



Self-Portrait

c. 1920

by Archibald J. Motley, Jr.

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

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Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (American, 1891–1981)

Self-Portrait, c. 1920

Oil on canvas; 30 1/8 x 22 1/8 in. (76.3 x 56 cm.)

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“The history of the image of blacks in American art is a troubled history,” art historian and curator Edmund Barry Gaither stated in 1997. Decades before, Chicago artist Archibald J. Motley, Jr. had said something even more specific:

... for years many artists have depicted the Negro as the ignorant southern ‘darker,’ ... gulping a large piece of watermelon ... or [as] a cotton picker or a chicken thief. This material is obsolete ... Progress has changed all of this. In my paintings I have tried to paint the Negro as I have seen him and as I feel him, in myself, without adding or detracting, just being frankly honest.

Motley both achieved and contradicted his pioneering goals in a body of work that is at once passionate and complicated, masterful and controversial. Embracing the idea that the fine arts are the highest expression of a culture, Motley, along with many contemporaries, believed that the visual arts could improve understanding between races by dispelling stereotypes and raising the consciousness of all Americans.

Motley recalled knowing from the age of nine that he wanted to be an artist. He was born in New Orleans; his ancestors included people of African American, European, Creole, and Native American descent. Seeking economic opportunities, Motley’s family moved from New Orleans to Chicago in 1893, preceding what became known as the **Great Migration**. This massive resettlement from the rural South to the industrial North led to the creative flourishing during the 1920s known as the **Harlem Renaissance**, also called the New Negro Movement. Centered in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem, this celebration of black culture and heritage spread to other cities as well, including Chicago—specifically in the south-side neighborhood of Bronzeville—just as Motley was embarking upon his artistic career.

The time in which Motley worked saw enormous changes in the United States, from the new vibrancy of life in the nation’s growing, northern cities after World War I, to the stress of the Great Depression and the sacrifices and traumas of World War II. Inevitably, such major societal shifts affected definitions of class and race. Motley supported his artistic career in a number of ways, including teaching at Howard University, Washington D.C. in 1935; working for the Easel and Mural Division of the Federal Art Project of the **Works Progress Administration (WPA)** from the 1930s to the early 1940s; and creating hand-painted shower curtains for Chicago manufacturers in the 1950s. He exhibited widely and won prestigious awards, including the Frank G. Logan Medal and Prize from the Art Institute. Despite such achievements, Motley, unlike a number of his successful contemporaries, chose not to live in the leading art center, New York and Paris; instead, he remained in Chicago, dedicating himself to creating, for the most part, works of art that focus on African American culture.



Figure 1: Archibald Motley, Jr. *Blues*, 1929 (2.1993)

Portraiture was extremely important in Motley's early career. His first works consisted of a group of dignified, sensitive portraits done just after his graduation from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 1918. In addition to his *Self-Portrait*, c. 1920, other works included a series of—almost a scientific inquiry into—women of mixed racial identity. As a young and struggling artist, he also turned to members of his family, who would pose for free. Motley did not utilize portraiture as a means to earn money, as many other artists have traditionally done. Rather, Motley used these various types of portraits—of himself, of his family, of anonymous models—to explore racial identity and as a vehicle to expose Americans to nonstereotypical views of blacks.

In *Self-Portrait*, c. 1920, Motley presents himself at work, displaying the trappings of a fine artist. His gaze is direct and unflinching, confident and composed. The conventional, half-length, frontal pose communicates Motley's serious demeanor and academic training. The background is an undefined space, allowing us to concentrate on the artist himself. He wears a dark-brown painter's smock over a white shirt, black vest, and black tie studded with a horseshoe-shaped diamond tie tack. With his pomaded hair and dapper mustache, Motley presents himself as the epitome of style and formality. The tools of the artist's trade are in the foreground of the painting, tilted forward. Motley's right hand is poised, as if to paint the next stroke. In contrast to the finished technique of the artist's head and upper body, the **palette** he holds contains thickly applied dabs of paint, resembling Motley's actual palette.



Figure 2: Archibald Motley, Jr. *Nightlife*, 1943 (1992.89)

The somber colors of the background and figure contrast with the vivid colors we see on the artist's palette, the colors he would use in his celebrated icons of black Jazz Age culture, which he would begin to paint the following year, 1921 (figures 1 and 2). These depictions of black life in the city would bring Motley fame in a career that spanned almost 50 years. This early *Self-Portrait*, c. 1920 may be intended to convince the world—and perhaps Motley himself—of his role in life, as an artist and a man.

Classroom Activities & Discussion Questions

Elements to consider when viewing a portrait

- The point of view from which the artist has depicted the sitter. Does the sitter look directly at the viewer?
- The individual's facial expression. Does the artist show the person frozen in time or in the midst of a fleeting emotion or action?
- The sitter's pose and gestures. What attitudes do they project to the viewer? Is the sitter engaged in a revealing activity or consciously posing for the portrait? Was this pose determined by the sitter or the artist?
- The clothing worn by the sitter. What does it reveal about the person's social class, era, or self-image?
- The setting. Does it reveal anything about the sitter?
- Balance between the figure and the setting. Is one element more prominent?
- The relationship between multiple figures in the painting. Are they linked together by gesture, clothing, setting, or pose? How does the artist convey their relationship, and how does it affect our understanding of the portrait?

Exploring the Mood of a Painting

How would you describe Motley's character? Look at his gaze, posture, gestures, grooming, and clothing. Does the artist see himself as important or ordinary? What clues tell you this? Describe the mood of the painting. What effect does the background have? How did the artist visually separate the viewer from the figure? What value does Motley place on being an artist?

Exploring Color Symbolism

Have students change the mood of the painting by finding pastels or paints that match the colors shown on Motley's palette. Use these colors to alter Motley's portrait (see following drawing). For instance, change the background by including abstract patterns, indoor or outdoor scenes, or specific rooms. Or, redesign Motley's clothes. Hand the finished pictures around the room and discuss the elements that affect our impressionism of a person's character.

Additional Activity: Using a reproduction of Archibald Motley's *Nightlife*, compare and contrast the colors in these two paintings. What mood is expressed by each painting? What associations or symbols do we make with these colors?

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall

Motley painted this self-portrait while looking at himself in a mirror. Look for the clues that demonstrate his portrait is a mirror image. For example, on what side does the button appear on his suit coat? How do you think an artist paints his hand while using his hand to paint? Look at Motley's right hand and discuss. Pose in front of a mirror and sketch yourself. What happens to your image when you draw from a reflection?

Glossary

Bronzeville: Chicago's vibrant South Side community whose population mushroomed from 14,000 in 1890 to 109,000 by 1920 because of the **Great Migration**. Also known as the Black Belt, this area was defined on the north by 31st Street and on the south by Pershing Road. Its east and west borders were Interstate 94 and Cottage Grove Avenue. The community became home to more than 90 percent of Chicago's black population by the 1920s.

Great Migration: Massive resettlement, spanning the decades from 1910 to 1970, of more than six million African Americans from the rural South to the industrial North in search of jobs and freedom from discrimination.

Harlem Renaissance: Creative outburst during the 1920s of literature, music, dance, and art centered in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem, which spread to other cities as well, including Chicago's **Bronzeville**. Also known as the New Negro Movement after Alain Locke's watershed book *The New Negro* (1925), which urged black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening and enriching their own expressions.

Select List of Artists of the Harlem Renaissance

- **Writers:** Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Nathan Eugene Toomer
- **Musicians and singers:** Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, John Coltrane, Scott Joplin, Josephine Baker, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Marian Anderson
- **Artists:** Hale Woodruff, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Lois M. Jones, Archibald Motley, Jr.

icons: Important symbols, objects, or works of art that represent a style, movement, period, etc.

palette: Board on which an artist mixes paints before applying them to a surface or object; usually designed with rounded edges and a hole through which one's thumb is placed in order to hold it while working. Range of colors used by a particular artist or in a particular work.

WPA (Works Progress/Projects Administration): Relief program created in 1935 under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency. The WPA included the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Writer's Project, and the Federal Music Project, all of which offered employment during the Great Depression to critics, actors, writers, and musicians.

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