

Mending Socks, 1924

Archibald J. Motley

THIS IS ONE OF TWO INSIGHTFUL PORTRAITS ARCHIBALD Motley painted of his paternal grandmother, Emily Sims Motley (1842–1929). Motley’s studio was next to her bedroom in the family’s home, and she played an important part in his life. Born into slavery in Kentucky, Emily and her husband (also named Archibald) spent much of their lives in Assumption Parish, Louisiana, where the artist’s father was born. She lived with her family in Chicago beginning in the 1910s.

Prior to emancipation after the Civil War, E. E. Kittredge owned Emily, her husband, and several other slaves with the surname Motley. Emily’s maiden name, Sims, points to the woman depicted in the oval painting within this painting. She is Emma Kittredge Sims (1847–1911), daughter of E. E. Kittredge and Emily Sims Motley’s “former mistress.”

According to scholars, Motley’s inclusion of the portrait of Emma Kittredge Sims is very revealing; it is abruptly cropped at the center, and the brushwork in her portrait is loose and broadly-treated compared to the meticulous brushwork of his grandmother. By depicting these women so differently, Motley establishes a spatial and historical distance from slavery.

He doesn’t present the harshness of his grand-mother’s life as a slave, but instead seems to offer a sentimental memory. The portrait within a portrait also shows his skillful ability to demonstrate different brush styles in one artwork.

Voted “the most liked painting” when displayed in the Newark Museum in 1927, Motley surrounded his octogenarian grandmother with her favorite things: a red shawl fastened with a brooch that had been hand-painted by her daughter; a silver bowl filled with apples, grapes, and bananas; and the family Bible. By including these objects, the artist stated that he hoped to “inject” her personality into the portrait, relating her kindness, piety, and conservatism. His sentimental connection with his grandmother appealed to a broad audience.

Discussion Prompts

Motley surrounded his grandmother with objects that were important to her. Make a list of the objects you see. What do these things suggest about his grandmother?

How do you think Motley felt about his grandmother? What in the painting leads you to believe that?

Object	What can you infer about his grandmother?



Mending Socks, 1924

Archibald J. Motley

Oil on canvas

Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Burton Emmett Collection 58.1.2801

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The Octoroon Girl, 1925

Archibald J. Motley

"OUTSIDE OF MY GRANDMOTHER'S PORTRAIT," Motley reflected, "[*The Octoroon Girl*] is the best portrait I've painted." With a title referring to someone who supposedly possessed one-eighth of "Negro blood," *The Octoroon Girl* is one of six portraits in which Motley represented women of mixed racial heritage. According to the exhibition curator, these portraits provide viewers with opportunities to contemplate physical variances and what that might mean for social status. "In those days," Motley mused, "[women] wore these little tight hats—she has one of them on, and she has her gloves in her hand." One can extrapolate from Motley's comments that this chic, light-skinned woman—fashionably attired and a little brazen (intuited from the woman's unflinching, doe-eyed gaze)—was, in 1920s jargon, a "New Negro:" a modern, sophisticated type that people encountered in neighborhoods like Chicago's South Side or New York City's Harlem.

In *The Octoroon Girl*, Motley portrayed an elegant young woman seated on a sofa against a maroon wall. Drawing on his academic training, Motley here creates a perfectly balanced composition. The sitter, off center, stares directly at the viewer, offset by the gold frame in the upper left and the table with books on the lower right. Motley demonstrates his mastery of texture in his depiction of her stylish dress, hat, and leather gloves. Her clear, steady gaze conveys a sense of confidence, composure, and dignity. Her elegance, wealth, and privilege are also evidenced by her fine jewelry. Almost indistinguishable from any white American, this woman embodies the ideals of timeless beauty and elegance.

Discussion Prompts

- He titled this work not with the woman's name, but a "racial designation." Why do you think he did so? What do you think about the title?
- How would you title this work?
- Based on both of these portraits, the octoroon woman and his grandmother, what can you infer about Motley's attitude toward women?
- Motley felt that these two portraits were the best he had ever done. Search online for other portraits by Motley. Do you agree? Why or why not?



The Octoroon Girl, 1925

Archibald J. Motley

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, New York

© Valerie Gerrard Browne

Barbecue, 1960

Archibald J. Motley

BARBECUE IS ARCHIBALD MOTLEY'S SECOND exploration of the theme of outdoor Southern-style gatherings (the first was a 1934 painting). Here, he transformed a modern genre scene into a highly complex composition only remotely tied to reality. Voluptuous women, diners, dancers, and other characters surround a smiling, rotund chef who watches over a brick barbecue grill. Motley's isolated urban witnesses—an attentive dog and a little girl with an ice cream cone—also contribute to *Barbecue*'s otherworldly aura.

Scholars have pointed out that Motley's high-energy genre scenes often include a figure who seems alone or is not partaking in the activities around him or her. The figure often conveys a sense of social isolation or detachment—as the little girl eating the ice cream cone in this painting, for example.

Other figures in his genre scenes seem to resemble stereotyped images that parodied African Americans. Features such as bulging eyes and enlarged lips are not uncommon. There has been much speculation as to why Motley would use racial stereotypes and stock characters. One scholar argues that Motley may have been trying to appeal to a broader audience with images that were immediately recognizable. Or, he may have used them simply for comic effect. Another scholar argues, however, that such types may have reflected Motley's sense of distance from his subjects because he enjoyed greater social status due to his middle-class upbringing, education, and light-skinned complexion.

These genre scenes were a new type of artwork at which Motley excelled: African Americans at leisure in an urban setting, escaping from intense agricultural labor or grinding factory work. White Americans enjoyed similar pursuits in their free time.

Discussion Prompts

- Motley liked to depict African Americans engaged in leisure activities. Look carefully at this painting. Describe what some of the people are doing. What do you think is happening?
- How would you describe the little girl in the front center of the painting? What is she doing? What is her relation to the other figures?
- Describe a leisure activity you like to do with your family to a partner. Draw the activity. What colors will you use? What details will you include? Try to include one figure that seems to be distant from all the activity surrounding him/her.



Barbecue, 1960
Archibald J. Motley
Oil on canvas
Collection of Mara Motley, MD and Valerie Gerrard Browne
© Valerie Gerrard Browne

Blues, 1929

Archibald J. Motley

IN 1978 ARCHIBALD MOTLEY RECOUNTED THAT THE "Petit Café" featured in his famous painting *Blues* wasn't very far from Paris's Bois de Boulogne and the Eiffel Tower. Although Motley's "Petit Café" has never been definitively located, the painting's black musicians, multiethnic clientele, and location all point to Le Bal Nègre, a popular West Indian cabaret in those years in the fifteenth arrondissement. Regardless of the nightclub's actual name or address, *Blues* signaled cosmopolitan, Jazz Age Paris—from left to right we see a bottle of red wine, a smoldering cigarette, and a woman's foot wearing a high-heeled shoe.

Painted in 1929, *Blues* became one of Motley's most celebrated works. The tightly-cropped scene portrays the interior of a popular Paris cabaret. On a crowded dance floor, partners embrace, their bodies rhythmically responding to the sounds from the musicians at left. The ambiance is exactly what one might expect of a late 20s jazz club. As America's truly unique music invention, jazz was a popular medium, created for and enjoyed by a broad audience. Like jazz, Motley hoped that this painting would appeal to everyone.

The composition resembles a tightly cropped photograph or a momentary close-up from a movie scene. *Blues* is a feast for the senses: the sounds of the band, bold colors worn by the stylish women, the smell of the cigarette in the center, the different textures of jewelry, instruments, and clothing, and the refreshing taste of the cocktails held by the waiter. The setting, fashions, and casual interactions convey a sense of sophistication and create an atmosphere in which racial identity is not relevant. Motley enjoyed patronizing this café because of the relaxed interaction among the clientele, who hailed from France, Martinique, and Senegal. For him, this painting represented his desire for his audience to enjoy art regardless of "race, color, or creed."

Blues is similar to his "Bronzeville" paintings, where there is no social hierarchy visibly established. Through jazz, social restrictions and racial segregation are temporarily suspended. By painting images of black and white people together, he wanted to express the idea that *all* people could enjoy the same kind of amusement and inhabit the same place—that art can be a force for democratization.

Discussion Prompts

- How would you describe the facial expressions of the figures? How about the woman in the center?
- One scholar noted that "The sounds of Louis Armstrong or Sidney Bechet's music seem to permeate the room." Listen to the music of each of these jazz musicians. What jazz music do you think best exemplifies this image?
- Is there one location in your community where people from all walks of life congregate? If so, where? What factors are in place to allow people from different races, social classes, and professions to assemble in a harmonious way?
- Do you think that there is one type of music that appeals to various classes? If so, which one?



Blues, 1929
Archibald J. Motley
Oil on canvas
Collection of Mara Motley, MD, and Valerie Gerrard Browne
© Valerie Gerrard Browne

Arrival at Chickasaw Bayou of the Slaves of President Davis, c. 1938

Archibald J. Motley

THIS WORK IS ONE OF ABOUT A DOZEN PAINTINGS Archibald Motley created while under the patronage of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. As part of the New Deal (to give people work during the Great Depression), the WPA commissioned artists to create images that celebrated the experiences of the United States and its people, both past and present. Motley based this work on a similar engraving by Frederick B. Schell for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (August 8, 1863; below). Schell illustrated a crucial point in the Civil War—the Confederacy's surrender to the Union army at Vicksburg, Mississippi, and the enslaved people taking advantage of this power shift. Motley, in contrast, accentuated the strange, almost burlesque nature of that moment, imagining it in acidic colors, hobnail-boot fashions, and exaggerated characterizations.

The aim of the Federal Art Project was to make American art more "truly American" and more in "touch with the people." It sought to make art more accessible to the general public by making it part of daily life by placing it in buildings like post offices, courthouses, etc. This notion appealed to Motley, who wanted to make his works both aesthetically engaging and socially conscious.

Discussion Prompts

- Look closely at both images of the arrival of President Davis' slaves; Motley's painting and Schell's engraving. What are some similarities? What are salient differences?
- Read the account of the surrender of Vicksburg in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*: www.accessible-archives.com/2013/08/frank-leslies-newspaper-reports-on-the-surrender-of-vicksburg/ How does the written account of the slaves of Jefferson Davis coming on to the camp at Vicksburg compare with the visual representations?



Arrival at Chickasaw Bayou of the Slaves of President Davis, c. 1938
 Archibald J. Motley
 Oil on board
 Collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
 © Valerie Gerrard Browne



*Arrival at Chickasaw Bayou of Jefferson Davis' Negroes from
 His Plantation on the Mississippi Below Vicksburg, Mississippi, c. 1863*
 Frederick B. Schell, American, active 19th century
 Engraving on paper
 American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts
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