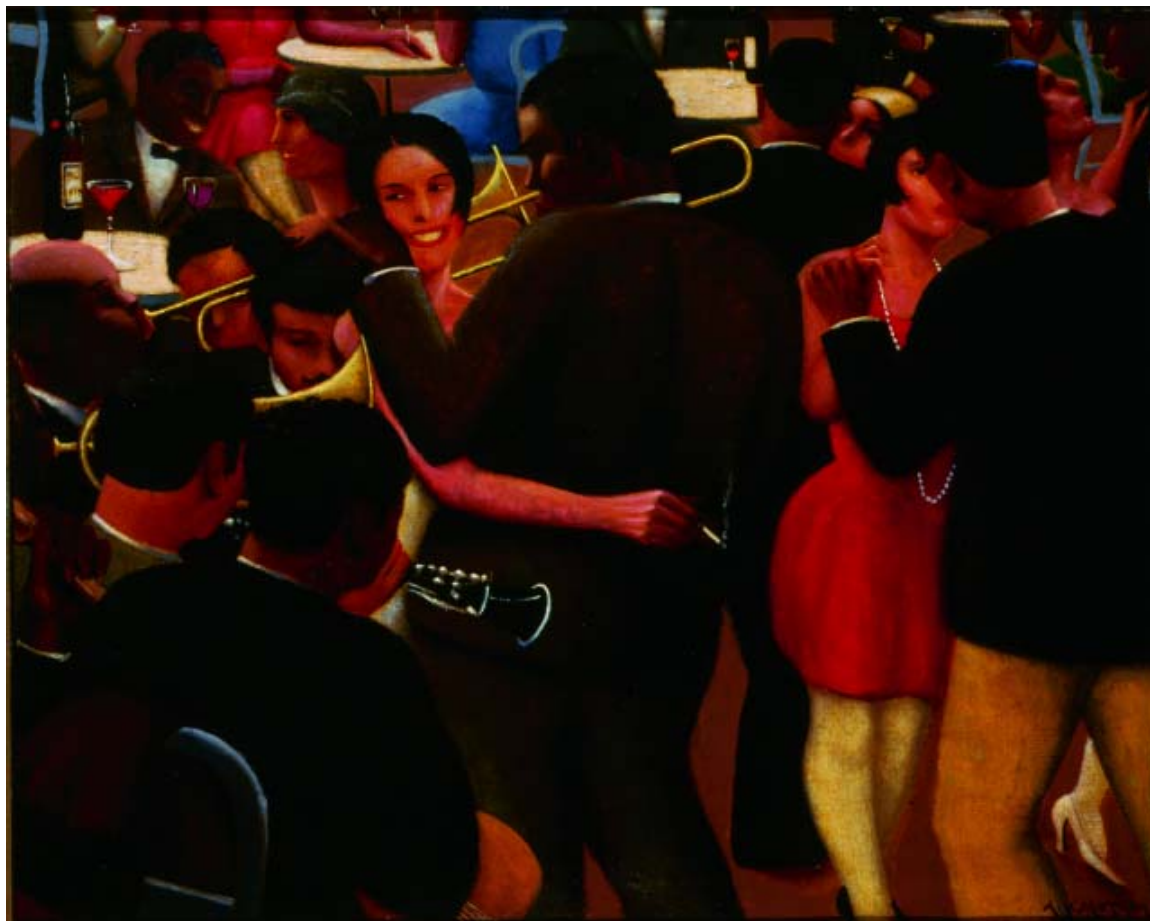


- [About](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Contact](#)

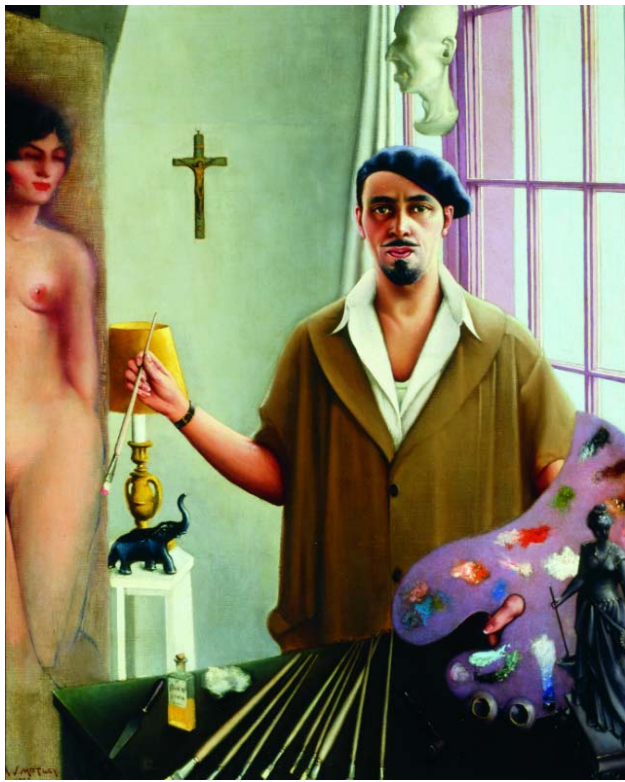
## Rediscovering a Jazz-Age Modernist

by [Allison Meier](#) on [March 3, 2014](#)



Archibald J. Motley Jr., "Blues" 1929. Oil on canvas, 36 x 42 inches (Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne) (image courtesy the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne)

Through subtle portraiture and roaring scenes of the Jazz Age, painter [Archibald J. Motley Jr.](#) chronicled the diversity and dynamism of the African-American community during the early decades of the 20th century. Yet his work is often omitted from discussions of American modernism. A new national touring exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are aiming to strengthen Motley's hold on the history of art.



Archibald J. Motley Jr., “Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)” (1933), oil on canvas, 57.125 x 45.25 in (Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne) (image courtesy the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne) (click to enlarge)

**Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist** opened in January at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Proclaiming to **celebrate** “one of the most significant yet least visible 20th-century artists,” the exhibition will journey to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the Chicago Cultural Center, and finally the Whitney Museum of American Art in the fall of 2015.

An **accompanying catalogue** was released in February, featuring images of Motley’s work laced through with essays that analyze everything from his personal place in Chicago’s Bronzeville — the south Chicago district popular with the African-American community in Motley’s time — to his travels to Mexico and Paris, which he explored as one of the first black recipients of a Guggenheim Fellowship. One issue for the visibility of Motley work’s is that much of it is in private collections, which makes this public tour of 42 pieces done between 1919 and 1960 even more essential to his legacy.

This is the first survey of his work in two decades, but the contrasts that have long been considered in his art are still central to the critical essays in the catalogue. While Motley created refined portraits that don’t flinch at the sensitivities of race, sexuality, and gender, he also painted works of more frenetic movement that show nightlife and society scenes, in which the faces are almost caricatures of all those graceful features in his portraiture.

In Columbia College Associate Professor of Art History Amy M. Mooney’s examination of his use of portraiture — “the most conservative of pictorial conventions” — she writes that these works demonstrate “how the artist viewed them as a means of achieving racial equality,” and that Motley “recognized the value and necessity of integrating black subjects into the canon of art and optimistically believed that such efforts would result in fundamental social change.”



Archibald J. Motley Jr., “The Octoroon Girl” (1925), oil on canvas, 38 x 30.25 in (courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne), and “Brown Girl After the Bath” (1931), oil on canvas, 48.25 x 36 in (Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne)

Motley’s admiration for the Old Masters, perhaps influenced by his studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is evident in his “Portrait of My Grandmother” (1922), in which watery, warm eyes gaze out from an ethereally lit yet worn body, or the more sensual “Brown Girl After the Bath” (1931), in which the soft subtleties of a nude woman’s skin seem illuminated as much by the lamplight as from within. Then, on the other side of the artist’s practice, there are works like “Barbecue” (1934), showing a sprawling picnic, and “Hot Rhythm” (1961), featuring a nightclub where the details of form burst into exaggeration. The catalogue’s editor, Richard J. Powell, the John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University, notes the assertion of Harlem Renaissance figure Alain Locke that Motley seemed “more and more fascinated by the grotesqueries and oddities of Negro life.” The artist embraced its vibrancy, and also its variances. Powell writes:

Motley recognized early that availing himself of caricatured black bodies and scenarios did not necessarily doom the pictorial enterprise, but, rather, energized his work by advancing it toward a broader concordance of representational strategies and conceptual frameworks as per African American subject matter. By providing a space in painting for humor, parody, and ambivalence — a space that had already been made in other discursive forms by Zora Neale Hurston, critic George S. Schuyler, all-around entertainer Josephine Baker, and assorted blues musicians, among others — Motley challenged his fellow African Americans to extend this same nuanced comprehension of black literature and performance to the visual arts.

Chicago, Paris, Mexico, the Jazz Age through the mid-century — it’s hard to imagine better fuel for Motley’s artistic energy. This exhibition and the accompanying catalogue offer a chance to slow down and contemplate these captures of African-American culture, with the contradictions in Motley’s work reflecting the complications of his own identity, as well as those of his subjects.





Archibald J. Motley Jr., "Portrait of My Grandmother" (1922), oil on canvas, 38.25 x 23.875 in (Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne) (image courtesy the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois) ©

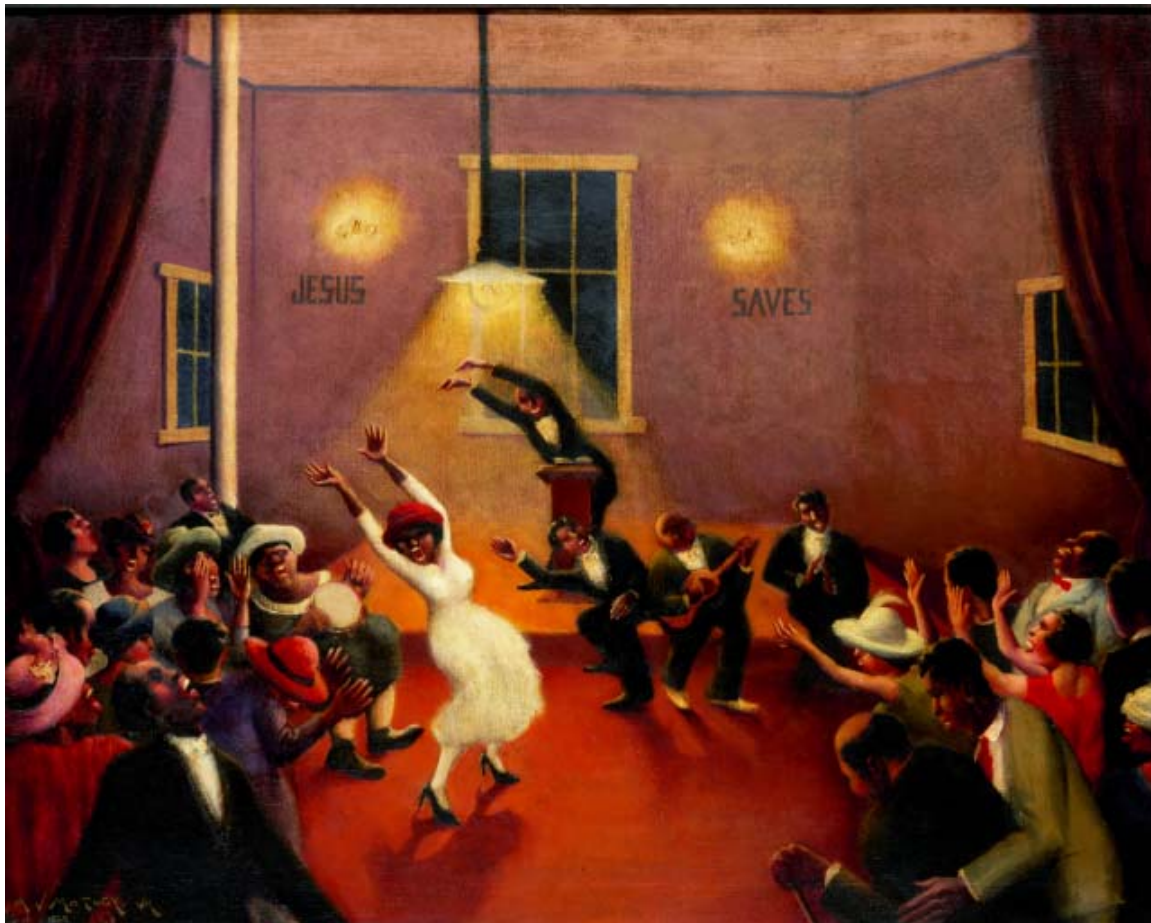


Archibald J. Motley Jr., "Barbecue" (1934), oil on canvas, 39 x 44 in (Collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne)

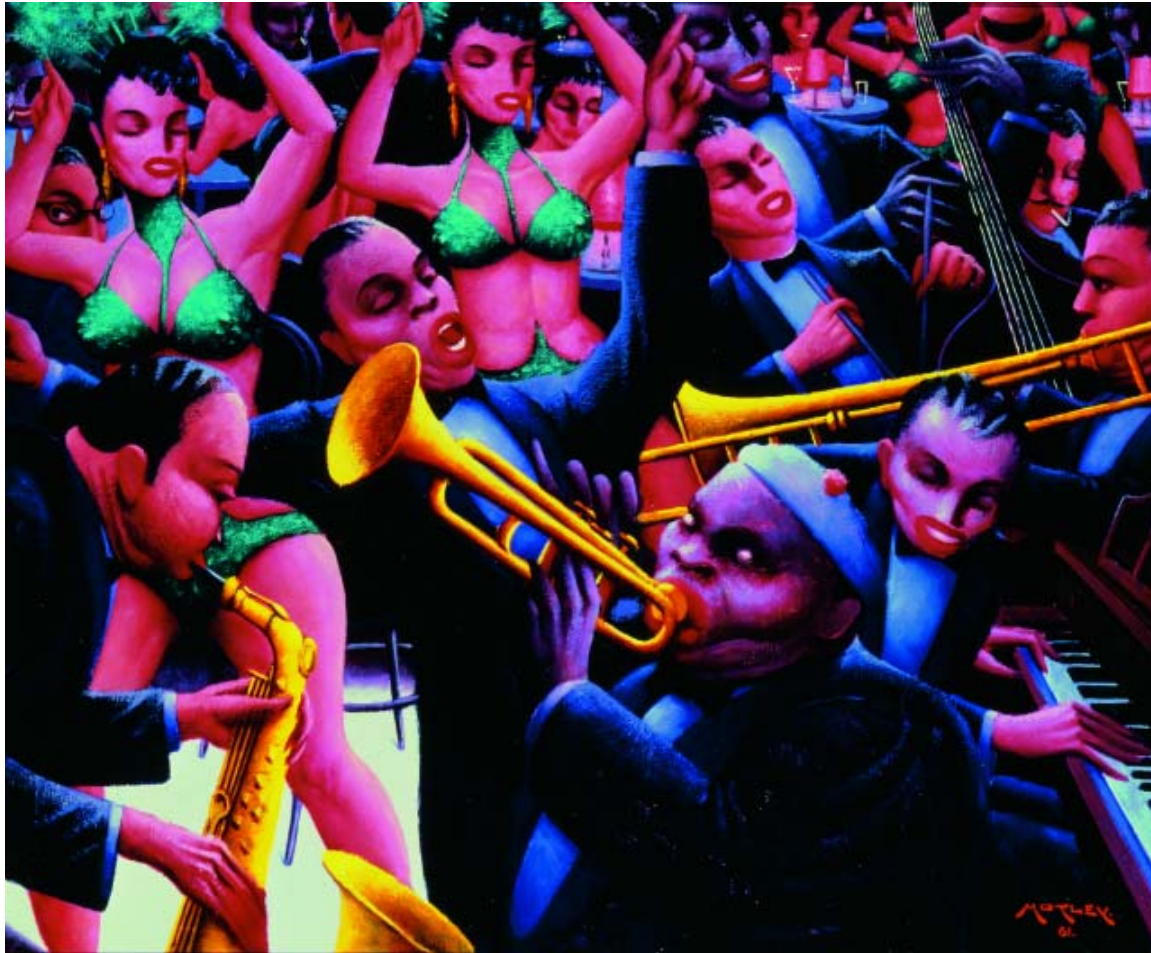




Archibald J. Motley Jr., "Barbecue" (1960), oil on canvas, 30.375 x 40 in (Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne) (image courtesy the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne)



Archibald J. Motley Jr., "Tongues (Holy Rollers)" (1929), oil on canvas, 29.25 x 36.125 in (Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne) (image courtesy the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne)



Archibald J. Motley Jr., "Hot Rhythm" (1961), oil on canvas, 40 x 48.375 in (Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne) (image courtesy the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne)





Archibald J. Motley Jr., "The Picnic" (1936), oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in (Collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) (© Valerie Gerrard Browne)

**Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist** is on view at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (2001 Campus Drive, Durham, North Carolina) through May 11 and then continues on a national tour. The catalogue, **Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist**, is available from Duke University Press Books.