

ARCHIBALD MOTLEY *and all that Jazz*



Above: Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s "Blues," 1929, oil on canvas, is on view at the Nasher Museum of Art as part of a new retrospective of the artist's paintings. **Below:** Motley's "Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)," 1933, oil on canvas.

Huge retrospective reintroduces artist

BY CLIFF BELLAMY

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DURHAM

If jazz music had a visual art equivalent, it might arguably be the paintings of Archibald Motley Jr. (1891-1981), with their rich reds, greens and blues and sense of movement. The first thematically organized retrospective of Motley's paintings in more than 20 years went on view this week at The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

"Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" pulls together 45 paintings from his long career. Works represented reflect Motley's experiences in Paris in the 1920s,

in Mexico in the 1950s, and, significantly, from his many years as a Chicago resident, where that city's African-American community called Bronzeville inspired his visions of the urban landscape.

"The fact that this show has been put together is a miracle," said Richard Powell, professor of art, art history and visual studies at Duke University and curator of this exhibit. It is "a consequent gathering of work that does not get seen," Powell said. The last retrospective of Motley's work was in 1991 at the Chicago History Museum. Much of his work is in



SEE MOTLEY/PAGE A2

MOTLEY

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

scattered private collections. For this exhibit, Powell got permission from a wide array of lenders — among them the Ackland Museum of Art at UNC and the Johnson Publishing Co. of Chicago.

The principal lender is Valerie Gerrard Browne, Motley's daughter-in-law (who married Archie Motley III, who died in 2002). She has loaned 14 paintings from her collection. "I'm just thrilled with this installation," Browne said during a walk-through preview earlier this week. Although many of the paintings in this exhibit are scenes of African-American life, her father-in-law did not want to be known as an African-American artist. "He wanted to be recognized for his artistic talent," particularly his contributions to modernism, she said.

This new show should enhance that reputation and make Motley better known, said Sarah Schroth, director of the Nasher Museum. When it closes at Duke, the exhibit will travel to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas; the Los Angeles

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WHAT: "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist"
WHEN: Exhibit is on view Jan. 30-May 1.1
WHERE: The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2001 Campus Drive
ADMISSION: General admission is \$5. For details and information, call 919-684-5135 or visit nasher.duke.edu.

County Museum of Art; the Chicago Cultural Center; and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. "I hope this [show] will broaden interest in other parts of his life and his other contributions," Browne said.

Browne would like for viewers to get a strong appreciation for Motley's portraits, which are the first gallery room in this show. The first painting a viewer sees walking into this space is "Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)" (1933), a portrait of Motley with his palette and a model who is presumably posing for a painting. Other portraits here are "Portrait of a Cultured Lady," a 1948 painting of Edna Powell

Gayle, a Chicago collector of art, along with several portraits of Motley's wife.

Motley was born in New Orleans but lived and worked in the first half of the 20th century in a predominately white neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest side, a few miles from the city's African-American community. In 1929, Motley won a Guggenheim Fellowship that funded a year of study in France. In the 1950s, Motley made several lengthy visits to Mexico, where he created depictions of life and landscapes. He died in Chicago in 1981.

One of the most significant paintings from his Parisian period is "Blues" (1929), which with its cubistic trombones, wine glasses and a dancer casually holding a cigarette depicts the life of expatriates of the period. Another painting from this period depicting Parisian night life is "Jockey Club" (1929).

One of the rooms is dedicated to the Bronzeville paintings. "I love it all," said curator Powell of this show, "but if one had to single out a body of work, when he is thinking about Chicago ... there's really nothing like them." Among the Bronzeville paintings are

"Barbecue" (1960), "Saturday Night" (1935) and "Black Belt" (1934).

Amy Mooney, who did her doctorate on Motley's art (and wrote an essay for the accompanying exhibit catalogue), marveled at "Black Belt." She last saw it when she was an intern at the 1991 exhibit, and has not seen the actual painting in many years. "For me it is so moving to be here, in the physical presence of" the painting, Mooney said.

Asked about the meaning of "jazz" to this work, Mooney said during her research she did not run across references to specific musicians in Motley's writings. "For Motley, it's about improvisation," she said. To improvise, "you have to be virtuosic and have a command of your instrument. For Motley his instrument is obviously painting," Mooney said. Like the musicians who improvise, Motley absorbed the techniques of visual arts masters, and seemingly reinvents it on site, she said.

Mooney points to the 1948 painting "Getting' Religion," a street scene with trumpets and trombones, and forms that move the viewer forward and backward, "and that's syncopation," she said.