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PRESS RELEASE



Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Blues*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 36 × 42 inches (91.4 × 106.7 cm). Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois. © Valerie Gerrard Browne.

Whitney to Present Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist

NEW YORK, August 20, 2015—This fall, the Whitney Museum of American Art will present *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*, the first retrospective of this pioneering artist in New York City in more than two decades. One of the most important figures associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Motley was a master colorist with a daring sense of spatial invention, qualities he combined with keen observational skills honed on urban culture. The exhibition offers an unprecedented opportunity to carefully examine Motley's dynamic depictions of modern life, and will be on view from October 2, 2015, through January 17, 2016, in the Museum's eighth-floor Hurst Family Galleries.

Comprised of more than forty paintings spanning 1919 to 1963, the exhibition is a full-scale survey of Motley's career and a rare opportunity to see such a large collection of his relatively small surviving body of work. Although the artist worked in Chicago most of his life, he was also inspired by Jazz Age Paris, and, later in his career, visits to Mexico. Motley's bold use of vibrant, expressionistic color and keen attunement to issues of race, society, and class make him one of the great visual chroniclers of his era.

According to Carter E. Foster, Steven and Ann Ames Curator of Drawing at the Whitney: “Archibald Motley’s achievement is on par with the greatest American artists of his generation. He inflected his paintings with an extraordinary visual rhythm and highly unusual sense of artificial light and color—his version of modernism is a unique and thrilling one. The presentation of this landmark exhibition at the Whitney and in the context of its collection argues for his long overdue place in the canon of great American painters.”

Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art, Art History & Visual Studies, and Dean of Humanities at Duke University, who curated the exhibition, writes: “Archibald Motley offers a fascinating glimpse into a modernity filtered through the colored lens and foci of a subjective African American urban perspective. Fusing psychology, a philosophy of race, upheavals of class demarcations, and unconventional optics, Motley’s art wedged itself between, on the one hand, a Jazz Age set of iconographic cultural passages, and on the other hand, an American version of Weimar Germany.”

Arranged thematically, with some chronological overlap, the exhibition has six sections, each looking at a particular facet of Motley’s oeuvre. It begins with a selection of the artist’s portraits, a traditional genre he treated with great sophistication, combining his strong sense of art history with an interest in changing social roles. The artist first achieved recognition for his dignified depictions of African Americans and people of mixed race descent, which challenged numerous contemporary stereotypes of race and gender.

In 1929, Motley received a Guggenheim Fellowship that allowed him to work for a year in Paris, where he created several lively paintings that vividly capture the pulse and tempo of the city. These canvases, which make up the section “Paris Blues,” depict diverse social worlds in Paris’s meandering streets and congested cabarets. Some of Motley’s greatest works came about during this period, including *Blues* (1929), a closely cropped image of couples dancing amid jazz musicians that is among the artist’s masterworks and an icon of the Harlem Renaissance.

Upon returning to the United States, Motley built further on the visual rhythms he honed in Paris in his scenes of “Bronzeville,” the common contemporary term for the thriving African-American neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago that greatly inspired the artist. His resulting works occupy the fourth section, “Nights in Bronzeville,” and together form a loose series that, taken together, is one of the most significant visual statements on modern urban life in America.

Paintings in the following section, “Between Acts,” reflect on leisure activity and societal changes within the African-American community. These urban scenes of dance halls, bars, parks, and playgrounds, at once celebrate the modernity of the Jazz Age, and simultaneously address influx of African-Americans from the south to northern cities as part of the Great Migration.

In “Hokum,” the artist’s penchant for outrageous humor and satire comes to the fore, his approach to his subject here sharing much in common with the genre of blues music from which the section takes its title. The final segment of the exhibition, “Caliente,” gathers works that were inspired by Motley’s travels through Mexico, where he created vivid and often surreal depictions of life and landscapes. The exhibition ends with a highly unusual, allegorical painting: a moving and disturbing meditation on race relations in America.

Archibald Motley is organized by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and curated by Richard

J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art, Art History & Visual Studies and Dean of Humanities at Duke. Prior to its presentation at the Whitney, it traveled to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas (June 14–September 7, 2014), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (October 19, 2014–February 1, 2015), and the Chicago Cultural Center (March 6–August 31, 2015)

About the Artist

Archibald John Motley Jr. (1891–1981) was born in New Orleans but moved to Chicago, the city with which he is most closely associated, in 1894. His father was a Pullman porter, who lived and worked for the first half of the twentieth century in a predominately white neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest side, providing a middle class lifestyle for his family.

Motley studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1914 to 1918. Following his graduation, he participated in a string of group shows at the Art Institute of Chicago, receiving several awards for his work. In 1928, an exhibition of his paintings at New York City's New Gallery garnered coverage in both *The New York Times* and the *New Yorker*.

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, Motley's work was included in several exhibitions in the United States, including *Contemporary Black Artists in America* at the Whitney (1933), as well as group shows at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (1933), the Baltimore Museum of Art (1939), and the Library of Congress (1940).

In the 1950s, Motley made several lengthy visits to Mexico, where his nephew, the writer Willard F. Motley, lived. He largely stopped painting in 1972. In 1980, he was one of ten African-American artists honored by Jimmy Carter at the White House. He died in Chicago in 1981.

Catalogue

Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist is accompanied by an illustrated exhibition catalogue with critical texts by scholars Davarian L. Baldwin, David C. Driskell, Oliver Meslay, Amy M. Mooney, Richard J. Powell and poet/essayist/novelist Ishmael Reed. The catalogue is published by the Nasher Museum and distributed by Duke University Press.

Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist is organized by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

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Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for more than eighty years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

<i>America Is Hard to See</i>	Through Sept 27, 2015
<i>Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist</i>	Oct 2, 2015–Jan 17, 2016
<i>Jared Madere</i>	Oct 16, 2015–Jan 3, 2016
<i>Frank Stella: A Retrospective</i>	Oct 30, 2015–Feb 7, 2016
<i>Rachel Rose</i>	Oct 30, 2015–Feb 7, 2016
<i>Collected by Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagne</i>	Nov 20, 2015–Mar 6, 2016
<i>Laura Poitras</i>	Feb 5–May 15, 2016
<i>Stuart Davis In Full Swing</i>	June 30–Oct 10, 2016
<i>Carmen Herrera</i>	Fall 2016
<i>Sophia Al-Maria</i>	Summer 2016
<i>David Wojnarowicz</i>	Fall 2016/Winter 2017
<i>Whitney Biennial</i>	Spring 2017

The Whitney Museum is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Museum hours are: Monday, Wednesday, and Sunday from 10:30 am to 6 pm, Thursday through Saturday from 10:30 am to 10 pm, closed Tuesday. General admission: \$22. Full-time students and visitors ages 19–25 and 62 & over: \$18. Visitors under 18 and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 p.m. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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