LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART
5905 WILSHIRE BOULEVARD
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90036
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

LACMA

Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist

Why should the Negro painter, the Negro sculptor mimic that which the white Man is doing when he has such an enormous colossal field practically all his own; portraying his people historically, dramatically, hilariously, but honestly. And who knows the Negro race, the Negro soul, the Negro heart, better than himself?

—Archibald Motley Jr.

Painter Archibald J. Motley Jr. (1891–1981) created portraits and scenes that reflect the African American experience of his era. Although he was associated with the Harlem Renaissance, a creative flourishing of the literature, art, music, and culture of African Americans, he never lived in New York's Harlem neighborhood nor did he associate with those artists. In fact, he did not feel that the visual arts were as important to the Harlem Renaissance as other art forms. Nevertheless, he is still best known for his portraits and paintings of urban street scenes and jazz cabarets, which visually embody the spirit of that movement.

These materials focus on the exhibition *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist* (on view through February 1, 2015), which features paintings from throughout the artist's career. Dedicated to exploring the diversity and richness of black culture through naturalistic portraits, and later, stylized genre scenes of everyday life, Motley embraced drama, humor, and honesty. Educators and students will learn about the career of this important artist, who lived during a turbulent and important time in American history, through examples of paintings of African Americans, including his family, friends, and neighbors—and historic events.

His Life

Motley was born in New Orleans to parents who held some of the most prestigious jobs available to African Americans at the time. His mother was a school-teacher; his father, a porter for Pullman railroad cars. Motley was of African American, Creole, and European descent. His light skin and middle-class status afforded him opportunities that were often out of reach for other African Americans in that period. Because of their Creole or "French Negro" heritage, economic standing, and level of education, the family retained a certain respectability within their community.

Like many African Americans at the time, the Motleys migrated to the "north" in search of better economic opportunities and to escape the South's rampant racism. Motley was two years old when he settled with his family in Englewood, a mostly white, middle-class suburb of Chicago, where Motley attended mostly white primary and middle schools.

Motley attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), a prestigious institution that was one of the first colleges to allow black students. There, he trained in formal, conventional painting techniques including traditional compositions and representational drawing methods. Motley thought that he ought to "abide by principles of true art, as our [white] brethren do." Although mostly accepted by the other students, Motley nevertheless experienced some harassment. A family friend paid for Motley's first year of study. After that, he supported himself with jobs such as dusting sculpture pedestals and working as a janitor. Despite the difficulties of paying his own way through school, Motley earned good grades and won several awards for his artwork.

At SAIC, he met other black artists, as well as artists whose works centered on the modern, urban American experience. These experiences led him to embark on a career that focused on depicting contemporary African American life, which was unusual at the time. Using the traditional techniques he had learned, he painted portraits that depict African Americans in a dignified way, rather than in the stereotypical or caricatured ways that white artists had often portrayed African Americans. Motley wanted to represent the American Negro honestly and sincerely. He said: "I feel that my work is peculiarly American; a sincere personal expression of the age and I hope a contribution to society."

After graduation from SAIC in 1918, Motley had immediate success. He exhibited widely and won many awards, including a prestigious offer to study abroad in Paris, through a 1929 Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1933 he began teaching at Howard University and working for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (FAP) as part of a New Deal program to give work to unemployed artists during the Great Depression. One of the artworks he completed while working for the FAP, *Arrival at Chickasaw Bayou of the Slaves of President Davis,* is included in this packet.

After a courtship of fourteen years, Motley married his neighborhood friend Edith Granzo. Her family, of German descent, disowned her because of her interracial marriage. Archibald J. Motley III (Archie), Edith and Archibald Jr.'s only son, was born in 1933. Archie later recalled that the family rarely went out together because of constant racial prejudice. It was only in Paris in 1929–30, when Edith joined her husband during his fellowship, that the couple had been able to socialize more freely, since a more tolerant attitude prevailed there.

His Times

Motley came of age during a turbulent and exciting time in American history, and he witnessed developments such as rapid industrialization, the Great Depression, and World War II. He was probably most inspired by the Jazz Age and Harlem Renaissance, both of which peaked in the 1920s.

Although named for a neighborhood in New York City, the Harlem Renaissance extended to other cities such as New Orleans and Chicago. In Chicago, Motley documented African Americans at leisure in "Bronzeville" (a reference to the brown complexions of the people who dominated its streets and boulevards), a neighborhood in the South Side of Chicago where many African American families had settled. The area, about 90 percent black, had a thriving African American business community and music culture, especially that of jazz and blues. Motley studied Chicago's African American community intently, painting its black elites as well as its recently arrived Southern migrants, unseemly slackers, and troublemakers. After a hard week of work, Motley observed African Americans as they danced, drank, and enjoyed the social entertainment offered in "Bronzeville," a place where people of different races, economic circumstances, and social status could come together. As a light-skinned black man living in middle-class Englewood, he was both an insider and an outside observer of his fellow African Americans.

Between 1930 and 1949, Motley executed numerous paintings celebrating scenes of everyday life, including depictions of picnics, barbeques (one of which is included in this packet), parades, and urban nightlife. His works from this period reflect the cultural milieu: rhythmic figures, pulsating colors, and animated compositions all suggest the high energy of jazz. Motley used both natural and artificial light to give his figures an unusual intensity—and his vibrant colors became one of the most distinctive features of his work.

His Portraits

Motley sought to improve race relations by dispelling stereotypes through his art, skillfully creating sensitive, nuanced portraits of African Americans. He also wanted to expose his fellow African Americans to the fine arts. He felt compelled to depict a mostly positive image of the black businessmen, cultured women, workers, and family members that surrounded him. He wrote: "I sincerely hope that with the progress the Negro has made, he is deserving to be represented in his true perspective, with dignity, honesty, integrity, intelligence, and understanding."

In many of his portraits, Motley captured his sitters' poise and demeanor, conveying a sense of their achievement, in addition to creating a believable likeness. Motley hoped that if blacks could see themselves in art they would gain an appreciation for their own racial identity. And he hoped that if whites could see the beauty and accomplishments of African Americans, stereotypes and racism might be dispelled.

In one series, Motley depicted African American women with different shades of skin color. He titled his portraits of racially mixed women with the Creole classifications that specified the amount of Negro blood they supposedly had—"mulatto" (half), "quadroon" (one-quarter), and "octoroon" (one-eighth). This was an important distinction at the time because it determined social status and legal rights. Two of his favorite portraits, one of his grandmother, and *The Octoroon Girl,* are included in this packet.

Motley's portraits, although masterfully executed, may suggest that he had complex feelings about race. He sometimes referenced stereotypes that equated physical appearance with social status. The light-skinned octoroon woman is beautiful, but she remains nameless, known only by her racial designation. But, as in the portrait of his grandmother, he also portrayed African Americans as dignified and unique individuals at a time when it was uncommon to make African Americans the subject in a work of traditional fine art.

His Genre Scenes

Motley spent 1929–30 in Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship. He went abroad to "study the masterpieces in the Louvre, as to color, composition, drawing, and technique." Similar in structure and spirit to his Chicago paintings (which had already garnered high praise from French art critics as early as 1925), these Parisian canvases extended the geographical boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance. Motley was not the only African American in Jazz Age Paris. Paris experienced "a black cultural uproar" in these years, incited by fellow visual artists, entertainers, intellectuals, and others of African ancestry. *Blues,* included in this packet, is an example of the work he did in Paris and reveals an eclectic fusion of peoples and cultures sharing a favorite pastime.

With his genre painting (scenes from everyday life or of ordinary people at work or play), Motley wanted to alter attitudes toward black culture. He wanted to "bring about better mutual understanding between the white and colored races." He believed that in his work blacks and whites would recognize themselves and their shared experiences as modern, urban Americans.

According to scholar Amy Mooney, Motley often borrowed from the conventions of film, a popular medium most viewers would be familiar with, in order to create his scenes. One might even say that, in his genre scenes, Motley used the techniques and methods of movie making to further social change. He employed cinematic techniques such as close-ups (as seen in *Blues*), panoramas, dramatic lighting, staging, elaborate costumes, and artifice all to dramatic effect. Through his inspiration from film, Motley created a unique, distinctive style; and one of the first series of paintings that depict contemporary black urban folk life in America.

His urban scenes exalt black accomplishments, self-sufficiency, and independence from the white world. They also provide white people a rare opportunity to view this intimate world. Through his paintings, Motley presented black culture as modern, approachable, and concerned with the same universal conditions as other Americans. Figures dominate his work and command the audience's attention; not the subservient figures of the past, they challenge the prevailing racism.

Unlike his portraits, in his genre scenes, figures are rarely shown realistically. He exaggerated facial features to create a cast of stock characters that he sometimes repurposed in other artworks. Scholars have debated the reasons for why he chose to paint caricatures of African Americans when he was so sensitive to the individual in his portraits. Some speculate that he sought to make his figures familiar and accessible to his viewers. Or, perhaps he may have used these stock characters, with their inherent associations (the bumbling man, the "mammy" figure), as an easier way to communicate his narratives. Or he may have used them simply for comic relief.

Through scenes he believed to be accessible, humorous, and engaging, Motley intended his art to deliver a message of the social progress his fellow African Americans had attained in America. His work gave viewers insight into the African American experience, his ultimate objective.

Conclusion

Whether painting masterfully executed, detailed portraits or caricatured genre scenes, Motley's body of work provides a remarkable view of family, friends, neighbors, and fellow Chicagoans and Parisians during an important time in America's history. Motley always sought recognition for his skill, by viewers of all races. His paintings were not meant to be an objective account of black life in America; rather they were a subjective history seen through the influences, ideas, and imagination of Archibald J. Motley Jr., a talented artist of mixed racial heritage living during Jazz Age America.

Works Cited

Powell, Richard J, *ed. Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist* (Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC, 2014)

Mooney, Amy M. *Representing Race: Disjunctures in the Work of Archibald J. Motley Jr. (*Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, Vol. 24, No 2, 1999)

Mooney, Amy M. *Archibald J. Motley Jr. The David C. Driskell (Series of African American Art: Volume IV*. (Pomegranate Publishing, San Francisco, 2004)

Credits

These curriculum materials were prepared by Veronica Alvarez, Michelle Brenner, and Holly Gillette, and designed by Jenifer Shell.

Evenings for Educators is made possible by The Rose Hills Foundation, the Joseph Drown Foundation, and the Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation.

Education programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are supported in part by the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education and the Margaret A. Cargill Arts Education Endowment.