



Archibald Motley Paintings Revel and Reveal in Jazz Age Modernist

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by Charles A. Riley II

The joint is jumping at the Whitney where “Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist” has just started playing.

Motley was born in New Orleans in 1891 and, like the jazz movement itself, migrated to Chicago, the city with which he is most closely identified. After studying at the Art Institute of Chicago, he reached Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1929, following in the footsteps of [Sidney Bechet](#), [Josephine Baker](#) and [Langston Hughes](#). These were just a few of the many African-American artists who pursued that route, beneficiaries of the Harlem Renaissance and the “New Negro” movement and grants from the Guggenheim, Rosenwald and Harmon foundations. Many also enjoyed the patronage of Dr. Alfred Barnes, Gertrude Stein (who moved on from the Cubists in the 1920s), and such established artists as [Henry Ossawa Tanner](#), who had been in France for more than a decade.

Motley was a protégé of [George Bellows](#), under whom he studied at the Art Institute in 1919, and it is instructive to descend a flight at the Whitney to compare teacher and student while at the same time noting the resemblances to the work of [W.H. Johnson](#), another African-American artist in Paris, and works by [Edward Hopper](#) and [Reginald Marsh](#). The twisting bodies of his mentor’s large-scale canvases are echoed in such complex group scenes as Motley’s *Blues* (1929), a pivotal painting in the exhibition.



“Blues” by Archibald J. Motley Jr., 1929. Oil on canvas, 36 × 42 inches. Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

The central couple in the whirl of dancing figures is a tall, light-skinned flapper with skinny arms and high cheekbones, features suggesting that this could be [Nancy Cunard](#). Notice the dancer’s alcohol-blurred eyes are not on her partner but trained instead on one of the musicians in the band, which accords well with Cunard’s reputation as a cougar with a well-known appetite for jazzmen. She absentmindedly trails a cigarette behind her dance partner, as big as a football lineman, smiling all the while—as do most of the other couples—bright and white like a toothpaste ad.

This is not the melancholy, dark blues of Langston Hughes but a revel in Harlem (or Montparnasse,

more likely, if the white woman is dancing with a black man). The composition echoes not just the crowded figures of *Bellows* but some important French sources as well. It is as complex as the outdoor dance scenes at the Moulin a la Galette by Renoir and [Picasso](#), which similarly pick out white accents of cuffs, collars and pearls. Nothing in the show has as much life as this panoramic dance floor scene.

The party is on and popping in a room full of American group portraits in which Motley pulls the curtain back on upper-middle class black life. The ladies in *Cocktails* are banging back martinis in the middle of the day, and in style, in the middle of Prohibition (the work is dated 1926). But where are the men? Just along the wall in the same room, *The Boys in the Back Room* are playing cards, drinking beer from their martini glasses, also served by a black butler. The scene is wilder in *Holy Rollers*, which is one of many paintings that uses a blue or purple tonality over the whole picture, one of Motley's later stylistic responses to the artistic, as opposed to political, issue of color.



“Tongues (Holy Rollers)” by Archibald J. Motley Jr., 1929. Oil on canvas, 29.25 x 36.125 inches. Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

The Whitney has its pedagogical and community responsibilities, and many of the parables in the show are heavy-handed teaching moments, rhetorical and ready for spoon-feeding but artistically dismaying. For one example, Motley's reputation in Chicago was secured by the Norman Rockwell-worthy *Mending Socks*, which caught a wave of sentimentality when it was made in 1924.

The worst of the didacticism is the late, overloaded allegory *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 They Do*. It bludgeons the viewer with a catalogue of clichés, including images of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln, a Klansman, a lynching and a Halloween haunted house. Like ranting typed in all caps, its message loses its force to the problem of overstatement. Hands up, I surrender, but just let me return to the art.

This may be a “post-racist” society in the eyes of some, but the question of color is complicated in the gallery of portraits, the most important part of the show from an art history point of view. The gallery walls are a deep plum tone, and each of the portraits intently examines the play of skin tones that outwardly manifest the inner fugue of genes. The nude and clothed portraits of Motley's wife, against a ruby background worthy of [Modigliani](#) (a major influence on Parisian painters of the time) are perfect examples of the meticulous, Renoir-inspired layering of tones, blended but still distinguishable from close in.



“Nude (Portrait of My Wife)” by Archibald J. Motley Jr., 1930. Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 × 23 1/2 inches. Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy the Chicago History Museum. © Valerie Gerrard Browne



“Portrait of Mrs. A.J. Motley, Jr.” by Archibald J. Motley Jr., 1930. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 × 32 inches. Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy the Chicago History Museum. © Valerie Gerrard Browne

The awkward word, at least in our time, is “mulatto,” a key term in the study of Motley’s career. His portraits are variations on that theme, such as the lusciously observed *Brown Girl After the Bath* and the early *Mulatress with Figurine and Dutch Landscape*, in which he also takes immense pains to make sure her fashion, like the fox stole in his wife’s portrait, is *comme il faut* to the last button. To the eyes of a reviewer who has been teaching inner-city kids in a public university for decades, she looks more Latina than black, but the title raises the issue.



“Mulatress with Figurine and Dutch Seascape” by Archibald J. Motley Jr., c. 1920. Oil on canvas, 31.375 × 27.625 inches. Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

Like a double shot of whiskey neat, Motley’s straight-shooting glimpses of the late-night action in a blues club make a bold claim to truth through authenticity. They cross the gap between the painting of Paris and the rhythm of Harlem. They are also emblems of the creative capital inherent in the double lives of African-American painters in Paris, Chicago, Harlem or Berlin, negotiating their “difference” just as the jazz players did by making sure their work did swing.

Langston Hughes and Archibald Motley did not meet in Paris, but their Jazz Age sojourns in Montparnasse shaped their work. The best of Motley, jaunty but in the minor key, calls out for a colophon by Hughes:

The rhythm of life

Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us.
The broken heart of love,
The weary, weary heart of pain,-
Overtones,
Undertones,
To the rumble of street cars,
To the swish of rain.
Lenox Avenue,
Honey.
Midnight,
And the gods are laughing at us.



“Hot Rhythm” by Archibald J. Motley Jr., 1961. Oil on canvas, 40 × 48 3/8 inches. Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy the Chicago History Museum. © Valerie Gerrard Browne

BASIC FACTS: “Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist,” October 2, 2015 to January 17, 2016, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, New York, NY 10014; (212) 570-3600; www.whitney.org

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