

Archibald J. Motley, Jr. depicted contemporary black social life in the city, often after dark. His particular focus was **Bronzeville** [see map below] Chicago's vibrant South Side community whose population had mushroomed due to the Great Migration, from 14,000 in 1890 to 109,000 by 1920. Also known as the Black Belt, this area around Douglas/Grand Boulevard became home to more than 90 percent of Chicago's black population by the 1930s.

Among those migrating North were the Motleys who journeyed from New Orleans to Chicago when the artist was two. Motley seizes the energy of this burgeoning black metropolis in pioneering images that range from backyard barbecues to backroom cardgames, from bustling street life to lively nightclub scenes. As art historian Jontyle Robinson declared: "Motley captured what facts alone cannot—the rhythms, the sounds, the blur of activity, indeed the essence of life itself."

One of Motley's most celebrated urban portrayals is *Nightlife*, 1943. [See slide 10] Here, he takes us inside one of Bronzeville's many nightspots, set against the backdrop of the Jazz Age. A major contribution by African Americans to American culture, jazz rhythms and melodies had floated through darkened city streets since the early 1920s, not just in Chicago and New York, but also in the European capitals of Paris, London, and Berlin. During Motley's time, such jazz greats as Duke Ellington (1899-1974), Count Basie (1904-1984), and Louis Armstrong (1900-1971) all played in Chicago clubs. Although Motley painted the Art Institute's picture during the difficulties of World War II (1939-1945), club patrons seem to have left the world's troubles behind. Inside the nightspot, all is exuberance, upbeat energy, revealing a pulsing, syncopated rhythm suggestive of jazz.

Motley conveys this animation through technique, composition, and color. What looks like a compact mass of bodies is, in fact, carefully composed and meticulously rendered. Figures are precisely outlined and stylized, and then strategically placed to form three diagonals—at the bar on the left, at the tables on the right, and, in the middle, on the dance floor.

SLIDE TEN



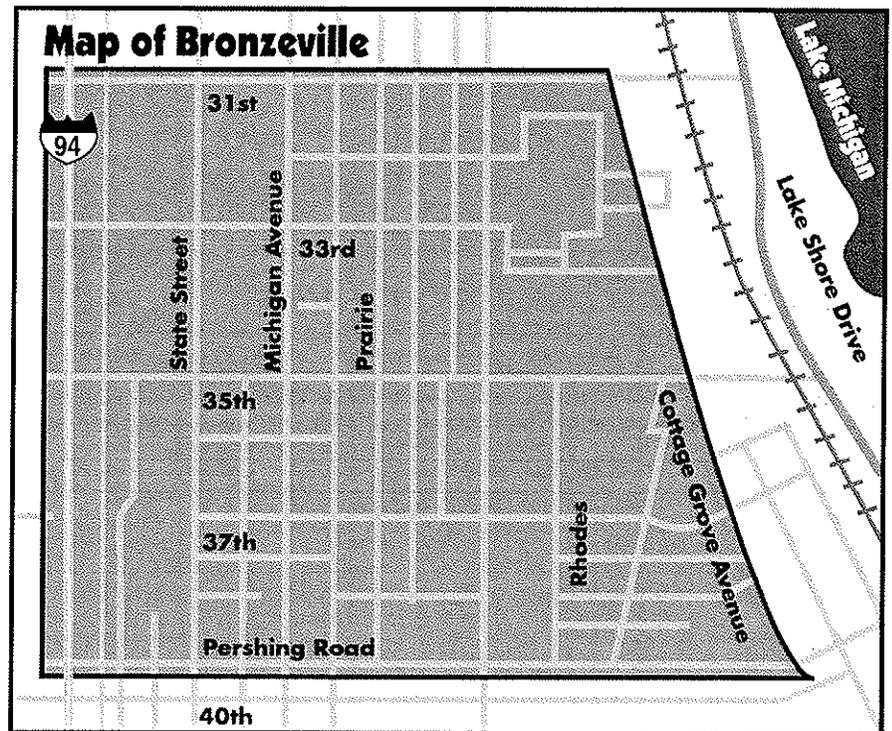
ARCHIBALD J. MOTLEY, JR.

American, 1891-1981; worked in Paris 1927-1930

Nightlife, 1943

Oil on canvas (36 x 47 1/4 in.)

Restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Field, Jack and Sandra Guthman, Ben W. Heineman, Ruth Horwich, Lewis and Susan Manilow, Beatrice C. Mayer, Charles A. Meyer, John B. Nichols, Mr. and Mrs. E.B. Smith, Jr.; James W. Alsdorf Memorial Fund; Goodman Endowment, 1992. 89



ARCHIBALD J. MOTLEY, JR.

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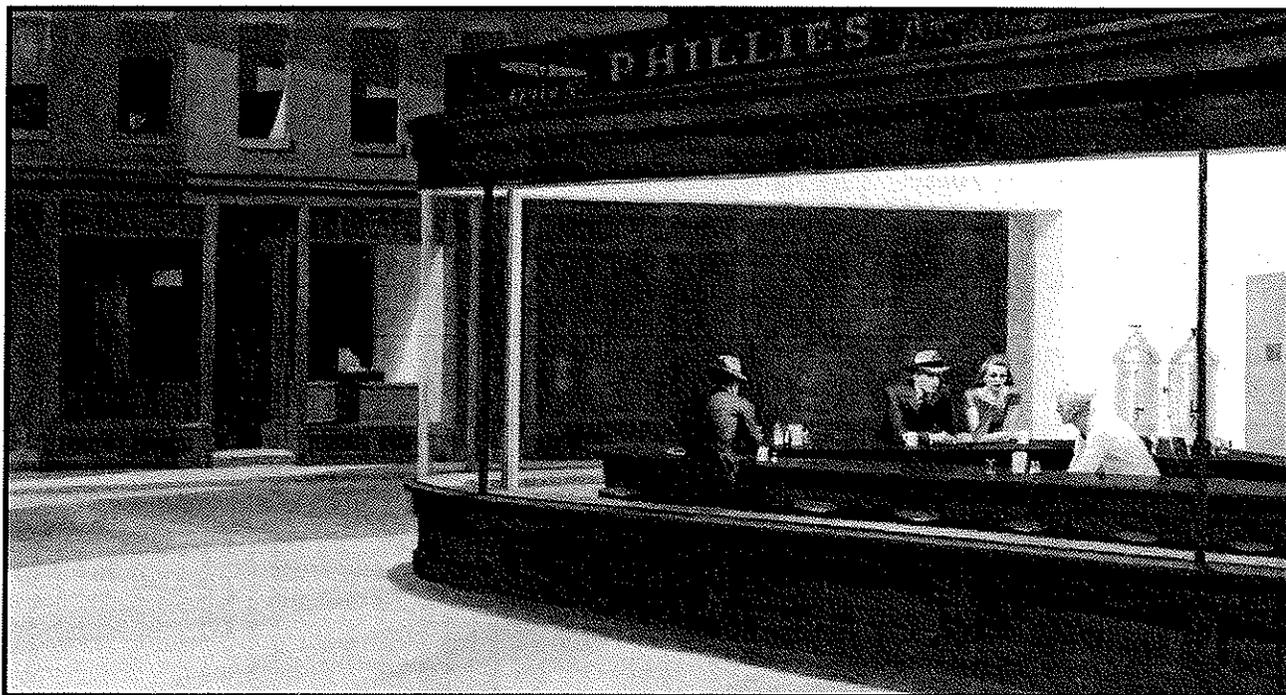
These diagonals sweep our gaze toward the lively dancers at the rear, swaying to the music from the jukebox on the far right, in the middle of the picture. The drama of the central dancers in the **foreground** dominates the scene. The woman in the tight orange dress looks left where the blue-suited man beckons. Next to him, at the bar, the green-dressed woman watches it all.

Uniting the entire scene, infusing it with verve, are the artist's trademark colors—an iridescent, almost eerie combination of hues. Motley was fascinated with light, both natural and artificial, and here, glowing violet/red tones dominate the composition. As in a tapestry, Motley weaves together color accents to lead our eye through the picture. From the purple tablecloth in the foreground, we look to the central man dancing, then behind him to the woman on the barstool and the men serving drinks. The well-stocked bar is like a **palette**, containing all of the painting's hues.

Color also served another purpose—in Motley's words, "as an expression of the numerous shades and colors which exist in such great variety among Negroes." Of Louisiana-Creole ancestry himself, the light-skinned artist had long been intrigued with skin color. We see here, as Motley called it, "the whole gamut"—skin tones that range from the deepest ebony to a pale rose-gold. Like the discrimination in the world at large, black society also had its subtle stratification, with white-looking skin conferring higher status.

Figure 9.
Edward Hopper.
Nighthawks, 1942.
Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago. Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.51

Motley's 1943 painting of city nightlife recalls one of the best-known images of twentieth-century art: the Art Institute's *Nighthawks*, painted by Edward Hopper (1882-1967) one year before. [See figure 9] Both artists explore the



modern city after dark using a simplified figurative style. The effects of light are central in both paintings. In fact, Motley was aware of Hopper's image, declaring that it was "the best example I have seen of [artificial interior] lighting." (Fluorescent lighting had just come into use in the early 1940s.) But whereas Motley's work exudes the energy and motion of people connecting, Hopper's painting conveys emptiness and isolation—or, in the artist's words, "the loneliness of a large city." Encased behind the all-night diner's seamless wedge of glass, his four anonymous and uncommunicative night owls seem as separate and remote from the viewer as they are from one another.



Motley began painting these Bronzeville icons of the Jazz Age as early as 1921. He himself, however, did not grow up in Bronzeville. He was instead from a comfortable middle-class home in the predominantly white Englewood section of Chicago's South Side. He graduated from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 1918. Although he was not part of the **Harlem Renaissance** group of artists, his philosophy embraced the same need to express his cultural heritage. "For many years artists have depicted the Negro as the ignorant southern 'darky,' ... gulping a large piece of watermelon ... or [as] a cotton picker or a chicken thief," he stated. "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."

His earliest works were dignified, sensitive portraits. His subjects 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. *Mending Socks* (1924) depicts his paternal grand-

Figure 10.
Archibald J. Motley, Jr.
Mending Socks, 1924.
Oil on canvas. Ackland Art
Museum, The University of
North Carolina at Chapel Hill;
Burton Emmett Collection.

mother, Emily Motley, a former slave who lived with the artist's family. [See figure 10] Motley shows her patiently mending socks, surrounded by objects that tell her life's story. A brooch with a picture of her only daughter pins together the eighty-two-year old's red shawl. The crucifix and bible on the table attest to her deeply spiritual nature. And the bowl of fresh fruit, which she loved, rests on a geometrically patterned tablecloth that suggest her Native American husband's roots.

This homage to his elderly matriarch earned Motley critical acclaim. The painting received the Art Institute's Frank G. Logan prize in 1925. Other awards followed, and by 1928, the New Gallery in New York featured Motley in a one-person show. A representative sampling of Harlem Renaissance themes, the works included portraiture, Jazz Age images, and several new paintings featuring fantastical African jungle scenes. Of the twenty-six paintings on view, twenty-two works sold. Success breeds success, and the same year, Motley received a **Harmon Foundation** Award. The next year, a Guggenheim Fellowship financed a year's study in Paris, from 1929 to 1930. There, he completed fifteen paintings, including his famous work *Blues* (1929; collection of Archie Motley and Valerie Gerrard Browne), that explored jazz and black life in Paris.

Upon Motley's return to Chicago in 1930, he began painting in earnest his signature Bronzeville images, including the Art Institute's *Night Life*. In 1934, his work was included in Chicago's *Century of Progress* exhibitions. During this period, he also completed murals and easel paintings for the **WPA/FAP**. In 1935, he was appointed visiting instructor at Howard University in Washington, D.C. With the exception of a series of works featuring scenes of Mexico, where he made extended visits during the 1950s, Motley painted genre scenes of the Black Belt in Chicago (see map page 45) until the early 1960s. Although recognition dwindled, Motley was honored by the National Conference of Artists in Chicago in 1972, and in 1980, he received an honorary doctorate from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago.

Motley's mature images of black life in the city coincided with sociologists at the University of Chicago deeming Bronzeville the nation's truly representative "black metropolis." As art historian Wendy Greenhouse stated: "In the Black Belt's intense urbanism, its highly textured character as America's essential modern black community, and its prominence as a center for innovative popular music, Motley found the occasion for the breakthrough he engineered in the portrayal of the African American, and the inspiration for the individual stylistic means by which to realize that breakthrough." Motley died in Chicago in 1981.

Slide Ten: Archibald J. Motley, Jr.

1. How does Motley convey the spirit of the scene through the organization within the picture? The nightclub is filled with energy and motion. How does he create a sense of rhythm and movement? Motley creates a visual rhythm that makes the painting pulsate and vibrate by using contrasting diagonals and parallels. Discuss how he places the swinging dancers, juggling waiters and seated patrons to convey swaying movement.
2. In 1914, School of the Art Institute of Chicago instructor George Walcott taught Motley “composition with color.” Color harmony is created when complementary colors are placed next to each other, which intensifies each color by contrast (i.e. red and green). Each pair has a warm and cool color. Cool colors usually slow down the viewer’s pulse rate. Warm colors stimulate the viewer’s pulse rate. On canvas, Motley would color each background area, then select and color spaces using colors of varying intensity.
3. Jazz was an important part of urban entertainment in Motley’s lifetime (1891–1981). The subject matter and titles of his paintings, such as *Hot Rhythm*, *Stomp*, *Black and Tan Cabaret*, and *Syncopation*, reflect the music scene of the time. Have students look up “jazz” terms (syncopation, improvisation, swing, bop, rhythm, polyrhythm). Using these terms, have students design and write a newspaper ad for this urban club.
4. Have your class listen to songs like *Mood Indigo*, *Sophisticated Lady*, *Black and Tan Fantasy*, *Mahogany Hall Stomp*, and *It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing*. While listening to the music, have students describe the colors the music seems to express. Describe the mood the music creates. What instruments can students identify? Does one or more of the instruments carry the melody? Is there more than one melody? What instrument(s) play out the rhythm(s)? Are there any instrumental solos? Have students relate these concepts to the painting. Does there seem to be a “melody” carried by a color or a line? What colors, lines, or shapes provide a sense of “musical composition” in the painting?
5. The artistic expressions in music, dance, literature and the visual arts were all part of the Harlem Renaissance experience. Artist Archibald Motley, Jr. and musician Bud Freeman, for example, demonstrated that the “Renaissance” went beyond Harlem and took place in Chicago as well. Writer Langston Hughes likewise centered his poems and stories around his cultural heritage, music, and the urban scene. Below is an excerpted conversation from Hughes’s story *in the Dark* set in a Chicago club from the book *Chicago Stories*:

“What you know, daddy-o?” hailed Simple.

“Where have you been so long lately?” I demanded.

“Chicago on my last two War Bonds,” answered Simple,... “to see my Cousin Art’s new baby to which I am godfather—against the wife’s will, because she is holy and sanctified.”

“What is the trend of affairs in Chicago?” I inquired....

While viewing *Nightlife*, have students choose two or three people and write a conversation between them. Have students look carefully at their expressions, gestures, and placement to develop the dialogue.

6. The social, political and artistic events that occurred during Motley’s lifetime determined many of his projects. He helped establish the *South Side Community Art Center* which brought art to the neighborhood by providing free education in the arts and crafts. Have students investigate additional South Side Community Center artists such as Marion Perkins, or other Chicagoans who were involved with community organizations and businesses. These could include: Provident Hospital, Wabash Avenue YMCA, the Negro Business League and newspapers, including the *Chicago Whip*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the magazine *Ebony*. What long-term influence have these people, organizations, and events had on Chicago? Have students write articles, cartoons, editorials and columns on one of the above and combine and create a classroom newspaper.