



Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

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Archibald Motley, The Painter Who Captured Black America in the Jazz Age and Beyond

The artist Archibald Motley captured both the high times and cultural vibrancy of the Jazz Age, as well as graver themes of racism and injustice.



The sexy sway of a 1920s Paris nightclub, filled with light- and dark-skinned people pressed against each other.

The bustling streets of the almost exclusively black “Bronzeville” neighborhood

A depressing surreal scene of horror following the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and the failings of the 1960s Civil Rights movement.

These are just a handful of the diverse visual expressions of the African-American experience that the artist Archibald Motley so adroitly and sumptuously captured throughout his career.

PHOTOS: Black America in the Jazz Age and Beyond



Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

As versatile in his aesthetic style as he was committed to scrutinizing African-American culture, Motley was a uniquely daring and sharp artist who stood out even among the Harlem Renaissance greats.

Yet, Motley's name does not elicit the same nods of recognition and respect as

That could—and certainly should—change after the retrospective *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist* opens October 2 at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Traveling through different chapters of his career, though not boxed into a strict chronology, the exhibition showcases how Motley was a thorough and sensitive observer of the black community, documenting its diversity while bringing his own keen perspective to its traditions and subcultures.

Motley “set his work apart” because he “created a modern, vibrant world which, as seen through a pair of jaded, laserlike ‘Negro’ eyes, revealed the jazz- and blues-accented absurdities that lay behind life’s facades and public face,” writes Richard J. Powell in “Becoming Motley, Becoming Modern,” an essay in the book, *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*.

Powell, who is an art historian and dean of humanities at Duke University, curated the Whitney exhibition.

In other words, Motley wasn’t afraid to capture the good and the bad of black life, as his peers made tremendous gains yet the community in general often struggled in poverty and disenfranchisement in a segregated, very racist America.

At least a significant part of Motley’s distinct perspective on African-American life came from his unique upbringing for a black man of his era.

“Motley challenged his fellow African Americans to extend the same nuanced comprehension of black literature and performance to the visual arts.”

Born in New Orleans in 1891, Motley was raised in Chicago’s then largely white immigrant Engelwood neighborhood and married his white childhood friend, Edith Granzo, in 1924.

Trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Motley’s earliest critically acclaimed paintings were portraits of different figures within the African-American community.

His 1924 *Mending Socks* depicted his grandmother, Emily Motley, a former

refinement.

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Motley was not so forward-looking that he ignored the complicated, painful slaveholding past. *Mending Socks* features part of a portrait of his grandmother's mistress in the upper left corner, hanging over her.

As important as it was for Motley to capture history, it was equally, if not more, significant to him to depict the spectrum of skin tones considered black. A blend of ethnicities himself, he was dedicated to painting "the whole gamut," as he said, of African-American complexions.

1920's *Mulatress with Figuring and Dutch Seascape* and 1925's *The Octoroon Girl* speak to his commitment of not only visually presenting multiracial figures, but doing so in a way that showed them as refined, strong figures.

As the Whitney exhibition notes of Motley's artistic interest in these portraits: "On the one hand, he believed that seeing themselves in art would help African Americans feel pride in their own racial identities; on the other, he hoped that seeing beautiful contemporary black subjects would dispel stereotypes and undermine racism."

This objective didn't disappear as his career progressed and he explored less positive portrayals of African American life.

His 1948 *Portrait of a Cultured Lady* is a strikingly restrained yet powerful image of a regal, sophisticated older African-American woman sitting in a modern-looking home while one of Motley's own paintings hangs on the wall behind her.

That the woman is referred to simply as a "Cultured Lady" is in itself a protest against the racism, stereotypes, and segregation of post-World War II America.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, Motley began to focus on group scenes from black life—often in bustling, energetic nightclubs or crowded streets. However,

Walking through the Whitney from the first room, which is focused on Motley's portraits, to the second showcasing his undulating, sumptuously-colored paintings of Paris and Bronzeville feels like one is looking at two completely different artists' bodies of work.

Motley lived in Paris from 1929 to 1930, after being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. There, he joined many other black Americans who left the States for greater freedoms abroad. The stillness of his portraits is jarring compared to the energy and movement in these scenes.

One can almost hear the trombones and trumpets of the Paris nightclub and feel the seductive touch of the young black woman with the sexy bobbed hair in Motley's 1929 *Blues*.

She is clutching a cigarette while her arm is wrapped around the waist of her dance partner, a trombonist. According to the exhibition, *Blues* shows how Paris helped "Motley fashion a new identity as a 'blues aesthetician' and visual interpreter of black modernity."

Similarly swinging is his 1935 *Saturday Night*, which shows that Motley brought his Paris evolution back to the States, specifically to scenes of the predominantly black Bronzeville section of Chicago.

Again, the music is almost audible thanks to the "jarring spatial distortion and artificial lighting effects," which give a "visual rhythm" to the painting of the nightclub, as the exhibition notes state.

Motley also painted scenes of the African-American community that utilized stereotyped images and behaviors—and not necessarily refuting them.

His 1936's *The Liar* shows a group of black men boozing in a seedy poolroom. Many have stereotyped thick red lips and big white eyes that make them appear as if they are in blackface.

It's jarring to more modern, politically-correct sensibilities. The exhibition notes that Motley "made strategic use of stereotypes" to compose a work that "was a caricature, intended to be mocking and affectionate simultaneously."

Motley applied this style to portraying rural, Southern black culture—a subject that fascinated him but was far removed from his educated, relatively

That might explain why there's a certain detached, almost disparaging tone to his depictions, especially in 1940's *Lawd, Mah Man's Leavin'*.

In it, an overweight black woman raises her hands and wails as her man leaves her small shack and a tiny, weak, sparsely dressed child looks askance. Still, what appears offensive to modern eyes was Motley's way of representing and parodying "downhome" culture—and he wasn't alone.

"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, all-around entertainer Josephine Baker, and assorted blues musicians, among others," Powell writes, "Motley challenged his fellow African Americans to extend the same nuanced comprehension of black literature and performance to the visual arts."

Motley's most striking, and most politically and culturally critical, work would be his final one.

Motley devoted nearly a decade, from 1963 to 1972, to painting *The First One Hundred Years: He Amongst You Who is Without Sin Shall Cast the First Stone; Forgive Them Father For They Know Not What*.

Ever the sharp-eyed observer, Motley captured in a single painting how the optimism of the Civil Rights movement crumbled in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and racial unrest.

A Klu Klux Klan member stands out against the predominant blue color with the red blood on his hand, as does the red of the Confederate flag and the devil.

In the background of explosive chaos, a black lynching victim hangs in a tree, while the disembodied heads of King, John F. Kennedy Jr., and Abraham Lincoln look on in horror.

After expressing this unadulterated rage and sadness on canvas, Motley put down his paintbrush and passed away nine years later in 1981.

His final work was a massive departure for the jazzy modernism and moving portraits that had earned acclaim, but his willingness to make bold moves to adequately capture black life in America was a hallmark of his entire career.