

# Arts & Living

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## Archibald Motley shows jazzy Chicago nights

Most of the time, we think of painting as a static representation of a given scene frozen at a moment in time. Unless, of course, you're talking about painter Archibald Motley's brightly colored "urban nocturne" scenes of big-city nightlife – which are so kinetic they seem poised to shimmy right off the wall.

Motley's mid-20th-century cityscapes make up the heart of "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist," a compilation of 42 paintings from throughout his career. The exhibit is on display at Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art through May 11.

"Motley's paintings literally move, capturing the mobility and movement and aspirations of his time," said Davarian L. Baldwin, a professor at Trinity College in Connecticut whose first book used a Motley painting for its cover. "They have a lot of fantasy and ambition, a lot more surreal than other painters'



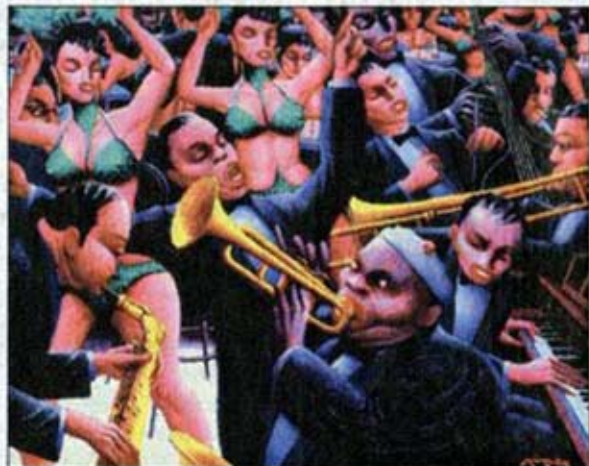
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social realism. A lot of other African-American painters were doing more 'upstanding' images, trying to uphold a sense of dignity by placing black history within epic shorelines. But Motley was painting these down and dirty night scenes."

As provocative as they were for their time, Motley's paintings are also elegantly rendered and beautiful to look at. Motley, who was 90 when he died in 1981, was one of the most important black artists of the 20th century. In 1928, he was one of the first African-American artists to win a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, using it to spend an expatriate year abroad painting in Paris (the "Jazz Age Modernist" painting "Blues" is from this period).

But the city most linked to Motley is Chicago, where he documented nightlife in the Southside district known as "Bronzeville."

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COURTESY OF CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM

"Hot Rhythm," by Archibald Motley (1961), depicts a crowded jazz club with musicians and dancers. The painting is on exhibit at Nasher Museum of Art.

# NASHER

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Up and down "The Stroll," a strip of nightclubs and shops, crowds bustled during the 1930s and '40s. Motley observed and painted the scenes in sharp-angled, neon shades of hyper-realism. Even though the district Motley depicted is no more, torn down in "urban renewal" projects during the 1950s and '60s, the paintings still look as fresh today as when paint was hitting canvas.

## An artistic pioneer

The sheer visual power of Motley's work was what first attracted the attention of Duke professor Richard J. Powell, but his connection to Motley runs deep. Although Powell never met Motley, he's a native of Chicago and an art historian specializing in American art portraying African-American migrations through the United States. That made Powell uniquely qualified to curate the Nasher's "Jazz Age Modernist," which will also show at museums in Fort Worth, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York after closing in Durham.

"Archibald Motley was a pioneer in going past the niceties of representation to mine life in all its unexpurgated aspects, especially African-American vernacular and life experiences," Powell said. "He went beyond the niceties of racial uplift to present art dealing with what life might be like for black migrants just arriving in cities from Mississippi. He showed the pool halls, speakeasies, nightclubs and other parts of this grassroots experience, but in a way that's visually luxuriant and expressionistic."

Motley's paintings were so striking and evocative that they eventually came to



COURTESY OF CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM

"Self-Portrait (Myself at Work)," by Archibald Motley (1933). Motley's paintings are on exhibit in Durham through May 11.

signify African-American life all over the country, not just in Chicago. Yet Chicago remained the city that fired Motley's imagination. Even more than Harlem, Chicago was the African-American capital of America during the 1920s and '30s.

"Chicago was home to negro-league baseball black independent filmmaking, the gospel music industry," Baldwin said. "It was a hub with magnetic force, where most working-class black migrants went until the mid-20th century, when Detroit's car industry started drawing them. New York was home to publishing houses, which is why Harlem got the reputation. But

Midwesterners say, 'We didn't write about it, we just did it.' Chicagoans love to say they're doers, not talkers. In that spirit, Motley was a doer — and a voyeur. He watched everything."

Between his Guggenheim and his reputation in New York art circles, Motley had an unusually broad audience for an African-American artist during the segregation era. As striking as Motley's paintings are, however, they were not universally acclaimed during their time because they were racy enough to trouble conservative viewers on both sides of the racial divide.

Indeed, much of the exaggerated imagery in Motley's



COURTESY OF CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM

"Barbecue," by Archibald Motley (1960), is included in "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" at Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art.

paintings is not far removed from racist caricatures seen elsewhere. But this is an instance where context counts, given Motley's identity as an African-American artist. "Jazz Age Modernist" curator Powell compares Motley to the late stand-up comic Richard Pryor, another artist who was unafraid to make people uncomfortable.

"I've spent some time trying to make people understand what Motley was after and how he was viewed by some as transgressive," Powell said. "If you don't know where he's coming from, you may not understand that what's behind it is love and a desire to communicate a truth. Some of that truth is not pretty, some of it is gritty. Richard Pryor comes closest in conveying that same quality in African-American humor and satire, understanding that painful things are being explored.

Ultimately, they're both speaking truth through humor."

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