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# Culture Talk: Duke Professor Richard J. Powell on Archibald Motley

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on May 2, 2014 • 9:33 am

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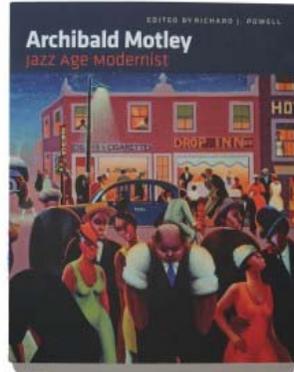


THE NASHER MUSEUM OF ART at Duke University is infused with Chicago jazz and Paris blues. Since January 19, the museum has been exhibiting 45 paintings by Chicago artist **Archibald J. Motley Jr.** (1891-1981). "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" presents a rare opportunity to experience the work of one of the 20th century's most important artists. For the first time in more than two decades, the retrospective gathers his works, mesmerizing portraits and vibrant cultural scenes painted between 1919 to 1961. Richard J. Powell, (above) the John Spencer Bassett Professor of art, art history and visual studies at Duke, curated the exhibition and edited the accompanying book. A week after visiting the museum, I spoke to Powell by phone about the exhibition which concludes in Durham on May 11 and will travel to Ft. Worth, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. Throughout the

interview, Powell's observations of Motley's work are both scholarly and laced with effusive praise of his mastery. He begins the conversation by explaining how the exhibition came together. Motley's modern perspective, brilliant use of color, and sense of humor and irony are recurring themes.

**CULTURE TYPE: Why Archibald Motley? What was the genesis for the exhibition now?**

RICHARD J. POWELL: There was a major retrospective of Archibald Motley that was done in the early 1990s by the Chicago Historical Society, now known as the Chicago History Museum. Why are we looking at him again? The show that was done in 1991 was a broad introduction to his art and career. It was less focused and broad and general. I had a chance to see that show and enjoyed it immensely. But as we have moved beyond that moment and into the 21st century and as we have moved into the era of post-modernism, particularly that category post-black, I really felt that it would be worth revisiting Archibald Motley to look more critically at his work, to investigate his wry sense of humor, his use of irony in his paintings, his interrogations of issues around race and identity.



*I really felt that it would be worth revisiting Archibald Motley to look more critically at his work, to investigate his wry sense of humor, his use of irony in his paintings, his interrogations of issues around race and identity. — Richard J. Powell*

**The exhibition describes Motley as one of the most significant, but least visible artists of the 20th century because his paintings are mostly held in private collections. Was it a challenge to locate and secure the works?**

I've worked on a number of shows over the years. My first big show was with the Smithsonian, an exhibit that I did in the early 90s on William Henry Johnson. Talk about a total contrast. I was working mostly with materials from the Smithsonian, which made it very easy. In sharp contrast, Archibald Motley has mostly been from private collectors. Valerie Gerrard Browne and Mara Motley [the widow of artist's son and their daughter] were on board. We went to them first since they own the bulk of the works. And then a few works are from museums like Hampton's university museum, Howard's museum, and the Schomburg Collection. When it came time to ask a number of individuals, it was a challenge because these are works that people love. These are works that people have up in their homes. These are works that people have a real, real connection to and so the idea of taking it out on the road starting in 2014 and ending at the end of 2015, you really have to buy into the vision. I had to put on my people skills and really encourage lenders that this was an opportunity to look critically at his work.

*[The Estate of Reginald F. Lewis; BET founder Robert L. Johnson; Walter O. and Linda Evans; Harmon and Harriet Kelley; Washington, D.C. art historian Teresa C. Grana, and Johnson Publishing Co., are among those who loaned paintings for the exhibition.]*



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ALMA THOMAS IS GIVEN PRIDE OF PLACE AT THE WHITE HOUSE



"Blues," 1929 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

**Does the exhibition reflect your original concept or did it take shape based on the available works?**

You look at all the works and you lay them out and you begin to say, 'Where are the conversations what will help viewers to put their heads around where he is coming from?' This show is a set of ideas, a set of concepts that take one through Motley's career and we hung it and we organized it based on these ideas. We felt that by grouping the paintings in particular vignettes that tell stories, we could help people to understand and see what his contribution was to American art.

*I knew that I wanted from the very beginning to think about what I would call Motley's humor, Motley's sense of irony, Motley's almost provocative way of digging into the everyday, but also the transgressive of black American life. — Richard J. Powell*

**The exhibition is defined by these vignettes, individual galleries devoted to significant moments or aspects of Motley's practice.**

Yes. We wanted to start with portraits because we had a really nice group of them and so we have a gallery devoted to just his portraits. Beyond that space, we thought it would be nice to think about the quotidian, the everyday of black Chicago, which was his inspiration, and so we have a gallery called Between Acts. And then I wanted to focus on the Paris moment, when he gets his Guggenheim and he goes to Paris around 1929-30. And then I wanted to look at these nocturns. Motley is really famous for these amazing paintings of street life, particularly at night. And then I knew that I wanted, from the very beginning, to think about what I would call Motley's humor, Motley's sense of irony, Motley's almost provocative way of digging into the everyday, but also the transgressive of black American life. So we have this gallery that we call Hokum to address that real quintessential side of Motley. And then finally we wanted a gallery that would deal with Motley's later career, where we ended up incorporating some Chicago works and some Mexican works, most of them produced in the 50s and 60s, all under the title Caliente because they are really hot and intense kinds of paintings. Also, we knew we were never going to be able to borrow two works from the Bill Cosby collection, so we hired a filmmaker who made a wonderful little six-minute meditation on "Stomp" and "Bronzeville at Night."

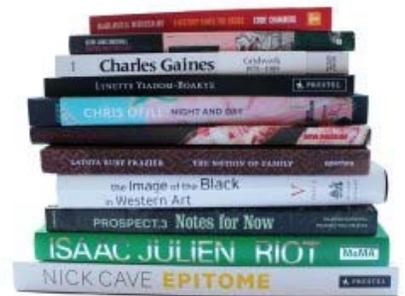
[In his essay for the exhibition catalog, "Face to Face with Archibald J. Motley Jr.," art historian David C. Driskell recounts visiting Motley in Chicago in 1979 to purchase the paintings on behalf of Bill and Camille Cosby.]



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*"The Liar,"* 1936 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.



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**I want to talk about the work specifically, Motley's approach and the subjects. He grew up in a white neighborhood in Chicago and painted these vibrant scenes with black people in Chicago. Then he went to Paris and painted scenes there and later in Mexico. He seems to be very immersed in capturing scenes he is not a part of. How does this remove factor into his work?**

I would first of all disagree that he is not a part of black Chicago. Born in New Orleans, coming up from New Orleans with his family, you are right that he lived in a neighborhood that was German and Swedish and Irish. But when I look at those paintings, I don't view somebody who is an interloper. I don't view somebody who is kind of dropping in from time to time and painting and then running back to home. I really see in those paintings of black Chicago that he is a part of those moments, and I don't think that he could have painted those paintings without feeling a connection.

**The fat man with the red lips and the really white eyes, is that figure a part of Motley's irony and humor?**

Motley has a lot of interesting figures in his paintings that have this sense of witnessing and they stand out from the other figures in a lot of different ways. He uses a number of figures who are full figured. They are heavy set and they pop up in these pictures from time to time and they always have interesting places within the composition. Sometimes they are in the midst of activity, but sometimes they are not. Sometimes they're just kind of in their own kind of reverie and he has other figures that function in that way as well. I am thinking about some of the animals. He has dogs that are sometimes in the lower right-hand corner sniffing and looking at what's going on or he'll have little children in paintings who are not a part of the activities of grown folks. He's always giving us this observer this outsider/insider who is at the pulse of what's going on.



"Barbecue," 1960 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

**What about the figure with the exaggerated lips and eyes?**

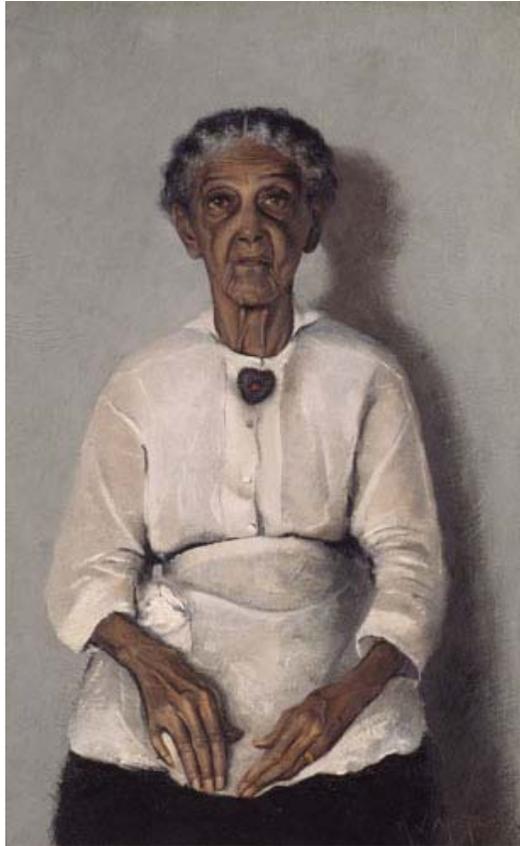
It's really interesting that a lot of people zoom in on that from Motley's paintings. The challenge is how do you deconstruct that? How do you take those kinds of representations apart? For starters, Motley is very much interested in zooming in on the variety and complexity of blackness. Blackness is not a monolith. Black people all don't look like one thing. They look like a lot of different things. Sometimes they're fair skinned. Sometimes they are dark skinned. Sometimes they're fat. Sometimes they're skinny. Sometimes they look like they might be white. Sometimes they look like they have roots and connections to the continent of Africa and their features range. Motley is very conscious of the complexity and that diversity and incorporates that into his work.

*He knows that African Americans during this time struggled around issues of class and race and identity and that he can get a rise out of audiences and viewers when he explores a range of subjects that might be viewed by some people as stereotypic. He is consciously doing this. He is willfully doing this to get people to engage with the work. — Richard J. Powell*

**Obviously black people come in many different shades and shapes, but to have only one or two characters with the exaggerated features, it stands out, as opposed to being one of a palette.**

After doing this show my motto is 'Don't be afraid of big lips anymore!' Motley is very attuned to the racial politics of his time. He knows that African Americans during this time struggled around issues of class and race and identity and that he can get a rise out of audiences and viewers when he explores a range of subjects that might be viewed by some people as stereotypic. He is consciously doing this. He is willfully doing this to get people to engage with the work, but also ultimately to move beyond a simplistic representation or a simplistic sense of what black people should or shouldn't look like. He wants to mix things up to make you come to terms with the richness of the subject

as it is represented from one painting to another. In 2014, after we've looked at Kara Walker, after we've looked at Kerry James Marshall, after we've looked at any number of contemporary black artists who do similar things by incorporating features in an expressive exaggerated way, we can now go back to Motley and see if there are comparisons or contrasts or similarities or differences in how all these artists probe and use race as a vehicle, a modernist statement.



*"Portrait of My Grandmother," 1922 (oil on canvas) | Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.*

**Let's talk about the portraits. Was the portrait of his grandmother Motley's favorite painting?**

It is. It is a spectacular painting (see above). He loves it and I love it. It is funny, I first saw the painting years and years ago, but it never clicked with me. Then when I was working on the exhibit and I went out to see it in storage, I was shocked at how amazingly beautiful it was. Now that we have it up in the gallery, I realize it is truly a masterpiece.

**The style of painting in Motley's portraits is very different from his scene canvases. The portraits are detailed and textural and dimensional. Describe his work in the 20s in these portraits versus the aesthetic approach with the scenic paintings in later decades.**

Portraiture is a medium where we want to be able to connect with a personality. When you see those paintings by Motley you can tell he is a master of portraiture. You can tell that he was educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and that he learned lessons in terms of verisimilitude and how one creates a portrait. He's doing something that you don't see a lot of people doing in the 1920s and that's representing black people in portraits. Motley is devoted to creating his renderings of his family and people in the community. He didn't just do that in the 20s. We have that great portrait of Edna Powell Gayle, "Portrait of the Cultured Lady" from 1948. That's the most recent portrait in that room and its right next to the earliest of his mother from 1919. You can see that while he definitely incorporates elements that speak to his modernist roots he is also very much aware of certain

expectations we have for portraiture.



*"The Octoroon Girl," 1925 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.*

#### **What about the scene paintings?**

When he is not doing portraiture, he is doing something entirely different. He is very much thinking about groups and collective activity and scenes and, as a result, he is also thinking about how one composes those scenes in an expressive and an informative way. He is thinking about color in incredibly progressive ways. If you go through those galleries, you see turquoise and purple and magenta and orange and cobalt blue and pink. He is not afraid to not paint things as you see them, but as you might feel them.

#### **You mentioned racial politics earlier. A couple of Motley's portraits are of his wife, Edith Granzo Motley.**

##### **What, if any, influence did she have on his practice and his pursuits?**

His wife was German American. They were childhood sweethearts before they actually got married. Let me put it this way, Motley was a ladies man. He was very popular with the ladies basically throughout his lifetime and yet he and Edith decided that they would wed. I think even in his notes (one always has to read artists carefully because this is how they want to tell history, which is very different than this is history) he mentions Edith wanted to marry him much earlier than he wanted to be married. He felt that he needed to perfect and get his career together. They finally do wed in the mid 1920s.

##### **Did their interracial union ever pose any issues?**

It was a complicated relationship because while Motley seemed to enjoy moving between white circles and black circles, it was difficult to do that with a white wife at this time. Interracial relationships were not looked on as *c'est la vie* then, as they are now. People were very, very upset about it, or disturbed about it, so they had a very difficult time. I've read information that suggests that it was really difficult for them to just go out as a couple. I can imagine

that when she went to Paris, it was quite liberating for them to be able to walk on the streets of Paris at not be ogled at by people unless they were Americans. He was an artist and I think she understood when she married him, that as an artist, he was going to be this eccentric person in terms of focusing on his painting and his career. But they stayed together. Tragically, she died in the 1940s and he had to raise his 13-year-old son [Archibald J. Motley III] by himself. But he had his family, his mother and other family members to help him.

*It was a complicated relationship because while Motley seemed to enjoy moving between white circles and black circles, it was difficult to do that with a white wife at this time. — Richard J. Powell*



PAGE 91 of "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" | Portrait of Archibald J. Motley Jr. and his wife, Edith Granzo Motley. Paris, France, 1929. | Photographic print. Collection of Mara Motley, MD and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, IChi-67279. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

**Over the course of Motley's career, compared with his contemporaries, why did his work not become as widespread in terms of people purchasing it or museums acquiring it. It is wonderful that his family has so many of his pieces, but I assume that is a unique situation. Why?**

Motley's career is very interesting. By the end of the 1920s he is a major figure. He has received a Guggenheim

fellowship. He's had a major one-person show in New York City at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. He received the Harmon Foundation award, which was a big to do in the 1920s. He gets lots of awards and acknowledgements from the Art Institute of Chicago. By the 1920s he had really made it as a major figure. The critical success was one thing. The financial success and the sales were perhaps not as forthcoming. This is not to say that he didn't get any sales, he actually had quite a few sales, but he also held onto a lot of work. And actually, if one looks at the catalogue, it notes that a number of his works have not been located. A lot of the work that he created has just disappeared. As to how Valerie and Mara received the work. They were in Motley's possession and Motley was very close and connected to his son, Archie, who acquired the works upon the death of his father. When he died, the works were acquired by his wife, Valerie and their daughter, Mara.

*By the 1920s he had really made it as a major figure. The critical success was one thing. The financial success and the sales were perhaps not as forthcoming. – Richard J. Powell*

**Motley was well traveled. He spent summers between art school riding trains with his father, a Pullman Porter, and he later went to Paris and Mexico. When he painted the Chicago jazz paintings was he aware that he was painting something that was being paralleled in Harlem at the time?**

Absolutely. He had access to the Chicago Defender, which was a national paper. It wasn't just a local paper. In the Chicago Defender you have news about what's going on in Harlem, in Washington, D.C., all over black America. In addition, he had access to magazines like The Crisis and Opportunity, national black magazines that cover all sorts of events. He was aware that there was lots of arts activity going on all over the country, but in particular in major urban centers with other black artists. He knew those artists. He was in exhibits in Chicago that included Aaron Douglas and other artists from that era such as Richmond Barthe.



*"The Picnic," 1936 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.*

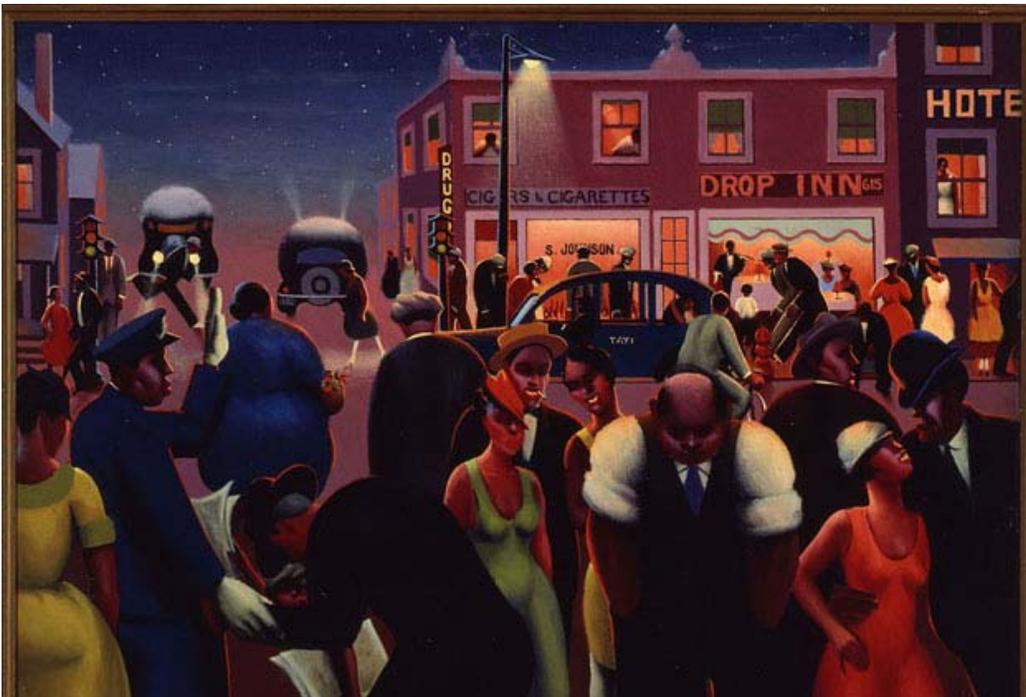
**What paintings in the exhibit are you particularly drawn to or find most significant in his practice?**

I already mentioned "Portrait of My Grandmother," that beautiful gray and white and black painting of her frontal with that amazing little brooch on her chest. Other works? "The Picnic" (above) is an incredible painting that shows a group of people in the park enjoying themselves. That painting is extraordinary in terms of the composition, in terms of his use of color, in terms of the wonderful eye contact and conversations within the picture. "Black Belt," the painting we have on the cover of our catalog, is a tour de force work and seeing it in person underscores that. The painting right opposite it, "Carnival," is a painting that I've always liked and now that I can actually look at it on a regular basis, I really understand how sophisticated it is, how he uses color. I don't know of any other artist who uses orange highlights like he does to give the affect of artificial light casting on individuals. "Lawd, Mah Man's Leavin'," is a major, major masterpiece.

**Throughout the conversation, you have referenced modernism. The name of your essay in the book is "Becoming Motley, Becoming Modern" and the title of the exhibit is about him being a jazz modernist. Explain this modern concept with regard to Motley and why you say "becoming" modern. What are you referring to?**

I mean that modernism as an artistic mode is very much afoot and is the topic, the goal of any number of artists as we move through the 20th century. It becomes for some people an objective to have their work reflect the now, to have their work speak to a conversation with other artists around the world, to really exemplify a divorcing of one's self from Victorian conventional approaches, not just to art, but to lifestyles. Motley is this quintessential modernist artist who is forging a path in painting to clearly set himself apart from everybody else and from in particular a certain kind of way African Americans would have been assumed to paint or to create. He really breaks away from the conventions. We call him a jazz age modernist because a part of his path to modernism is to imagine his work and to imagine his subjects as products of, exemplars of, the jazz age. When I use jazz, I don't just mean music, I mean a kind of an attitude. I mean a lifestyle. I mean a sense of urbanity, sophistication and style that even boils down to how one walks, and how one talks, and how one dresses.

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— Richard J. Powell





*"Black Belt," 1934 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of the Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.*

**Post-Motley, two generations later, what contemporary artists do you find particularly significant?**

There are so many exciting contemporary young artists. William Villalongo, an amazing artist based in New York. He's an amazing painter with a wonderful sense of humor. I guess I am into fun art works, paintings that lift you up. Beverly McIver is another really interesting artist who lives in Durham. She does amazing portraits of herself and her family. Who else? Mark Bradford. Amazing, very different work. Very abstract and big-scale stuff. He is a powerful, powerful artist. Nari Ward, I really like his assemblages and things.

**What are you working on next?**

Motley has gotten me going. My next big project is a book on black visual satire and he's going to be just a little bit of the story. The heart of this book will probably be Robert Colescott who to me is a fascinating and still unpacked artist. There are so many interesting things happening in those paintings. What I want to do in this next book is talk about humor, talk about satire, talk about irony in art. I want to bring in a whole cast of characters. Not just Colescott. Not just Motley, but Renee Cox. I want to go back in time to the black cartoonist Ollie Harrington. I want to look at films like "Watermelon Man" by Melvin Van Peebles and earlier things like "Amos 'n' Andy." I am going to do a set of lectures next year at Harvard. That's going to be the launch of it. **CT**

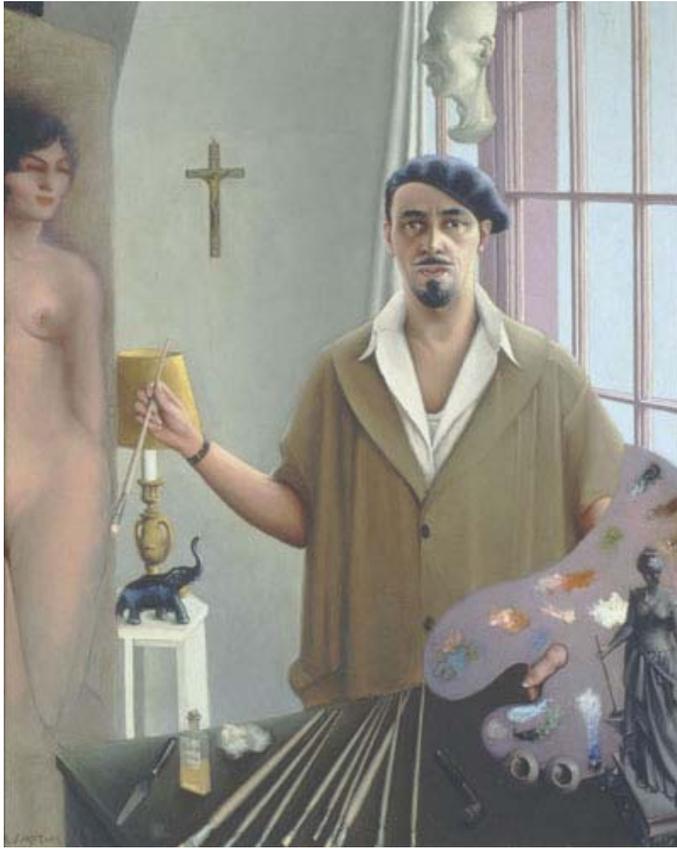
*This interview has been condensed and edited.*

**"Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist," Edited by Richard J. Powell (Duke University Press Books, 176 pages). | Published Feb. 10, 2014.**





*"Barbecue,"* circa 1934 (oil on canvas) | Collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.



*"Self-Portrait (Myself at Work),"* 1933 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.





*"Tongues (Holy Rollers)," 1929 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.*



*"Mending Socks," 1924 (oil on canvas) | Collection of the Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Burton Emmett Collection, 58.1.2801. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.*





"Hot Rhythm," 1961 (oil on canvas) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. | Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

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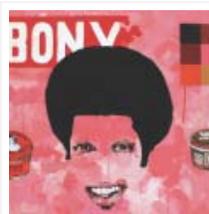
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