



# The Whitney Acquires Archibald Motley Painting for its Art Collection

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by Hamptons Art Hub Staff

[The Whitney Museum of American Art](#) has acquired Archibald Motley's painting *Gettin' Religion* (1948) for its permanent collection. The painting is the first art work by the American modernist to enter the Whitney's collection, announced the museum. Archibald Motley's art is the subject of the retrospective "[Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist](#)" which closes on Sunday, January 17, 2016 at The Whitney.

*Gettin' Religion* was in the artist's possession at the time of his death in 1981 and has since remained with his family, according to the museum. The Whitney purchased the work directly from Motley's heirs. After [Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist](#) closes, the painting is expected to be installed on the museum's seventh floor as part of The Whitney's Collection.

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"*Gettin' Religion*" by Archibald Motley. Courtesy The Whitney Museum of American Art.

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*Gettin' Religion* is one of the artist's iconic Chicago street scenes. It's acquisition is considered an important one to the New York City art museum.

"The Whitney Museum has long championed artists such as [Edward Hopper](#) and [Reginald Marsh](#) who captured the everyday life of the city in their works. We are thrilled that we can now hang this crucial acquisition, *Gettin' Religion*, alongside such mainstays of the collection," said Dana Miller, the Whitney's Richard DeMartini Family Curator and Director of the Collection. "We expect that within a very short period of time it will come to be regarded as one of the icons of the Whitney's collection."

Adam D. Weinberg, the Whitney's Alice Pratt Brown Director, noted in the news announcement, "For the last several years we have been working to bolster our holdings of works by key figures associated with the Harlem Renaissance and at the top of the list was bringing a major Motley painting into the collection."

Motley first came to prominence in the 1920s during the early days of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural hotbed of African American art, music, and literature that sprung from the New York City neighborhood but also extended to other cities, notably Chicago, where Motley spent most of his

life.

Motley's art drew inspiration from neighborhoods just south of Chicago's main business district, a socially dynamic quarter known as the "Black Belt" and "Bronzeville," both of which referred to the skin color of its inhabitants. The poet Langston Hughes described the neighborhood's main leisure thoroughfare, known as "the Stroll," as being crowded with "theaters, restaurants, and cabarets. And excitement from noon to noon. Midnight was like day. The street was full of workers and gamblers, prostitutes and pimps, church folks and sinners," according to *The Whitney*.

The broad demographics and shifting cityscape of Bronzeville are evident in Motley's *Gettin' Religion* (1948), which depicts an expansive spectrum of African American urban life. In the painting, the street bustles with characters including amorous young couples, the elderly, musicians, children and people dressed for an evening on the town.

A wooden house bookended by an apartment building and a market form perches for residents peering at the life parading in front of them. Their perspectives mirror that of the art work viewer, forming a bond with the voyeurs, those on the street and the artwork itself. Motley fuses the vivid narrative with coloristic invention; the nocturnal scene in blues and purples and the cool light emanating from an electric lamppost is echoed by the stars that dot the indigo night sky.

Archibald John Motley Jr. (1891-1981) was one of the first black artists to attend the [School of the Art Institute of Chicago](#). His training there was academic, rigorously focused on the human figure, and steeped in European tradition. Motley's sophisticated understanding of art history is especially apparent in his sympathetic portraits, but it was a history that he challenged and advanced with his raucous depictions of everyday urban life.

While Edward Hopper, [Thomas Hart Benton](#), and Reginald Marsh became much more famous than Motley for their American scenes, Motley also developed and elucidated his own archetypes of place and people in this country, based on African American subject matter. His paintings combine vivid narrative with dizzying spatial distortion and jarring hues to produce striking settings for characters of diverse racial backgrounds and social classes.

While his portrayals range from serene and august portraits to abrasive or outrageous caricatures, all were Motley's instruments for addressing the poignancy, folly, and complexity of modern life, explained the museum.

"Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" was organized by [the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University](#) and curated by noted art historian and Duke professor Richard J. Powell. Part of the aim of the retrospective was to reclaim Motley's rightful place in American art history, according to The Guggenheim.

To read a Hamptons Art Hub review of the retrospective, visit "[Archibald Motley Paintings Revel and Reveal in Jazz Age Modernist](#)".