This somber Self-Portrait (c. 1920) by Archibald J. Motley Jr. is the image of a young artist trying to locate himself within and to represent himself to urban Americans in the 1920s. Motley came of age during a turbulent and exciting time in American history, when industrialization drew thousands of people from rural areas to the city for work, creating bustling, crowded, diverse centers of social and cultural life. As a young artist living in the middle-class neighborhood of Englewood, on Chicago’s South Side, Motley was drawn to representing the people and places of the city around him.

In his Self-Portrait, Motley presents himself as a painter of distinction—the artist as a gentleman rather than as a craftsman. He stares outward, and his gaze is direct and unflinching, perhaps even confrontational. He wears an elegant dark suit, covered by a dark artist’s smock, and a tie studded with a horseshoe-shaped diamond stickpin. His hair is carefully parted, his moustache waxed and pointed. The tools of the artist’s trade in the foreground of the painting are tilted forward, as if being offered to the viewer. Motley’s right hand is poised as if to paint his next brushstroke. In contrast to the finished technique of the artist’s head and upper body, the palette below contains thickly applied daubs of paint, the colors of which contrast with the somber tones of the background and figure. These are the vibrant colors he would use in his celebrated images of Jazz Age culture, which he would begin to paint the following year.

SCHOOL AND EARLY CAREER

At the end of the 19th century, when the artist was just two, Motley’s family moved from New Orleans to Englewood, a middle-class, mostly white village about eight miles south of downtown Chicago (now a neighborhood of Chicago). The Motleys moved at a time when hundreds of other families, mostly African Americans, migrated from south to north. This massive resettlement, called the Great Migration, began at the end of the 19th century and lasted well into the next century and led to a
creative flourishing in northern cities. This literary, musical, and artistic boom of the 1920s is sometimes called the Harlem Renaissance, named for the area of New York City with which it is most commonly associated. Outside of New York, in cities like Chicago, this cultural flourishing was known more generally as the New Negro Movement. As the name indicates, it was in the African American neighborhoods of these northern cities that the cultural rebirth took place, and it was in this atmosphere that Archibald Motley embarked upon his artistic career.

Motley became interested in drawing as early as the fifth grade. In high school he pursued courses in free-hand drawing, charcoal sketching, and technical drawing. Using these skills, he traveled into the streets to capture images of the people he saw around him. After high school, Frank Gunsaulus, president of Chicago’s Armour Institute of Technology (now part of the Illinois Institute of Technology), who knew Motley’s father, offered to pay the young artist’s tuition to the Armour Institute. Motley instead persuaded Gunsaulus to pay for his first year of tuition at the School of the Art Institute. When the year was finished, Motley continued his studies, paying his own way by working at the Art Institute, cleaning and dusting in the museum before hours.

At the School, Motley was exposed to artists such as John Sloan (1871–1951) (figure 11) and George Bellows (1882–1925) (figure 12), whose works focused on modern-day urban and rural American experiences. These artists gave Motley a model for his already developed interest in representing the people of Chicago’s South Side. Although Motley experienced little racial discrimination at the School, after he left college he found himself back in a world of inequality. Soon after graduating, he lost a promising job to a less-qualified white classmate. This experience also influenced his work. In reaction, he began to create paintings that featured African American men and women, for he saw that, in the mostly white art world, African Americans were rarely represented. He also saw that, when they were depicted, they were often stereotyped or caricatured in ways that reinforced racial discrimination. As Motley stated in 1933, he wanted to “express the American Negro honestly and sincerely, neither to add nor detract, and to bring about a more sincere and brotherly feeling, a better understanding between him and his white brethren.” He embarked on a series of portraits of friends, family, and models that represented and celebrated African Americans in Chicago. His self-portrait was a part of this series.
MOTLEY AND CHICAGO’S NIGHTSPOTS

Other African American artists across the nation were embarking on similar projects, most of which were being done in New York City. However, even after Motley became well known and was awarded the Frank G. Logan Prize at the Art Institute, a Guggenheim Fellowship to Paris, and a one-man show in New York, he remained loyal to his hometown Chicago. He distanced himself from New York artists and set his sights instead on documenting Bronzeville, a South Side neighborhood where many African American families settled during the Great Migration (Figure 13). Also known as the Black Belt, this area around Douglas Boulevard and Grand Avenue became home to more than 90% of Chicago’s African American community by the 1930s. It was in this neighborhood that Chicago’s thriving cultural rebirth occurred. Whereas New York City was the center of literary, poetic, and visual art in this period, Chicago had music, jazz and blues flourished here. (See Bibliographies.) Chicago also had a thriving African American business and professional community. One of its achievements was the Defender, the first truly African American owned and operated newspaper. The area also boasted a number of juke joints, neighborhood nightclubs that offered music, drinking, and social entertainment.

All of these aspects—Chicago’s musical culture, the African American owned and operated nightclubs, and Motley’s interest in the cross-section of social, economic, and racial differences—came together in his images of Bronzeville executed between 1929 and 1949. Nightlife, 1943 (Figure 14), one of his most celebrated urban portrayals, takes its viewers into one of those crowded neighborhood night spots. Although Motley painted this picture during World War II, the scene is carefree. Club patrons seem to have left the world’s troubles behind. Inside, all is upbeat energy, set to the beat and pulsing, syncopated rhythm suggestive of jazz. Motley animates the scene through technique, composition, and color. What looks like a jumble of bodies is, in fact, a meticulously rendered composition designed to sweep the viewer’s gaze through the foreground toward the lively dancers at the rear.

Uniting the scene and infusing it with vitality are the artist’s trademark colors—an iridescent, almost shocking, combination of hues, seen on the palette in Motley’s Self-Portrait. The artist was fascinated with light, both natural and artificial. Here, glowing violet and red tones, intensified by the artificial illumination of the club, dominate the composition. As in a tapestry, Motley wove together color accents
to lead the eye through the picture, for example, from the shades of purple seen in the tablecloth in the foreground, the central man dancing, the woman on the barstool, to the men serving the drinks.

Motley's Self-Portrait could hardly be more different than Nightlife in style, mood, composition, and color. Yet, together the two pictures illustrate this artist's skill in representing the faces and places of Chicago's South Side in the first half of the 20th century. Motley's works capture "the rhythms, the sounds, the blur of activity, indeed the essence of life itself...Motley's paintings present a remarkable vision of black Chicagoans and their lives."
Classroom Applications
Transparency 4

Archibald Motley Jr. Self-Portrait, c. 1920

1. Moving Day
Archibald Motley’s family moved to Chicago from the south around the turn of the 20th century. The Great Migration, a period from the early 1900s to the 1960s, brought hundreds of African American families to the north in search of better-paying jobs and improved living conditions. Discuss what it feels like to relocate to a new city. Is it exciting? Scary? What do you take with you and why? Have students pretend they are moving to another city, one of their own choosing. Instruct them to write a journal entry about their journey, taking into consideration their potential fears and anticipations. Share these with the class. Compare these entries with personal accounts of real people who have moved to Chicago from other parts of the world.

As an alternative, have students pack a suitcase for their journey. Have students create a suitcase using a shoebox, pillowcase, or bag. Engage students in a discussion about the items they would take with them if they were to move to another city. Discuss the difference between wants and needs. Have them make a list of items that they would need in their new home. Instruct students to draw, construct, or cut out images of the objects they listed and place these in the suitcase. Display the suitcases around the classroom.

State Learning Standards: 3B, 16B, 18C

2. Map It!
Find a map of early Chicago (c. 1920) in a history book or on the Internet. Locate Bronzeville, the South Side neighborhood that Motley depicted in this painting (Figure 13). Locate Engelwood, the then affluent neighborhood where Motley grew up. Locate the Art Institute (Michigan Avenue at Adams Street), which then housed the school where Motley trained as an artist. Discuss how and why these areas of Chicago have changed since 1920. Instruct students to write an essay about the neighborhood in which they live. Encourage them to interview neighbors or merchants who have lived or worked in the area. How has their neighborhood changed in the last 25 or 50 years?

State Learning Standards: 3B, 5A, 16C, 17A

3. Interview Someone
As a class or in groups, interview someone who can tell you what life was like in the early decades of the 20th century. Have students create a list of questions about what life was like for African Americans during Motley’s time. Topics might include living conditions, education, transportation, entertainment, jobs,
or health. Encourage students to consider how life has changed for African Americans in Chicago over the last 50 to 100 years. Have students tape record their interviews and then write a short newspaper article about the person they met.

State Learning Standards: 16B, 16C, 18C

4. Jazz It Up!
America's Jazz Age (1920–1929) was a period of economic growth and a time when music, art, and literature flourished. (See Bibliographies.) Look at Motley's Nightlife (figure 14) and discuss how the painting shows this synthesis of the arts, which lasted well into the 1940s. Which senses does Motley activate and how? What would this place sound like? Smell like? Feel like? Listen to jazz tunes created during the 1920s through the 1950s (such as Count Basie's "Swingin' the Blues," Billie Holiday's "Don't Explain," Ella Fitzgerald's "A Tisket a Tasket," and John Coltrane's "One and Only Love"). Pick a song that matches the mood of Nightlife. Choose two or three others that reflect a different feeling or emotion, such as a melancholy or slow tempo song. Play the songs for the class and have students choose which one best fits the painting. Discuss the similarities between the music and the painted scene.

Have students create an advertisement for this jazz club with words and images based on clues they find in the painting. Instruct students to include information about the mood of the club, the music being performed, and the crowd we see gathered.

State Learning Standards: 18B, 25B, 26A

5. The Mood of Colors
Discuss the colors Motley used in his paintings, in his Self-Portrait for example. Discuss the mood these colors create. Are they active or calm colors? How do they make you feel? Compare the darker, neutral colors in his self-portrait with those he used to paint Nightlife (figure 14). How are they different? Have students choose a color from Motley's palette. Ask them to write descriptions of how it feels to be that color. Ask them to demonstrate how that color would move. Allow them to play or sing a song that reflects the mood of that color.

Looking around the room and in reference books, have students examine the range of the color they have selected. Using tempera paint, have students mix a range of tints of their color by varying the amount of white or black added to it to create a chart that represents this range. (figure 15) If the color is not a primary color, have students note which colors are used to create that color.

State Learning Standards: 12C, 25A, 26

FIGURE 15
Grayscale

(See www.artsconnected.org/toolkit for more information on color.)
6. Portray Yourself
Motley's *Self-Portrait* is a traditional portrait in many ways. The painter gives the viewer clear information about what the artist looked like and clues to his age and profession. His palette acts like a separate portrait, however, showing us another side of this multi-faceted man. Have students create two self-portraits. The first should be a traditional portrait, drawn or painted while looking in a mirror or at a photograph. The second self-portrait should be non-figural, representing something unique about the student in an abstract way; this portrait may take the form of an object, symbol, animal, etc. Allow students to freely select the materials they wish to use to create their second portrait.

State Learning Standards: 25A, 26B,

7. The Artist Past and Present
Analyze the role of the artist in today’s world. What makes someone an artist? What are some stereotypes associated with an artist? Based on his self-portrait, ask students to consider how Motley would define the artist. Have students write Motley’s definition of an artist, using visual clues in the painting as evidence. Look at self-portraits by other artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), or Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). Discuss how their works demonstrate a similar or different definition of the artist. Have students create portraits of themselves as artists that include attributes of the skills and training they think are important to the profession. Types of artists may include painters, sculptors, printmakers, illustrators, photographers, architects, or graphic designers.

State Learning Standards: 3C, 18B, 27A, 27B