THE SELF AS OTHER: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE PAINTING OF ARCHIBALD J. MOTLEY JR.

By Dennis Raverty

Archibald Motley Jr. was the first, nationally-recognized, African American artist to portray black subject matter almost exclusively, beginning with the poolroom players that he sketched as a boy in the early 1900s. From the 1920s through the 1940s, his portraits and scenes of traditional African and urban African American life won him critical acclaim, both in his native Chicago and in the major art centers of that time, Paris and New York.

In an interview near the end of his life, Motley acknowledged his choice of subject matter to be part of a conscious strategy of reaching and expanding an African American audience for art. But the manner in which he discusses his subjects and his audience is strangely detached. He refers to his fellow African Americans not as "us" but "them."

Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Chicago
c. 1950.
COLLECTION OF ARCHIE MOTLEY AND VALERIE GERRARD BROWNE

> *I was trying to get their [black people's] interest in art. I planned [to accomplish] that by putting them in the paintings themselves, making them part of my work, so that they could see themselves as they actually are.*[1]

Motley's detachment is even more obvious earlier in the interview:

> *In order to study them, I made it a habit to go to places where they gathered a lot, like churches, movie houses, dance halls, skating rinks, sporting houses, [and]...gambling houses.*[2]

These kinds of references to black people are not isolated cases, but permeate Motley's writings and give them a disturbing, even somewhat patronizing tone. They reveal an ambivalence that mirrors larger class prejudice within the African American community in Chicago of the time. Even more interestingly, they bespeak an inner struggle to come to terms with the artist's marginal status with regard to both whites and blacks.

Motley was an outsider. As an African American man living in America during the first half of the century, he was inevitably on the periphery of mainstream society. But as a relatively light-skinned, relatively well-to-do black man educated in predominantly white schools in Chicago and in Europe, and living in white neighborhoods most of his life, Motley did not feel an unequivocal part of the African American community either.

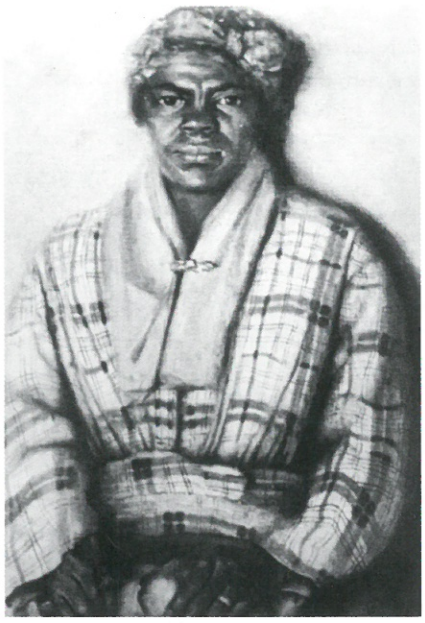
Unmistakably African American in physical appearance, Motley would have led a more "black identified" life had he lived in the South. There was no question of his being able to "pass." Many members of the Southern black middle class were similar in appearance to Motley — of obvious mixture — but, restricted to their own communities, were content to develop their social lives there — lives of great fraternity through their own colleges, churches and elite clubs. However, growing up in Chicago's, then mostly white, Englewood neighborhood on the city's South Side, Motley's place in society was always ambiguous.

This tension of being suspended between two worlds resulted in a crisis that gave birth to an artistic expression driven by a search for identity. Motley's art is a struggle to come to terms with his "race" in an era permeated by racist ideas.

Before we can trace reflections of the artist's outer struggle in his work, it is important to understand what is meant here by "racial identity." Unlike mere racial categorization, which is imposed upon a person by society and is based on observable physical characteristics, ascribed racial identity is chosen. It refers to a personal sense of collective identity grounded on a perception that an individual shares a common heritage with a particular racial group. According to Janet E. Helms, a social psychologist specializing in racial identity formation:

> *Black racial identity theories attempt to explain the various ways in which blacks can identify (or not identify) with other blacks and/or adopt or abandon identities resulting from racial victimization.*[3]

Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Tongues (Holy Rollers)*
1929, 29 $\frac{1}{4}$" x 36 $\frac{1}{8}$"
COLLECTION ARCHIE MOTLEY AND VALERIE GERRARD BROWNE



Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Woman Peeling Apples (Mammy)
1942
oil on canvas
32 $\frac{1}{2}$" x 28"
COLLECTION SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Portrait of on Octoroom
1922
oil on canvas
37 $\frac{1}{4}$" x 29 $\frac{1}{4}$"
COLLECTION CARROLL GREENE

Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Kikuyu God of Fire
1927
oil on canvas
36" x 41 1/8"
COLLECTION JUDGE NORMA Y. DOTSON

Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Africa*
1937, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"
COLLECTION WILLIAM WATSON HINES

Ascribed racial identity refers to one's deliberate affiliation with a particular racial group. According to social psychologist William E. Cross, one can choose to commit primarily to blacks as a definer of self (mono-racial ascribed identity) or primarily to whites; to both groups (bi-racial ascribed identity); or the individual can commit to neither group, vacillating in his identification between one group and the other (marginally ascribed identity). It is this latter, marginal identity that is evident in both the life and the oeuvre of Motley.

Motley says in his autobiography that he and his sister didn't even realize that they were Negroes until they went to school. They returned home that first day of school, after being called names by the other children, to ask their mother to explain how they were different and what it meant. He claims that as a boy he knew more about the Italian, German and Irish among whom he was brought up than his fellow African Americans.

Yet Motley was fascinated by the South Side's nearby black community, and recalled how, instead of eating with the white children when he was in the fifth grade, he would ride his bike over to a poolroom in the nearby black neighborhood:

> *I used to take my lunch, go over there, [and] sit in the poolroom so I could study all those characters in there. There was nothing but colored men there. The owner was colored. I used to sit there and study them and I found that they had such a peculiar and such a wonderful sense of humor, and the way they said things and the way they talked, the way they would express themselves ...I used to make sketches even when I was a kid then.*[7]

The early fascination with the black community was undoubtedly a way for the boy to come to terms with the fact that he, too, was "colored." From summer trips to visit relatives in Louisiana, Motley had a sense of his African ancestry from a close association with his maternal grandmother who told him stories about Africa. According to family oral history, the grandmother was "a Pygmy from the British East Africa."[8] However, the deportment of the grandmother (who married a French man), and Archibald's school teacher mother and his Pullman porter father was probably vastly different from the lively characters in the poolhall.

Motley did not concentrate on black subjects in the paintings he did as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The school was at that time very conservative and Motley for the most part painted in the classical and academic style that predominated there. He, in fact, planned to earn a living as a portrait painter, according to art historian Wendy Greenhouse.

This belief that a black artist would be allowed into the privileged world of those who commissioned portraits at that time in Chicago reveals Motley's naiveté as regards the power relations of the art world. D.M. Taylor refers to this kind of ideation as typical of what he calls the "preencounter" stage of racial identity formation.[9] The preencounter person believes that it is possible for him to be "just a person" and thereby not being adversely affected by racism. Persons in the preencounter stage are to a greater or lesser extent effectively in denial about the social realities that surround them. They identify with whites as a primary reference group.

In a stance typical of many African American intellectuals of this time as well as the preencounter stage, Motley inveighs against the expectation that black artists should portray black subject matter in an article he wrote for the *Chicago Defender* in 1918:

> *If all Negro artists painted simply Negro types, how long would our Negro art exist? Is this world composed only of Negro, or are we living in a large universe of numerous nations and customs?*[10]

The article was published during the summer following his graduation from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Within two years he had reversed his position and from that point on concentrated almost exclusively on black subjects.

It easily can be imagined that the incidents of the following summer, the "Red Summer" of 1919 marked by city-wide race riots, prompted Motley into the "encounter" stage, which Helms describes as a personal epiphany:

> *Usually this awareness seems to be aroused by an event(s) in the environment that touches the person's inner core and makes salient the contradiction that no matter how well he or she personally, or other black individuals conform to white standards, most whites will always perceive him or her as black and therefore inferior.*[11]

As people struggle to discover a new identity, they vacillate between their old preencounter identity and their new, as yet unformed black identity. Some remain in this stage of vacillation and in the end arrive at a more or less stable although marginal identity. What Motley experienced is almost universal among blacks in this stage of identity formation according to Helms. What is interesting for our purposes is that Motley represents this struggle in his art.

The iconography of Motley's painting is of primary importance in his search for identity. His paintings generally fall into three categories: self-portraits and uncommisioned portraits of people with various degrees of racial mixture; fanciful, often terrifying (and inaccurate) depictions of African rites; and scenes of African American urban life including speakeasies, pool halls and street preachers for which he is best known.

The portraits are the most obvious manifestations of this search for identity. They have been analyzed at length in a 1999 article by art historian Amy Mooney published in

Museum Studies. Mooney convincingly interprets Motley's ambition to do what he calls "scientific" studies of women of various racial mixtures to be influenced by racialist ideas common at the beginning of the century as to the psychological "type" of the Mulatto, Quadroon and other Creole mixtures.[12] In developing this visual taxonomy, Motley may have been trying to "place" himself among the range of "colored types," as Mooney suggests.

Perhaps even more revealing of Motley's struggle with his racial identity (particularly the misunderstood "primitive" aspects of his heritage) are his paintings on African themes. Most likely familiar with philosopher Alain Locke's belief that African American visual artists should develop a modernist expression from their African heritage and the Africanesque vogue in Harlem, Motley executed ten African-themed paintings during 1927 for his solo exhibition at the New Gallery in New York City, of which only a few survive. These works reflected the stereotypical notions about traditional African life that were conjured up in the popular imagination of his day. Even in those works now lost, the titles alone suggest a perception of African spiritual practices as sinister: *Omen, Devil-Devils, Spell of the Voodoo, Waganda Charm Maker*.

In *Kikuyu God of Fire*, one of the few remaining canvases from the series, we witness the terrifying presence of what is probably the god Ngai, the supreme god of the Gikuyu people of Kenya, who is said to be manifest in thunder and lightning. Gikuyu is sometimes spelled Kikuyu, as in the Motley painting, but in either case, it is the name of the group, not of the god. This inaccuracy is compounded by the fact that the Gikuyu seldom depict their deities and rarely use figuration at all in their art. It is likely that Motley was inspired in this fanciful depiction more by Hollywood movies than by actual familiarity with authentic Gikuyu beliefs. Yet in their depiction of "primitive" rituals and "savage" gods, the paintings are an evocation of Motley's deepest fears about what it means to be of African ancestry — fears similar to those held by many whites.

Motley's lack of knowledge about authentic African cultures is corroborated by his application for a Guggenheim fellowship the previous year. He states an intention of doing research in what he vaguely calls the "country of Africa lying south of the equator."[13]

He goes on to propose "intense study of the natives: their habitations, customs and life in general. I shall make paintings of them and their country ...a history of the Negro from his uncivilized and unprogressive stage through the years to his present state of civilization in the more progressive countries." Unsuccessful in obtaining this grant, he reapplied the following year, elaborating on his African studies and describing his work thus far in the genre:

> *These paintings* [i.e. those executed for his exhibit] *are on the subject of voodooism as it is practiced amongst various tribes of Africa ...the superstitions which have been for a long time sovereign in the minds of the illiterate blacks.*"[14]

He also asked for support to study in Paris. The foundation granted him money only for the Parisian part of his proposed study. He never visited Africa but his interest in going there suggests a complex combination of fascination and condescension.

During the 1930s, Motley executed the *Black Belt* series of paintings that documented the progress of the race he outlined in his proposal. The first painting in this series, *Africa*, depicts life in, as he called it, in the "uncivilized stage" of the race.

Other paintings in this series depict slavery, emancipation and the contemporaneous, or as he says, "progressive state," of African American life in the Bronzeville section of South Side Chicago. Yet Motley does not idealize the race as one might expect from his stated intentions of showing their advances.

In fact, there is a definite aspect of the dangerous and the "uncivilized" in many of Motley's paintings of life in the series. For example, in *Carnival*, painted the same year as *Africa*, what may seem from the title to be a depiction of a joyous celebration is haunted by the same glaring and sinister light that illuminates the jungle scene. The African scene, lit by the ritual fire and the full moon, has a similar effect as the artificial light of the midway, distorting the colors in the direction of a smoldering red and throwing the figures into partial silhouette. As in the African painting, many faces of the figures in the carnival are not fully visible, a concealment that denies individuality and squares with the artist's generalizations about the people of the Black Belt. The only part of the face of the hawker in the right half of the composition that is visible is his open mouth. With his tall top hat pulled down over his eyes and concertina in hand, he exudes a foreboding, minstrel-like quality.

A similar atmosphere pervades other scenes of night life in Bronzeville. In *Saturday Night*, the lively scene is restrained by the studied caricatures of the figures. Like the Africans enacting rituals, these revelers are strange, fascinating, beautiful and grotesque — subjects, that Motley views essentially as an outsider.

The heavy-set, balding bartender in the upper left corner of the composition is a character who makes frequent appearances in Motley's work. Usually an observer rather than a participant, he remains aloof and apart from the main action of the scenes in which he is depicted, and in works such as *Black Belt*, he even appears to be more racially mixed than the other figures. This figure could be a stand-in for Motley himself or a man like his father.

In *Bronzeville at Night*, the same figure walks across the front of the scene, alone with his thoughts amid the hustle and bustle of the night life. He is cast in a similar role in *Black Belt*. In *The Plotters*, he sits to the far right, the other figures turn their backs to him as if he is not privy to their

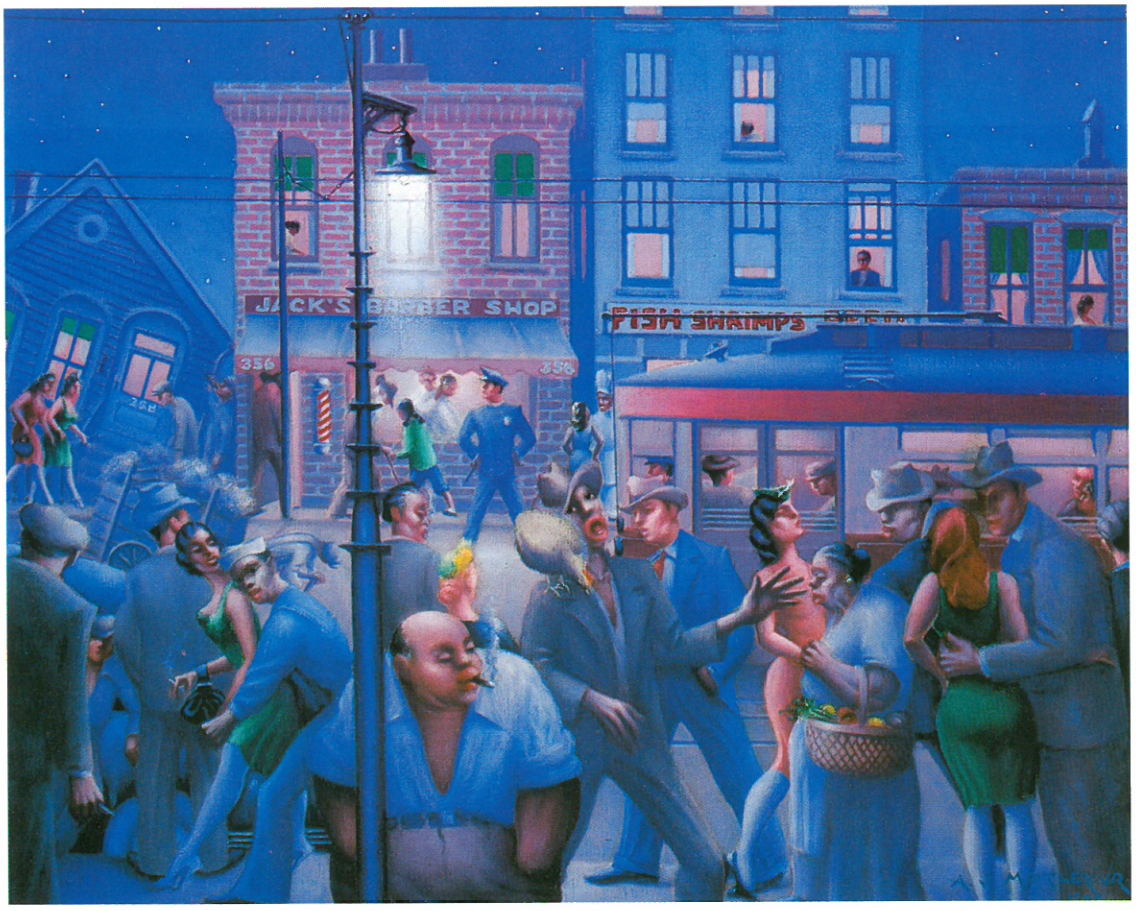
Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Carnival
1937
oil on canvas
30" x 40"
COLLECTION HOWARD UNIVERSITY GALLERY OF ART

scheming. He plays the role of the waiter in *The Boys in the Back Room* and the bartender once again in *Nightlife*.

In *Tongues*, subtitled *Holy Rollers*, the outsider figure is guided into the Pentecostal church service by an usher. "Jesus Saves" is emblazoned onto the wall in this make-shift, storefront meeting place for fundamentalist Christians, who, possessed by the Spirit, writhe to and fro in a frenetic dance, while speaking in tongues. This type of "joyous noise", common in Bronzeville, must have seemed strange indeed to Motley, who was raised a Roman Catholic. To him, they may have represented a continuity of the spirit-possessed dances of the Africans he depicted around the same time. His subtitle, "Holy Rollers," is generally considered a pejorative term, used by outsiders to denigrate these types of religious expressions. He views them much as he views the Africans — at a remove: foreign and "primitive."

In *Gettin' Religion*, the outsider/bartender figure takes a more active roll in the revival meeting, blowing his horn to accompany the evangelical street preacher perched on his soap box. Frequently depicted in Motley's paintings, the house in the center background resembles quite closely the house on West 60 Street in which Motley was raised. This house, I believe, is also a stand-in for Motley, a silent witness often present — or inserted — into scenes which are

Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Christmas Scene
1945
oil on canvas
24" x 30 3/8"
COLLECTION DUSABLE MUSEUM



Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Casey and Mae in the Street
1948
oil on canvas
32" x 39 1/2"
COLLECTION JUDGE NORMA Y. DOTSON
& MRS. NORMA V. LAMONTE

otherwise more-or-less realistic portrayals of particular neighborhoods. In *Christmas Eve*, the house is situated in a white neighborhood, while in *Casey and Mae in the Street*, it insinuates itself into the neighborhood, squeezing itself in at an impossible angle next to Jack's Barber Shop, a business that actually operated in the Bronzeville area, although of course it was not located next to the Motley home. What could be a more painfully distorted image for the artist desperately trying to "fit in" to a community of which he felt he did not entirely belong? This alienation is underscored by the presence of the outsider figure in this picture standing apart from the whirling crowd, close to the viewer, nonchalantly smoking his cigar and hunched over as if not to call attention to himself and yet spotlighted for us by the glare of the street lamp and his proximity to the picture plane.

Like the outsider figure in his paintings, Motley kept himself at a distance from the activities of other African American artists. His very successful solo exhibition in New York City was favorably reviewed in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* magazine and the work sold, but mostly to white collectors.[15] Bessie Beardon, the mother of Romare Beardon, and the New York correspondent for the Chicago's black newspaper, the *Defender*, wrote a glowing review of Motley's exhibit. She planned an elaborate black-tie reception to honor Motley and invited all of Harlem's luminaries, but Motley did not attend.[16]

Motley asserted in a later interview that not many black people visited the exhibit, despite the publicity. As he described it, "A few colored people came in. I didn't know them, they didn't know me: I didn't say anything to them, they didn't say anything to me."[17] After returning to Chicago, he stated of Harlem's New Negro movement, "There was no Renaissance."[18]

Although Motley participated in traveling exhibitions sponsored by the Harmon Foundation, a philanthropic organization devoted to the promotion of African American culture, and taught for a while at Howard University, he held himself aloof from local African American artists. For example, he refused to exhibit with the "Negro in Art Week" exhibition sponsored by the Chicago Women's Club in 1927 and was reluctant to join the Chicago Art League of the Wabash Avenue YMCA, stating that the artistic quality of the largely black league was too low.[19] However, he joined Chicago's No Jury Society, of which he was the sole Afrcian American member.[20]

These attitudes, and the self-chosen marginal identity they imply, were not particular to Motley and his personal search for identity, but reflect a gulf in Chicago's African American population as a whole. Motley's family was part of what has "Black Aristocracy." These were African Americans who migrated north to Chicago mostly from Kentucky, Louisiana and Tennessee (borderline states to the Black Belt states of the central, deep South) during the last decades of the 19th century. For the most part, they were absorbed into the fabric of Chicago's middle class and assimilated into the predominately white society.

In the years after the First World War, the "Great Migration" brought thousands of new African Americans to Chicago, most of them from the deep South, and they brought their southern culture with them. It was these later arrivals that made up the bulk of the residents of Chicago's "Black Belt." And it was to the depiction of African American life in this milieu of storefront churches, chicken shacks, speakeasies and pool halls that Motley devoted himself.

Motley's odyssey was fraught with pitfalls but, according to his son, he was "always concerned about racism" and did find some common ground with 'the darker brother' as evidenced by works such as *Senegalese Boy* (1929), an oil portrait invested with great dignity. *Senegalese Boy* is now in the Camille and William Cosby collection and reproduced in *The Other Side of Color* book on their collection. During his later years, moreover, the artist was "enamoured of (Martin Luther) King and thought the movement was important," says son, Archie Motley. "He wanted to make a statement and was spurred by the Birmingham church bombing" to produce, over a several year period, his final, major work: *The First One Hundred Years: He Amongst You Who Is Without Sin Shall Cast The First Stone: Forgive Them Father For They Know Not What They Do*.

Although for much of his career he seemed to regard the community he created with a mix of enthusiasm and ambivalence and fear, Archibald Motley's willingness to explore this world fully and unflinchingly makes him an important chronicler of African American life in Chicago during the first half of the 20th century. Torn between two worlds, white and black, he chose to depict his own people, long before Alain Locke's clarion call. In his choice of subject matter and his style, he reflected the complex racial attitudes of the assimilated person of color. Too smart and too proud to deny his ethnicity, he sought to come to terms with the contradictions within the African American community of his time by a search for personal identity through his art.

Dennis Raverty is assistant professor of art history at Iowa State University.

NOTES

1. Interview with Archibald Motley Jr., by Dennis Barrie, January 23, 1978: 9, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

2. Ibid.

3. Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research and Practice*, (New York, Greenwood Press, 1990), 3.

4. Ibid., cited by Helms, 5.

5. Archibald Motley Jr. "Autobiography," n.d., Archibald J. Motley Jr., Papers, Archives and Manuscripts Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

6. Ibid.

7. Barrie Interview, 9.

8. Barrie Interview.

9. Cited in Helms, 21.

10. Archibald Motley Jr., "The Negro in Art," *Chicago Defender* July 18, 1918, n.p.

11. Helms, 25.

12. Amy Mooney, "Representing Race: Disjunctures in the Work of Archibald J. Motley, Jr.," *Museum Studies* v. 24 no2 (1999), 162-79, 262-5. I want to point out in passing, the different economic status implied in each of these portraits by the accouterments of the sitter and their surroundings: the larger the amount of Black ancestry, the lower the economic class of the subject–and the rougher the handling of the paint.

13. Archibald Motley Jr., "Guggenheim Proposal," 1927, Archibald J. Motley Jr., Papers, Archives and Manuscripts Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

14. Archibald Motley Jr., "Guggenheim proposal," 1928, Archibald J. Motley Jr., Papers, Archives and Manuscripts Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

15. Edward Alden Jewell, "A Negro Artist Plumbs the Negro Soul," *New York Times Magazine* (March 25, 1928), 8; "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker* 4 (March 1928), 79.

16. Jontyle Robinson, "The Life of Archibald Motley Jr.," in *The Art of Archibald Motley Jr.* (Chicago, Chicago Historical Society 1991), 14.

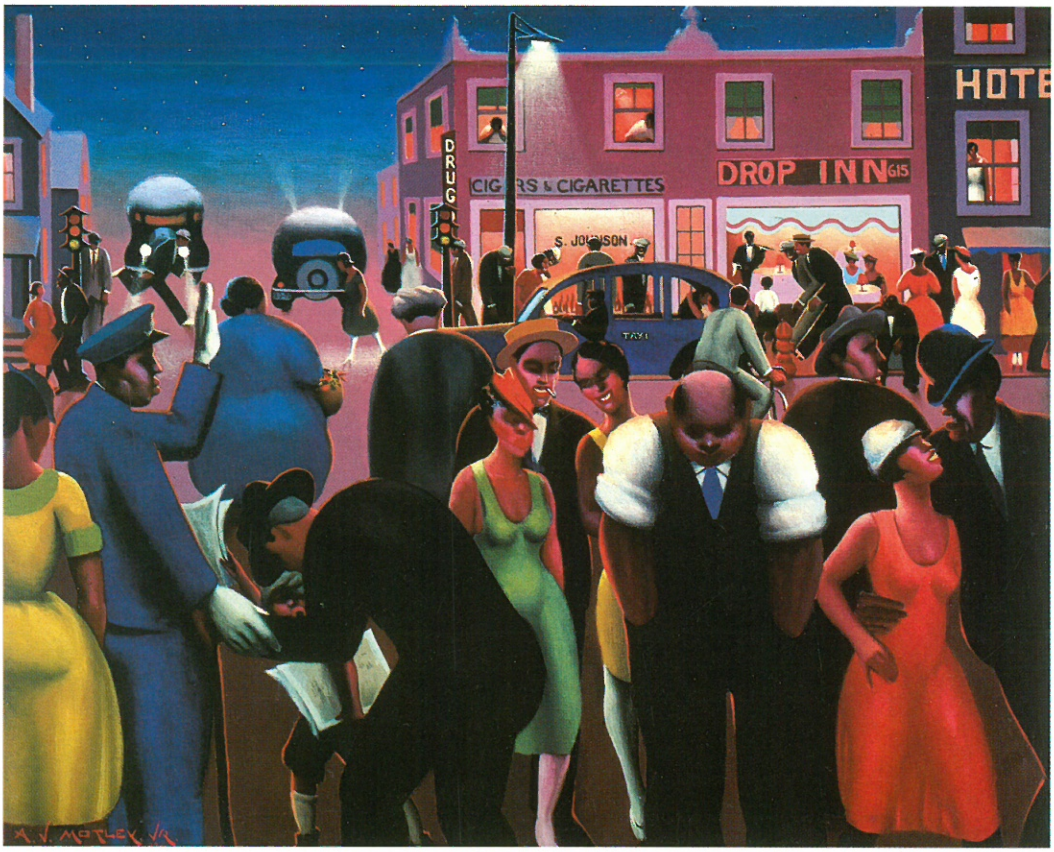
17. Barrie Interview, 26.

18. Ibid, 42.

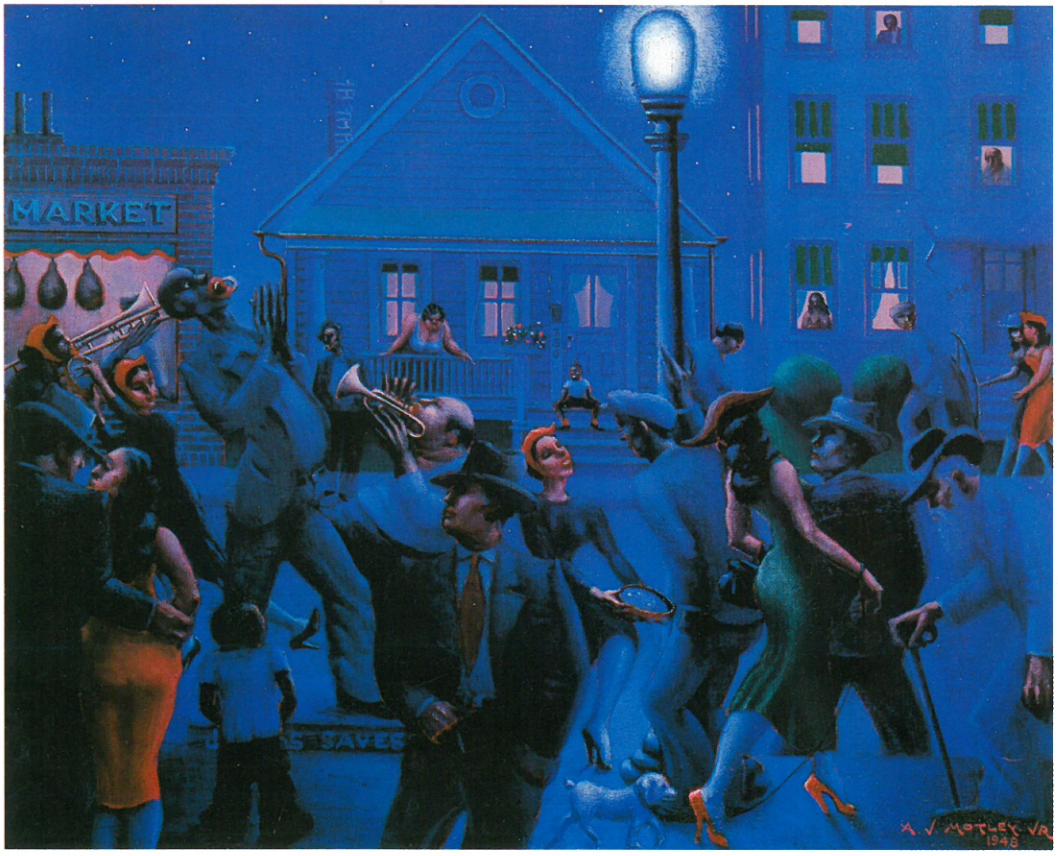
19. Elaine Woodall, "Archibald J. Motley Jr.: American Artist of the Afro-American People, (Master's Thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1977), 114.

20. Ibid.

Archibald J. Motley Jr., *The Plotters*
1933, oil on canvas, 36 1/8" x 40 1/4"
COLLECTION WALTER O. EVANS, M.D.



Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Black Belt
1934
oil on canvas
31 7/8" x 39 1/4"
COLLECTION HAMPTON UNIVERSITY MUSEUM



Archibald J. Motley Jr.
Gettin' Religion
1948
oil on canvas
31 7/8" x 39 1/4"
COLLECTION ARCHIE MOTLEY & VALERIE GERRARD BROWNE

Archibald J. Motley Jr.
The First 100 Years: He Amongst You Who Is Without Sin Shall Cast The First Stone: Forgive Them Father For They Know Not What They Do
1969
oil on canvas
48 $^{7}/_{8}$" x 30 $^{3}/_{4}$"
COLLECTION ARCHIE MOTLEY & VALERIE GERRARD BROWNE

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