

Archibald J. Motley Jr.

American, 1891-1981



Nightlife, 1943

Oil on canvas

91.4 x 121.3 cm

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. The Art Institute of Chicago

Archibald J. Motley Jr. often depicted contemporary black social nightlife in the city. His focus was **Chicago's** **Bronzeville** neighborhood. Also known as the Black Belt, this area became home to more than 90 percent of the city's black population by the 1930s.

Nightlife, one of Motley's most celebrated paintings, takes viewers inside one of Bronzeville's many nightspots. Although the artist painted the picture during World War II (1939-45), his figures seem to have left the world's troubles behind. Inside the club, there is nothing but exuberant, upbeat energy. The dancers' pulsing, jumping movements are suggestive of **jazz**.

Motley conveyed the sound and motion of jazz through technique, composition, and color. He outlined the figures with simplified, geometric shapes and emphasized diagonal lines, creating a sense of lively motion. Fascinated with natural and artificial light, Motley chose glowing violet-red tones. The subject of *Nightlife* gave the artist the opportunity to present, in his own words, "an expression of the numerous shades and colors which exist in such great variety" among African Americans in Chicago.