

FAMOUS ARTISTS SERIES: Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (1891-1981)

Supplies Needed:

Art Box:

- 4 Laminated examples of Motley's work
- 6"x8" muslin fabric squares (1 per student)

Learning Center Gallery:

- Framed print "Casey and Mae in the Street" (1948)
- Framed print "Blues" (1929)

Other:

- Colored markers from classroom supplies
- Music to play during project: "Rhapsodies in Black" music and works from the Harlem Renaissance. CD #3 has good selections from the 1920's. Available to check out from Fremont Public Library (Mundelein).

References

- *A History of African American Artists*, 704.0396073BEA(Cook)
- *The Art of Archibald Motley, Jr.*, Jontyle Robinson and Wendy Greenhouse: Chicago Historical Society, 1991.
- Just the Arti-FACTS-Painting the People, www.chicagohs.org
- *Archibald J. Motley, Jr., Notable Black American Men*, www.galenet.galegroup.com

AHEAD OF TIME NOTE:

- Copy (1 per student) the "Famous Artists Series" Take Home Note

PRESENTATION:

Present laminate #1 "Self Portrait" (c. 1920)

Today we will be studying the art of Archibald J. Motley Jr. He was part of an artistic movement in the 1920's called the "Harlem Renaissance," which reflected African American life through the arts. Harlem is a part of New York City, but the "Harlem Renaissance" was an art movement recognized all over America: New York City was known for its writers and poets, New Orleans, Louisiana for its musicians and Chicago was home to the finest visual artists of this period.

Motley was one of first artists to concentrate on African American life in his paintings. Until Motley's time, African Americans were either not painted at all or were depicted as Motley said, as "*ignorant...or as a cotton picker or a chicken thief.*" Motley believed that his paintings could help Americans understand the real African American culture that for the most part they did not know. He did this by painting the proud, the dignified, the beautiful, the talented and most important to Motley, the joyful African American.

Archibald Motley was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1891. His father was African American and his mother was white. Before he was two, his family moved to Chicago. This was during the period known as the “Great Migration” when many southern African Americans moved north to seek better opportunities. Motley’s family settled in the Englewood neighborhood on the south side of Chicago where his father became a porter for the railroad.

Ask: Does anyone know what a “porter” is?

At Englewood High School Motley was a star football player. He even played semi-professional baseball on the weekends. But his real love was *art* so he went to study at the Art Institute of Chicago.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, Motley earned good grades, but it was not easy, because in addition to going to class and doing his homework, Motley worked at the museum to pay his tuition and earn \$15 a week spending money! He had to get up at 5:00 a.m. every morning to straighten-up the art galleries and dust some of the very statues that we may have seen at the Art Institute.

Motley graduated near the top of his class, but because of his race he had trouble finding a job as an artist. So, he worked as a plumber, a waiter and as a porter to earn a living. Still, he painted whenever he could find the time.

The early part of Motley’s artistic career was dedicated to portrait painting. Many of his models were family members. What made Motley different from other portrait painters was that he painted only black or mixed race subjects.

Ask about “Self Portrait”

- *This is Motley showing himself at work.*
- *Look at the background -what do you see? It is empty. Why? There is no distraction and this allows us to concentrate on the artist himself.*
- *Look at his facial expression. His gaze is direct, strong, composed.*
- *Do you think Motley see himself as ordinary? Note the smock over white dress shirt, vest and black tie with diamond tie tack. His hair is styled. He presents himself as a man of style and education.*
- *What is Motley’s mood? Dark colors emphasize his serious expression and posture.*
- *Many people believe that Motley used this self-portrait to convince the world of his value as an African American artist and as a man. Perhaps he was still trying to convince himself.*

Present laminate #2 "Octoroon" (c. 1922)

Another painting Motley created to show a different side of African American culture was "Octoroon." This is one of many portraits that Motley did of beautiful women of mixed race.

- *Like Motley's self portrait, notice the subject in rather fancy clothes.*
- *Does this woman look like she has been worn down by a hard life? What hints to show us that she is a woman of class? (Her lovely, delicate hands; her upright posture; her peaceful gaze)*
- *What does the term Octoroon mean? "Octo" means eight and the woman in the painting was 1/8 black.*

Present laminate #3 "Mending Socks" (c. 1924)

The next portrait is called "Mending Socks" and is considered Motley's most popular work. In fact, Motley himself believed this to be his finest piece. It is interesting that his finest piece was done on a laundry bag that the railroad used on its sleeping cars, because Motley could not afford artists canvas.

- *This is called a narrative painting because it tells the story of the subject. The painting shows Motley's 82 year-old grandmother Emily who had been a slave and lived to see the end of slavery.*
- *The oval portrait shows the mistress of the house where the grandmother had been a slave. It was given to her on the day she was freed. Note that only part of the portrait is shown because it serves just as a reminder of her former life.*
- *Below, the books refer to her education. Emily was taught reading and writing alongside her mistress's children, which was a rare privilege for a slave.*
- *The blue and white tablecloth has an Indian design and refers to Emily's Native American husband.*
- *Crucifix & Bible: She was a woman of strong religious beliefs.*
- *Emily's brooch contains a portrait of her only daughter.*
- *The socks and scissors refer to her daily routine of mending the family's socks.*

In 1929 Motley received a fellowship which allowed him to study in Paris for a year. Some of the paintings he did during this time showed a second style that Motley became known for: the lively city night scene. Motley believed African Americans shared a special sense of community; he showed this through their love of music.

Present framed print, "Blues" (c. 1929)

One famous painting which shows the lively sense of community is "Blues", which is on exhibit at the Art Institute here in Chicago.

- *In "Blues" Motley shows mixed race patrons at a Paris nightclub. It is a portrayal of elegant people enjoying each other, enjoying life and particularly enjoying music.*
- *Do you get a feel for the type of music being heard? (The instruments suggest jazz)*
- *The painting is a crowded one isn't it? What makes up the crowd? Patrons, musicians and instruments - it is jam packed, full of life.*
- *Note the simple shapes, showing strong, dignified characters.*
- *There are a lot of positive influences going on in this painting, but do you see anything here that is not a positive example? (Point out cigarette noting that in those days - the 1920s- it was common and acceptable to smoke, but this was before people knew that tobacco was dangerous to health.)*

Present framed print, "Casey and Mae in the Street" (c. 1948)

Here Motley takes us to Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood, which shows us African American nightlife south of the city. The feelings of community and optimism are again evident.

- *What do you think of the colors in this painting?*
- *How does this work make you feel?*
- *How is this neighborhood similar to yours? How is it different?*

Present laminate #4 "Nightlife" (c. 1943)

This painting is also set in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. This is another example of Motley's use of lively night scenes and the influence of music as a subject. "Nightlife" is one of Motley's most famous works, and like "Blues" it can be viewed at the Art Institute.

- *What kind of music is suggested? (Dancers' jumping movements suggest jazz.)*
- *What else in the painting suggests lively motion? Note the simple geometric shapes and diagonal lines (arms and legs).*
- *Motley also showed his interest in color and light through this painting. What is the main color you see in "Nightlife?" Do you see how Motley concentrates on one color but in different shades? This in turn gives us the effect of light in the painting.*
- *Motley purposely used this shading technique as a way to point out the many shades of skin color among African Americans in Chicago.*

In 1945 Motley's wife died and he became so depressed that he couldn't paint. In order to support his son, he took a job in a factory that made hand painted shower curtains. The workers were from all over the world and Motley appreciated all the differences about them. It was this interest in people from different backgrounds that sent him back to painting, which he was able to do for the rest of his long life.

Motley died in 1981, just short of his 90th birthday. Many feel that he did more than any other artist to show a different side of African American culture. Motley understood the challenges and the pain that African Americans had suffered throughout history, but he chose to paint a joyous celebration of African American life.

Suggested Project

On front blackboard, display laminate #3, "Mending Socks".

In "Mending Socks", Motley told the life story of his grandmother in his painting. He painted objects that had some meaning in her life (either good or bad).

Today we are going to create our own "narrative portrait". The subject will be ourselves and we will draw on a fabric similar to the laundry bag that Motley used for "Mending Socks".

1. First we are going to divide our "canvas" by folding the fabric in half and half again and creasing the folds. This should create four squares in which to work.
2. Using a pencil, let's sketch-in the basic framework of our composition:
 - Top left square: Draw a picture frame – any shape!
 - Bottom left square: Draw a table top with two legs (refer to template)
 - Right half: Sketch an outline of yourself.
3. Now, using your colored markers, fill-in the picture and tell your story. Since a "narrative portrait" is about *you*, try to include details and objects that have some meaning in your life.
 - Fill the picture frame with a person, place or thing that has affected you; something that has helped make you the person you are today.
 - On the table, draw a few objects that are important to you.
 - On your self-portrait: Pay attention to your clothes. Casual or fancy? What colors? Are you doing something or holding anything that represents who you are?

When you are done, we should be able to tell a little more about you on the inside. This was what Motley was all about – showing us the real person.

**Leave 5 minutes at end of class
to give children opportunity to present their narrative portraits.**

Staple fabric portraits to colored construction paper.

Ask teacher where she/he would like the work to be displayed.

FAMOUS ARTISTS SERIES

Take Home Note

Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (1891-1981)

Today in class a volunteer presented the works of American painter Archibald J. Motley, Jr. Motley was raised in Chicago in a bi-racial family and graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago at the top of his class. He is associated with the Harlem Renaissance, the period during the 1920s when African American writers, artists and actors received encouragement and support for the first time in this century. Motley devoted himself to the portrayal of African-Americans believing that his paintings could promote a better understanding among white viewers of his black heritage. Your child was introduced to Motley's use of portraiture and lively city night scenes to achieve this goal. Ask your child what a "narrative portrait" is and what made Motley's paintings so unique.

Two of the works studied today are on display at the Art Institute of Chicago and are often included in the docent led grade school tours of the museum. They are "Blues, 1929" and "Nightlife."

Sincerely,

Butterfield School Art Volunteer