

Exhibition: *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*

On View: October 19, 2014–February 1, 2015

Location: BCAM, Level 3



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(Los Angeles—September 30, 2014) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*, the first retrospective of the artist to travel to the West Coast. Comprising approximately 45 paintings, *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist* is a full-scale survey of one of the most important Harlem Renaissance artists active outside of New York City. The exhibition surveys Motley's entire career—including periods the artist spent in Chicago, Paris, and Mexico—and presents the painter's visual examination of African American culture during the Jazz Age, a time when society and attitudes were shifting.

"This is a rare opportunity for Los Angeles audiences to see the lively and incisive paintings of Archibald Motley," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "Many of these paintings belong to private collections, or have never traveled to Los Angeles before. We are glad to present them to the public in this exhibition."

"Centered in the Harlem district of New York City in the '20s and '30s, the Harlem Renaissance led to an increasing appreciation of arts, literature, theater, and music by African American artists," said Ilene Susan Fort, senior curator and the Gail and John Liebes Curator of American Art at LACMA. "Capturing the bold color and shadowy, syncopated rhythm of nightlife during the Jazz Age, Motley painted crowded urban street views and indoor scenes of nightclubs, bars, and other social gatherings that best characterized the newly emerging, modern and urbane black community."

Archibald Motley opened at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (January 30–May 11, 2014) and traveled to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas (June 14–September 7, 2014). Following its presentation at LACMA, the

exhibition will travel to the Chicago Cultural Center (March 6–August 31, 2015) and conclude its tour at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (fall 2015).

Exhibition Overview

Archibald Motley is arranged in loose chronological order and is broadly organized into four parts: portraits; Chicago's street and night scenes; time in Paris; and satiric commentary on race. The exhibition also examines Motley's involvement with the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Projects of the New Deal and his time spent in Mexico in later years.

Motley's initial success came from his early portraits. In contrast to prevailing racial stereotypes at the time, his African American sitters exude calm, a sense of contemplation, outer and inner beauty, and embody a modern understanding of anatomical form and color. A frequent subject with the artist is a beautiful young woman of mixed racial ancestry, a recurring figure in Harlem Renaissance that, as visualized by Motley, conjures a Jazz Age muse. Liberated from Victorian-era morality, this representative of the "New Woman"—with her bobbed, waved hair and unrestrictive clothing—is an object of emulation, desire, and speculation.

The burgeoning African American population of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s reflected a myriad of socioeconomic groups and art and leisure interests. During this time, Motley also spent a year in Paris, where he captured the essence of bohemian life, filling his later southside scenes with a sense of rhythm and music. Driven by highly developed transportation networks and mass-media outlets, the machines of commerce and culture created a vibrant, consumer-oriented metropolis and intellectual center. Motley studied Chicago's community intently, painting with equal humor and affection the city's black elites; its rustic, recently arrived migrants from the South; and its unseemly lowlifes.

By 1930, migrants from the Mississippi Delta and the Cotton Belt had dramatically transformed the neighborhoods just south of Chicago's main business district popularly known as Bronzeville. Motley responded to the effects of the city's changing demographics in his art. Although he lived in Chicago's Englewood, a predominantly European-immigrant neighborhood, he spent his youth and adult years socializing in Bronzeville, and it would become his primary artistic inspiration.

In the 1950s, Archibald Motley went on to create numerous canvases in Mexico in the 1950s while visiting his nephew, the writer Willard F. Motley. These chromatically dissonant yet emotionally dispassionate paintings are, in one sense, part of Motley's long artistic trajectory, but they also parallel Willard's own incisive writings about Mexico's growing tourist industry. For the remainder of Motley's career, he would continue to work in this *caliente* (or "hot")

mode, letting neon colors and the strange effects of artificial light dominate the picture's narrative.

About Archibald Motley

Archibald John Motley, Jr. was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1891. During the first half of the 20th century, he lived and worked in a predominately white neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side. In 1929 Motley won a Guggenheim Fellowship, which funded a year of study in France, during which time he created *Blues*, a colorful rhythm-inflected painting of Jazz Age Paris, in addition to several canvases that vividly capture the pulse and tempo of "la vie bohème." Similar in spirit to his Chicago paintings, these Parisian canvases depict an African diaspora in Paris's meandering streets and congested cabarets.

In the 1950s, Motley made several lengthy visits to Mexico, where he created vivid depictions of life and landscapes. He died in Chicago in 1981.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a 176-page illustrated catalogue, edited by Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art, Art History & Visual Studies and Dean of Humanities at Duke University, with contributions from Davarian L. Baldwin, David C. Driskell, Olivier Meslay, Amy M. Mooney, Richard J. Powell, and Ishmael Reed.

Related Programming

Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra

Friday, November 14, 2014 | 6 pm

Free and open to the public

In celebration of *Archibald Motley*, LACMA presents the community-based Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra. The Arkestra was founded by the late pianist and composer Horace Tapscott and is now under the direction of saxophonist Michael Session. First created in the late 1970s, this ensemble has performed the world over. The concert is presented as part of Jazz at LACMA, taking place every Friday evening, April through November.

Credit

Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist was organized by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. This exhibition is made possible by the Terra Foundation for American Art and the National Endowment for the Humanities: *Exploring the Human Endeavor*.



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

About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes over 120,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art; Latin American art, ranging from masterpieces from the Ancient Americas to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement. LACMA is located in Hancock Park, 30 acres situated at the center of Los Angeles which also contains the Page Museum and La Brea Tar Pits and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Situated halfway between the ocean and downtown, LACMA is at the heart of Los Angeles.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036 | 323 857-6000 | lacma.org

Image captions:

Left: Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Black Belt*, 1934, collection of the Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia, © Valerie Gerrard Browne

Center: Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Mending Socks*, 1924, collection of the Ackland Art Museum, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Burton Emmett Collection, © Valerie Gerrard Browne

Right: Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Barbecue*, c. 1934, collection of the Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, © Valerie Gerrard Browne

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