dance halls and storefront churches, the streets and social clubs of Chicago's African American community from the 1920s to the 1940s, a period called the New Negro Movement. In all of his work, Motley utilized a Modernist sense of color and composition in images whose subject and spirit drew on his ethnic heritage.

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**Motley's handsome "The Octoroon Girl," 1925, reflects his close attention to clothing and skin color in his portraits. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York City.**



A welcome, revelatory exhibition, “Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist” is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art through January 17. Organized by the Nasher Museum at Duke University and curated by Duke professor Richard J. Powell, this is the final venue for the show, which has already been seen at four other locations.

“The exhibition,” says Sarah Schroth, director of the Nasher Museum, “pays scholarly and visual attention to the most obvious aspect of Motley’s art: its radical privileging of color, emotional expressionism and atmosphere over naturalism or social reality.... Under Motley’s aegis the various people and places he encountered were transformed into chromatically charged scenes of compositional dynamism, artistic matters imbued with nonillusionistic colors and a part-organic, part manufactured vitality.”

In “Café Paris,” 1929, Motley conveys the diverse patrons inside a café as a horse-drawn vehicle passes by outside. The oil on canvas measures 23 5/8 by 28 7/8 inches.



Motley captures the frenzy of participants in a meeting of “Tongues (Holy Rollers),” 1929.



**“Nightlife,” 1943. The Art Institute of Chicago. Restricted gift of Mr and Mrs Marshall Field, Jack and Sandra Guthman, Ben W. Heineman, Ruth Horwich, Lewis and Susan Manilow, Beatrice C. Mayer, Charles A. Meyer, John D. Nichols, and Mr and Mrs E.B. Smith, Jr; James W. Alsdorf Memorial Fund; Goodman Endowment.**

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Born in New Orleans, Motley was the grandson of ex-slaves and the son of a Pullman porter who was Roman Catholic and of Creole ancestry. The family soon moved to Chicago, which Motley made his lifelong home. The fact that he grew up in a mixed neighborhood provided him with sources and material for paintings of the rich culture that blacks brought to the urban scene. His art was racially informed but colorfully embellished by having lived as a child in a mixed Chicago neighborhood.

While at the Art School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1914–18, Motley executed highly accomplished figure studies in oil. In their subdued coloring, careful attention to modeling and slightly broken brushwork, they reflect his embrace of the academic training and approach to painting that characterized that conservative institution...

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