

2022

# Black Artists and Federal Muralism in New Deal Chicago: An examination of the Politics and Ideologies of African-American Muralists under the New Deal: The Illinois Federal Art Project as Case Study.

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/19670>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.24382/964>

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*Black Artists and Federal Muralism in New Deal  
Chicago: An examination of the Politics and Ideologies  
of African-American Muralists under the New Deal: The Illinois  
Federal Art Project as Case Study.*

by  
James Cuffe

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial  
fulfilment for the degree of

RESEARCH MASTERS  
School of Society and Culture

September 2022

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe a great deal to the tutors that have assisted me in this research project. My biggest thanks go to my first Director of Studies, Dr. Jody Patterson, who has consistently provided me with excellent advice, encouragement and guidance throughout this project and my undergraduate thesis. I am also grateful to my second Director of Studies Dr. Simon Topping and to Dr. Péter Bokody for their assistance and insights in developing my thesis and shaping my arguments.

I must also extend my thanks to Nancy Alexander who provided me with excellent insights into Archibald Motley's murals at Nichols Elementary School. I am also grateful to Hilary Mac Austin who undertook archival research on my behalf in Chicago.

I am also very much grateful for my friends and family, without their support, I would have never regained the abilities to complete this thesis. I am especially grateful to my brother Grant, my cousin Jody, and my friend Martyn who have provided me with no end of support throughout these years.

### **Authors' Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Research Masters has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

A program of advanced study was undertaken, which included taught modules:

*MARE700 Research in the Arts & Humanities* and *MARE703 Research Methods in Art History*.

Conferences attended: Art Outside The Gallery: New Voices Conference (Association for Art History) 2016

Word count of main body of thesis: 20834

Signed .....James Cuffe.....

Date .....1/9/2021.....

## **Abstract**

**James Cuffe**

### **Black Artists and Federal Muralism in New Deal Chicago: An examination of the Politics and Ideologies of African-American Muralists under the New Deal: The Illinois Federal Art Project as Case Study.**

This thesis provides an examination of the relationship between federal muralism and African-American art under the Illinois Federal Art Project. The exploration of the murals that were undertaken by two of Chicago's best-known African American painters of their day, Archibald J. Motley Jr. and Charles W. White provide a useful basis for analysis. The murals also provide new insights which formulate a worthwhile contribution to current historiography. The state funded arts projects afforded artists including Motley and White the opportunity to paint freely, and both represented African-Americans as a core part of their work, therefore, this study will provide an interesting basis for comparison as they had the freedom to represent African-Americans as they wished.

Using a social history of art methodology, this study examines the class relationships within the Illinois Federal Art Project and offer original insights into federal muralism during the New Deal era. This study represents the first examination of Motley's murals that were undertaken in 1935 at Nichols Elementary School, similarly, this thesis will examine other contributions by Motley on the Federal Art Project, arguing that Motley's ideological stance was more conservative than previous art historians have indicated. This thesis will also examine the murals undertaken by Charles W. White during his time on the Federal Art Project. This examination also challenges existing assumptions in terms of the content of the murals that have been written about in current historiography on White. Finally, a comparative analysis will demonstrate their similarities and differences in terms of ideology, style and their perceptions of race and class.

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## **Introduction and Literature Review**

This project explores the murals of Archibald J. Motley Jr. And Charles W. White, both were noteworthy African-American artists who sought to use art as a means for redressing negative depictions of African-Americans in art and wider visual culture. Both Motley and White achieved a great deal for artists during their time and the tumultuous years following the Great Depression, a rare opportunity occurred for artists when the New Deal cultural relief programs under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were rolled out. Both Motley and White took part in these programs and they both produced murals between the years 1935 and 1943. A comparison of these murals is the central focus of this study. The years under which artists in the US enjoyed federal patronage represented an opportunity to further build upon the successes of the Harlem Renaissance for African-American artists. In turn, this study examines Motley and White's murals and examines the contrasting methods they employed to represent their race and provides a rationale for these findings. The diverging artistic choices of the artists and their differing ideological approaches provided the basis with which to build a clearer argument on the plurality of the artwork produced under the Illinois FAP, more precisely murals by African-Americans. The influence of politics on the FAP in Chicago was keenly interwoven with the content of the artworks produced under the project. The artwork of both Motley and White demonstrate polarised political leanings; Motley of an aggrandising conservative and White identified himself very much with the left.

In terms of scope, this study focuses on the art history of Illinois, although Chicago is the prime focus. Most studies on the New Deal arts project focus exclusively on New York, as it can be considered the 'art capital' of the United States. This study seeks to add to the historiography of the Illinois FAP and African-American Chicago art history. The New Deal years which encompassed federal muralism that both Motley and White participated in tend to group African-American artists into a reduced whole rather than exploring the more detailed nuances of their respective works. This study will analyse Motley and White through the lens of class, as they were distinctly different in their approaches but also their socio-economic background. This study will demonstrate these differences in terms of outlook and perceptions of their own race and will also analyse their works in terms of ideology, race, class and style. In addition to

this, this study will argue for a greater recognition between Motley's ideology and the relationship between Du' Bois 'Talented Tenth' philosophy, placing it within the appropriate context with other art historians that have written along similar lines about Motley's artwork.

In terms of structure, this thesis is arranged over two chapters. The first chapter will provide the historical context for the study. Discussing the artists, their cultural milieu and the evolution of black politics in Chicago during the 1930s. This chapter will also place Motley and White within the respective art-historical contexts in which they reside, specifically the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Black Renaissance and will discuss the local art history of Illinois. Following this, the chapter will provide an in-depth history on the Federal Art Project (FAP) the flagship arts relief program of the New Deal years. This section charts the FAP from a national to local level and provides details on the FAP's National Director, Holger Cahill, the Illinois State Director, Increase Robinson and discussing the ideologies that were at play and the ways in which the Illinois project became an ideological battleground in which the plight for American-Artists was intermixed with left-wing ideology and politics. The next sections of the chapter focus chiefly on federal muralism under the FAP. The section discusses the Chicago Artist's Union (CAU) and maps out the relationship between the politics of the CAU and the artists of the Chicago Mural School (CMS) that were instrumental in assisting the plight of African-American artists such as Motley and White. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relationship between federal muralism and the Mexican Muralist movement, which provided a suitable cultural product model for the muralists on the FAP including Charles White and the contemporary criticisms of the FAP.

The second chapter focuses on the murals produced by Motley and White. The first section discusses the previously unanalysed Motley murals at Nichols Elementary School, Evanston, Illinois. The three murals named *Negro Children*, *Dance Scene*, *Bands Playing* were painted in 1935 and includes an analysis which places them within the historiography around Motley and the associations of race and class that this study seeks to explore. Motley also painted a mural for TRAP named *Stagecoach and Mail*, but this is not the focus of this study and is justified in the chapter. Further to his murals at Nichols, Motley also painted easels for the FAP and this chapter will also discuss the relevance of those *Evolution of the American Negro Series* in

relation to ideas around race and class. Following this, the chapter will discuss the relationship between the ideas and tropes in Motley's artwork in its relation to the Du Boisian concept of the 'Talented Tenth'. The chapter will then turn its attention to Charles White and his contributions to federal muralism during the FAP years. His *Five Great American Negroes* and *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* are discussed in detail, as are the heroic characters which formulate his style. The chapter will also challenge existing historiography on Barnwell's interpretations of several of White's characters in *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*. The chapter will finish with a comparative analysis of Motley and White's murals with respect to ideology, style, race and class.

## Literature Review

My research was concerned with developing an extensive knowledge of the social-historical background to the era of history concerned. The FAP ran from 1935-1943, therefore, investigation into this area is concentrated on several publications which offer that knowledge. The most insightful book which concerns the experience of the contemporary black Chicagoan is *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. The book contains a rich amount of analysis and raw data concerning labour, class, social and housing issues starting around the Great Migration but especially concerning the 1930s to 1940s and is seminal reference book for my project when relating the artworks to the social conditions in which they were produced. The books Chapter 21- The World of the Lower Class<sup>1</sup> and Chapter 22- The middle-class Way of Life<sup>2</sup> provide insights which are complementary to the debates that will make up my thesis. More specifically, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935-1943* is a pivotal text on the FAP in Illinois which offers detailed accounts of the internal workings and structure of the FAP. In particular, the chapter on Increase Robinson<sup>3</sup>, the local administrator of the FAP in Chicago from its inception and her quarrels with the CAU. Robinson was a staunch conservative and

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<sup>1</sup> Horace, R Cayton and St. Clair, Drake *Black Metropolis: A study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, (Illinois, University of Chicago Press) 1993 (Reissue). .pp 600-651

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pp. 658-716

<sup>3</sup> Richard Lawson and George J. Mavigliano, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935-1943*, (Illinois, Southern Illinois University Press) 2006. pp. 14-46

allowed little freedom of the artists to interpret what they believed to be interpretations of the 'American Scene'.<sup>4</sup> *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935-1943* also provides some excellent information on the murals that were produced under the WPA. It highlights the importance of the mural as a means of communicating to a larger audience because of their location and prominence<sup>5</sup>. The book also charts the influence of Mexican muralists on the IFAP and the influence that they had on the local artists, Charles White falls distinctly in this category.<sup>6</sup> In terms of murals in Chicago, both *A Guide to Chicago's Murals* by Mary Lackritz Gray and *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive Era-and WPA Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943* by Heather Becker have provided additional information in relation to additional murals and the CMS. As well, *The WPA Guide to Illinois: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s Illinois* provides insights into contemporary Chicago also. O'Connor's *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930's by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* is also an enlightening read and features several contributions from Illinois FAP artists on their views on the project.

There are two key texts concerned explicitly with the artists that will be analysed in this study, they are aptly called *Archibald J. Motley Jr.* and *Charles White* who are written by Amy M. Mooney and Angela Barnwell respectively. Both provide useful biographical information as well as insights into the stylistic, political and ideological nature of the artists. Together the two books chart the lives of two revered Chicagoan African-American artists and have been invaluable in informing this study, as they represent the only up-to-date biographical records on the artists. The *Art of Archibald J. Motley Jr.* A 1991 biography by Johntyle Theresa Robinson and Wendy Greenhouse, whilst useful, pays little attention to Motley's federal mural contributions.

*Artist's on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* provides an excellent survey of the emergence of the left wing artist in the USA. The book provides analysis of the ideological standpoint of the contemporary arts scene, with an emphasis on New York,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.24

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.22

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.17

offering great insights into the ways in which politics and art intermixed during the WPA years. In particular, the book provides useful information on the ideological framework which Holger Cahill was approaching from when he ran the FAP.<sup>7</sup> The book also supports the *Charles White* book by acknowledging his importance as a left-wing muralist, adding further useful information about Charles White and explaining his artistic contribution within the wider scope of the socially progressive left.<sup>8</sup> Robert Bone and Richard Courage's *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American creative expression in Chicago 1932-1950*, and Bill V. Mullen's, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African American Cultural Politics 1935-1946* were also helpful sources in relation to understanding the contemporary socio-political scene in Chicago. The historiography in relation to Motley is as it relates to the use of caricature must be addressed here. This survey does not include Phoebe Wolfskill's *Archibald J. Motley Jr., and Racial Reinvention: The Old Negro in New Negro Art* which was released in 2017. Instead, this thesis has relied on Wolfskill's article, *Caricature and the New Negro in the work of Archibald J. Motley Jr*, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91, 3, 2009 which addresses the same themes.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement*, (Yale, Yale University Press) 2002 .pp 151-153

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 260-264

## **Chapter One: Context**

To provide the best possible context for the reader on this study, it is first necessary to contextualise various aspects of the wider histories in which this study is involved. This will place both Motley and White within a complex and multi-faceted Chicago. This chapter will firstly provide biographies of Motley and White and discuss the African-American cultural milieu, discussing how Chicago's black ghetto became a source of 'race pride' and the preceding social conditions that provided both Motley and White, their home as well as a great deal of their own artistic inspiration. As well as this, the chapter will also provide details on Chicago's political situation for African-Americans. The 1930s and the Great Depression caused a great deal of upheaval and consternation in American politics and it became the first time in American political life where 'the black vote' had accrued the power to become an election swing decider.

This chapter will also provide detailed information on the artistic movements that influenced African-Americans during these years. Both the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Black Renaissance were both cultural/artistic movements in which both Motley and White are placed within respectively. As well as this, this chapter will discuss the key artistic changes within Chicago's cultural history during this era. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and its subdivisions created the FAP, which had a positive effect on African-American cultural synthesis and progress between 1935-1943. This chapter will provide details on the history, structure and of the FAP project nationally and in Illinois, focusing on federal muralism. In turn, the chapter will also discuss the differing ideologies at play within the Project from the National Director, Holger Cahill to State Director, Increase Robinson, discussing the influences from a national to a local level in relation to what the FAP meant for African-Americans.

Additionally, the chapter will furnish the reader on the nuances of the Illinois Federal Art Project (IFAP). The Chicago Mural School (CMS) and the Chicago Artists' Union (CAU) how its internal schisms helped to create a receptive place in which African-American artists could somewhat freely create, politically engaged murals which could challenge the visual culture pattern of the white power structure after 1938. Lastly, this chapter will also chart the influence of Mexican muralism, both stylistically and politically on the IFAP and its protagonists, including Charles White. The chapter will end with a discussion on the criticisms of the FAP, as well as the impact it had on Chicago's artistic reputation as well as African-American parity as cultural workers.

### **Biography Archibald Motley**

Archibald J. Motley Jr. (1891-1981) was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1894, Motley's parents Mary Huff Motley and Archibald J. Motley Sr. moved to Chicago, like many African-Americans in the South, looking for better work opportunities and better racial relations. Motley's father worked as a Pullman Car Porter, a well-respected job for contemporary African-Americans, providing a seemingly middle-class lifestyle by the standards of the day. Motley's formative years were an unusual one for an African-American. The Motley's lived in a white neighbourhood and Motley also attended majority white schools. From 1914-1918, Motley attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the first African-Americans to do so. During those years, Motley honed his craft in portraiture, encouraged by one of his instructors Karl Buehr (1866-1925) to recognise the potential of future commissions from the genre, which bore him some early career recognition and success. Motley took to portraiture well, his 1924 painting *Mending Socks*, a portrait of his maternal grandmother won 'the most liked painting' award at the Newark Museum in 1927 and was his personal favourite.<sup>9</sup>

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Fig.1 Archibald J. Motley, *Mending Socks*, 1924, Oil on canvas, 111.4 x 101.6cm Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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<sup>9</sup> Amy M. Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.*, (San Francisco, Pomegranate Books) 2004 pp.23-24



It was in the medium of portraiture too, that Motley originally sought to redress the negative stereotypes bygone and contemporary in American visual culture around images of African-Americans in his work. From the mid 1920s, Motley sought to illuminate the diversity and beauty of African-American women as a means of dispelling the negative stereotypes around them. Motley's 1925 painting *Octoroon Girl* typified this ambition on canvas. An octoroon, is a person who is one eighth black by descent.

'image has been removed due to copyright restrictions'

Fig.2 Archibald J. Motley Jr., *The Octoroon Girl*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 76.8 cm

To me it seems that pictures portraying the suffering, sorrow and at times child-like abandon of the Negro; the dance, the song, the hilarious moment when a bit of Jazz predominates, would do much to bring about better relations, a better understanding between the races, white and colored.<sup>10</sup>

Motley straddled the contemporary Chicago arts scene rather well, exhibiting regularly at established institutions and societies, as well as the open-to-all No Jury Society of artists in 1926. As the 1920s wore on, Motley moved towards genre paintings and street scenes, representing African-Americans with a distinctly modernist, style and palette, that deepened in its vibrancy and vividness into the 1930s. In the realms of art, modernism can be defined as an early twentieth century movement that built upon earlier precedents and represented a shift away from traditional European notions of mimetic painting. Instead of mimesis, artists sought new techniques to transfer meaning and better explain the realities of the changing world in which they lived.<sup>11</sup> In 1929, Motley was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and lived in Paris for a year and produced several works during his stay. His seminal 1929 painting *Blues*, perhaps encapsulated Motley's ambition to promote the diversity of skin tones and positive cultural settings for his black protagonists. The painting shows numerous characters of varying degrees of blackness, dancing to music and enjoying themselves. This was something not seen in the US at the time as due to segregation. Motley perhaps imagined a future in which black people were on a par with whites. Like *Octrooon Girl*, Motley represented diversity in black people with a variety of skin tones, which in turn challenged the espoused monopolar blackness of the white power structure. Even though *Blues* was painted in Paris, it could have quite easily have been an American club or speakeasy which Motley was using as subject matter.<sup>12</sup>

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Fig. 3 Archibald J. Motley Jr, *Blues*, 1929, Oil on canvas, 80 x 100cm. Collection of Valerie Gerrard Browne.

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<sup>10</sup> Archibald Motley, quoted in, Judith A. Barter *et al*, *American Modernism at the Art Institute of Chicago*, (New Haven, Yale University Press) .p 296

<sup>11</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press) 1987 p.xiii

<sup>12</sup> Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.*, pp.63-65

Motley was raised in better conditions than the majority of African-Americans, had access to better education, married a white woman and by the time of the inception of the FAP, had certainly accrued a great deal of social and cultural capital, owing to his earlier successes in portraiture and his national and international artistic ventures. If Motley did support or empathise the position of his fellow artists, there is no evidence to demonstrate this. During his time on FAP, Motley, Chicago's and perhaps the United States' most talented African-American artist, was released from the IFAP and had appealed to be reemployed by Increase Robinson, but was rejected.<sup>13</sup> If Motley was an active member of the CAU, he certainly was not a key player. Motley's proximity to those on the left is abundantly clear, he would have known the likes of Edward Millman, Mitchell Siporin, Rudolph Weisenborn, Gustaf Dalstrom, all artists that would become part of the FAP, CAU and CMS from his time exhibiting with the No Jury Society of Artists in the 1920s. Motley's brother, Willard Motley, moved in left-wing circles, alongside well-known contemporary author Richard Wright.<sup>14</sup>

Charles W. White, (1918-1979) was an African-American, born in Chicago to impoverished surroundings and raised solely by his mother. White's father, a polygamist with another family elsewhere in Chicago, died in 1926. Due to her long hours of domestic work, Ethelene White, left her son at the public library on a regular basis, White came to prefer the freedom of the library to mainstream education. The low admission numbers of African-Americans in his school and lack of appreciation for the contributions of African-Americans in the annals of contemporary history, irked White considerably. Although White was recognised as talented in the realms of art, he was also considered problematic by his teachers due to his frequent challenges the racist nature of historical interpretation. White eventually became severely disillusioned with mainstream education and regularly played truant from school in order to visit the library. It was then, that White came across the writings of Alain Locke and his 1925 collection of essays and poems, *The New Negro*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Increase Robinson to Archibald J. Motley Jr dated 3 March 1936, Archibald Motley Papers, Chicago Historical Society,

<sup>14</sup> Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr*, p 83

<sup>15</sup> Andrea D. Barnwell, *Charles White* (San Francisco, Pomegranate Books) 2002. pp.16-17

White's fascination with art started around age seven, his mother recognised his early talents in illustration and encouraged him to develop his artistic talents and began professional sign painting at the age of fourteen.<sup>16</sup> White furthered his artistic skills during his teens by joining the Arts-Crafts Guild, a group of non-academic painters, who were led by an African-American artist George E. Neal, who had received some formal artistic education from the Art Institute of Chicago, Neal passed in 1938. The guild boasted the membership of several future contributors to the FAP, including White's fellow African-Americans, Margaret Burroughs and Charles Sebree. Later, the group chose to fundraise together in order to send selective members to the Art Institute, who would then pass on what they had learned to other members of the Arts-Crafts Guild the following weekend. The Arts-Crafts guild, organised exhibitions at local institutions, such as local churches and YMCA buildings. White, first exhibited his work at the Open Air Art Fair in 1933 and later at the Negro Art Exhibition in both 1936 and 1937. It was around this age also, that he began to associate with other artists and intellectuals such as author Richard Wright and African American sociologist Horace R. Cayton.<sup>17</sup> Artistically, White's pre-FAP years were something of an experimental time, he experimented with cubist techniques, however, his subject matter was firmly rooted in redressing the negative representation of African-Americans. Barnwell attributes the formation of White's artistic repertoire to several sources, namely that of Thomas Hart Benton's and Alexander Brook's contributions in *Arts Magazine* with respect to the principles of spatial depth and analysing and how shapes interlock and interrelate. Additionally, she cites his time at Arts-Crafts Guild and his time with Siporin and Millman.<sup>18</sup> In 1937, Charles White, won a scholarship to the Art Institute of Chicago. After graduating from the Art Institute in 1938, White went to work for the easel division of the FAP in Chicago. Shortly after, White joined the mural division of the FAP. Initially, White assisted Mitchell Siporin and Edward Millman with the production of their murals, shortly after, White was granted permission to undertake his first mural for the FAP.

### **African-American Cultural Milieu**

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<sup>16</sup> Oral history interview with Charles W. White, 1965 March 9. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>17</sup> Barnwell, Charles White, p.17

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.26

The African-American experience during the New Deal era must be contextualised by looking at the key changes in American society during the preceding decade, both socially and culturally. The first of these changes was The Great Migration, which started around 1910 and accelerated hugely when the United States entered the First World War.<sup>19</sup> Most African-Americans in the South eked out a living as sharecroppers. Even during 'good' years, their income was meagre at best, the sharecropper would usually just about manage to pay to be able to work the land for another season. Burdened with poverty, the persistent threat of lynching and a resurgent Ku Klux Klan, African-American workers started to migrate from the South, their main destinations being Chicago and New York<sup>20</sup>. In 1919, the Chicago Race Riot, was the focal event of the Red Summer, a season-long campaign of white supremacist terror which took place in over three dozen US cities. In Chicago alone, twenty-three blacks and fifteen whites were killed and there was significant damage to property. The name for the riots was coined by James Weldon Johnson, an NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and was a watershed moment in Chicago's racial history.<sup>21</sup> The second of these changes was the 1929 Wall Street Crash. The fallout was aptly named The Great Depression, again, the resulting economic and social upheaval was particularly awful for African-Americans. African-Americans were traditionally the 'last hired and first fired' of workers and relied heavily on blue collar industries in the North. In the more agrarian geared South, the economic situation was similarly woeful and the social situation considerably worse.<sup>22</sup>

Due to segregation restrictions, Chicago's African-Americans were restricted to an area of the city nicknamed Bronzeville, also known as the 'Black Belt', between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> Street and State Street and Cottage Grove.<sup>23</sup> Overcrowded and treated with indifference by the

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<sup>19</sup> US National Archives, The Great Migration 1910-1970, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration> accessed 24/8/21

<sup>20</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration*, (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press) 1989 pp. 4-9

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Wills, *The Mob Violence of the Red Summer*, JSTOR Daily Website, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-mob-violence-of-the-red-summer/> accessed 24/8/21

<sup>22</sup> William A. Sundstrom, "Last Hired, First Fired? Unemployment and Urban Black Workers During the Great Depression." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1992, pp. 415-429.

<sup>23</sup> St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago) 1993 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Originally published in 1945. pp. 62-63

municipality, the ghetto was a hotbed for internal strife between settled Chicagoan blacks and incoming Southern blacks to Chicago. Some settled African-Americans looked down upon their new brethren, citing their lack of knowledge of local cultural idiosyncrasies and education, increased overcrowding and job competition, often blaming the newcomers for the tensions that arose.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, these attributions of responsibility for the emerging social problems were based upon somewhat retrospective myths of pre-migration Chicago. Settled African-American's blamed the newcomers for the perceived loss of respect between Chicago's settled blacks and white population, especially after 1919 race riots, which was seen as a watershed moment in the erosion of race relations by settled Black Chicagoans. Over the coming two decades, the tension between settled and incoming African-Americans would cement itself more keenly.<sup>25</sup> Evidence of this clear contrast in attitudes is reflected in the contemporary newspapers and magazines of Chicago's black middle-class media outlets of the day.<sup>26</sup>

Both Motley and White found artistic inspiration from Bronzeville. Many of Motley's 1930s easel paintings were based upon the nightlife and idiosyncrasies of the new locals. Works such as *Boys' in the Back Room (Card Players) 1934* and *Tongues (Holy Rollers) 1929* typify Motley's interest in the oddities of the incoming Southerners and demonstrate a questionable perception of members of his own race which will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter. Motley painted Bronzeville scenes from the late 1920s through to 1949 when he painted *Bronzeville at Night*. Equally, White found inspiration from Bronzeville also, but in different ways to Motley. White's 1939 easel painting *Kitchenette Debutantes* features two prostitutes, soliciting from a window. The characters are barely-clothed and White twisted the forms of the characters in typical social realist style to convey the pain and suffering of the protagonists. Essentially, *Kitchenette Debutantes* was a critique of the inadequate housing and social conditions that Chicago's black population had to endure. Kitchenettes were essentially sliced up flatlets which were barely habitable.

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<sup>24</sup> James R. Grossman, 'Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration', pp.11-13

<sup>25</sup> Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 73-74

<sup>26</sup> Powell et al, *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*, pp. 51-53

Fig 4. Archibald J. Motley Jr, *Boys in the Backroom (Card Players)*, 1934, 76.2 x 101.6cm, Collection of Reginald Lewis

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Fig 5. Archibald J. Motley Jr, *Tongues (Holy Rollers)*, 1929, 74.3 x 91.7cm, Collection of Archie Motley and Valerie Gerrard Browne

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Fig.6 Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Bronzeville at Night*, 1949, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 100.3cm, Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr

'image has been removed due to copyright restrictions'

Fig.7 Charles W White, *Kitchenette Debutantes*, 1939, watercolor, Private Collection

As the 1930s ended the political situation in Chicago had shifted decisively more left than the turn of the decade, the New Deal and its various supporting apparatus drew the support of African-Americans away from the Republican party, giving the Democrats huge gains in African-American districts.<sup>27</sup> Oscar DePriest, a Republican and the first African-American congressman since the Reconstruction was unseated in favour of William Dawson, also an African-American, in 1932. The significance of African-Americans abandoning the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln and anti-slavery, represented a fundamental shift in US political history. This was symptomatic of black voter patterns in the 1930s, it is however unsurprising given the massive detrimental effect the Depression had on Chicago's black population and the lack of civil rights support from the Republican Party.<sup>28</sup> A study found that although black people made up a mere tenth of the population, as much as a quarter of the people on relief rolls were black. The effect of New Deal relief programs meant that the lifestyle for the average black Chicagoan was actually better than it was in the previous decade.<sup>29</sup> Despite the growth in unions, African-American participation was stymied by exclusionary organisations such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and had to wait until 1935 until the pro-equality Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) which assisted in African-American union participation.<sup>30</sup>

The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was concerned with African-American inequality since the Comintern instructed it to give special attention to the 'Negro Question' in 1928. The CPUSA believed that African-Americans should feel empowered and the CPUSA should assist this aim. In doing so, the CPUSA positioned the plight of African-Americans along the same class lines as colonial struggles and the general notion of proletarian conflict.<sup>32</sup> Despite the popularity of contemporary left-wing luminaries such as Richard Wright, there were few actual African-American members of the CPUSA in Chicago. Many politically motivated black people, stayed within the relative safety of the mainstream American political life as

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<sup>27</sup> Ralph J. Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro under FDR*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press) 1973 p.575

<sup>28</sup> Rita Werner Gordon, "The Change in the Political Alignment of Chicago's Negroes During the New Deal." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 56, no. 3, 1969, pp. 584–603.

<sup>29</sup> Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis* p. 386

<sup>30</sup> James Gilbert Cassedy, African Americans and the American Labor Movement, *Federal Records and African American History Summer 1997*, Vol 29, No2, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/american-labor-movement.html> accessed 12/8/21



affiliations with Communism brought their own issues. Estimates of CPUSA membership were around 500, although, fellow-travellers would have swelled these numbers greatly.<sup>31</sup> It is clear that White was an ardent leftist, however, Motley's own political leanings are difficult to locate and therefore to elucidate. There is clear evidence of unconscious bias in Motley's ambitions for better recognition of African-Americans and the ways in which he portrayed African-Americans. However, that alone is not enough to establish a grounding for Motley's political views, a subject that he seemed to keep to himself. Although a participant in the IFAP and a regular contributor to the Southside Community Arts Center (SSCAC), he is distinctly absent from historical accounts relating to any left-wing political affiliations and the Chicago Artist's Union (CAU).

The key artistic movement for African-Americans during the 1920s was the Harlem Renaissance, otherwise known as the 'New Negro' movement. The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual and artistic movement which sought to reshape contemporary notions of what it meant to be an African-American during the 1920s. The movement was limited in its scope and success, mainly appealing to the black middle classes; its imagery featured more positive representations that countered the dominant stereotypes and moved away from the realm of mass culture, where whites still maintained control of the culture industry, it was in fine art where African-Americans had freedom to produce their own images. The movement sought to assert a new degree of self-confidence and race pride for African-Americans and was the first time black voices could be heard in wider United States culture above the din of an expanding white supremacy and a resurgent Ku Klux Klan.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most significant success of the Harlem Renaissance was its ability to recast the look of blacks in art along new, more positive lines, throwing off the debasing caricatures from minstrelsy and vaudeville that were extolled by the white power structure.<sup>33</sup> Art, like many of the creative realms of the Harlem Renaissance, was steeped in modernism, which itself was a reaction to the stratified and stifling

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<sup>31</sup> Ralph J. Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro under FDR*, p.575

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be, The Black Freedom Struggle From Emancipation To Obama*, (London, Belknap Press) pp.170-175

<sup>33</sup> Martha J. Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture*, (London, Harvard University Press) 2004 pp. 11-15

nature of contemporary society in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Histories of the Harlem Renaissance place Motley within this movement, although Motley did not personally believe in the Harlem Renaissance. Motley personally believed that there was an advancement in the quality of production by black painters in Harlem around this time<sup>35</sup> For White, however, the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke in particular, influenced him strongly in his formative years.<sup>36</sup> Locke was the author of an anthology of essays, short-stories and poems named 'The New Negro' in 1925. The book challenged the notions of black inferiority and White firmly inherited the ideas from this and can be seen as a key part of White's own ideas around race and wider society. The influence of the Harlem Renaissance on White, should not be underestimated, it provided White with an existing intellectual basis for his future political and artistic endeavours. The 'New Negro' discourse, not only demonstrated to White that he was not alone in his thoughts around the misrepresentation of African-Americans. From aged fourteen onwards, White had an expanding, principally left-wing fraternity, many of whom were (or would become) communists and fellow-travellers.

Interestingly, in Archibald J. Motley's Archives of American Art interview, he was dismissive of the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance. When questioned about the Harlem Renaissance, Motley stated "There was no Renaissance" the interviewer re-asks the question and Motley elaborated on the reasons, believing that the quality of art being produced by black artists in New York had fallen in quality and the patron had decided to close shortly-afterwards.<sup>37</sup> Motley's rejection of the Harlem Renaissance and failure to make connections with the art and wider 'New Negro' movement as a force for civil rights points to an ambivalence to engage with the core thrust of African-American ideology that was emerging in the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> This problematic disengagement with African-American ideals points to Motley's ideas around civil rights and art being somewhat disconnected despite his earlier platitudes in relation to using

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Joseph Singal, *Modernist Culture in America*, (California, Wadsworth) 1991 pp. 4-6

<sup>35</sup> Oral history interview with Archibald Motley, 1978 Jan. 23-1979 Mar. 1. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>36</sup> Andrea D. Barnwell, *Charles White*, pp. 16-17

<sup>37</sup> Oral history interview with Archibald Motley, 1978 Jan. 23-1979 Mar. 1. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

art as a means to develop better understanding between black and white people. Elements of this problematic ideology were also present in his easel and mural paintings and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

The Harlem Renaissance, arguably set the tone for what became known as the Chicago Black Renaissance. The Chicago Black Renaissance was principally a literary movement and was heavily influenced by the social upheaval of the 1930s. The new WPA state apparatus also provided a springboard for the African-American movement, histories place Charles White within this movement.<sup>39</sup> The Chicago Black Renaissance had strong connections to the political left, luminaries such as Richard Wright were also John Reed Club members, as was Charles White as well as friends from the artistic community. John Reed Clubs were local organisations for the benefit of Marxist intellectuals, artists and writers.<sup>40</sup> The Chicago Black Renaissance was deeply benefitted by the WPA cultural programs.<sup>41</sup> The increase in opportunities for African-Americans in the cultural industries in Chicago was not a simple matter for Chicago's African-Americans. Indeed, the SSCAC and the Southside Writers Project, both beneficiaries of the WPA cultural programs were immensely helpful to artistic provision and training for African-Americans. For artists however, the benefits were late to come. Due to the internal schisms of the FAP, relative parity with white artists came late due to issues which were more centred around the poor management of the State Administrator Increase Robinson, which is discussed in detail further on in the chapter. The SSCAC remains the only building which was commissioned under the FAP for the use as a community arts hub which is still in use for its original intended purpose<sup>42</sup>, as of 2017, the SSCAC was named as a national treasure by the US National Trust.<sup>43</sup> This is testament to the impact that FAP had for Chicago's African-American

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<sup>39</sup> Richard A Courage, Charles White and the Black Chicago Renaissance, <http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/Charles-White-and-the-Black-Chicago-Renaissance> accessed 26/8/21

<sup>40</sup> Hemingway, Artists on the Left .pp 159-160

On John Reed Clubs see Laurie Ann Alexandre, *John Reed Clubs: A Historical Reclamation*, MA Thesis, (California State University, Northridge) 1977 Abstract p.5

<sup>41</sup> Oral history interview with Archibald Motley, 1978 Jan. 23-1979 Mar. 1. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

<sup>42</sup> Archives of American Art, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/surveys/chicago/south-side-community-art-center> Accessed 25/5/2018

community during this era and subsequent decades for black Chicagoans. The SSCAC opened informally in December 1940, seventeen artists exhibited works, including Archibald Motley and Charles White, with four hundred people attending the opening. The SSCAC was officially dedicated by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on 7 May 1941.<sup>44</sup> According to Courage, Twenty-six African-American artists were admitted on to IFAP, following Robinson's departure, according to White's Archives of American Art interview, Motley was the only African-American artist employed on the program during Robinson's tenure.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, the consistent pressure from the CAU and the proximity of their own ambitions, next to the remit of the FAP, influenced local policy, making the IFAP more engaging with people and ideas outside of the white power structure and was a small victory in the wider chronology of the pursuit of African-American equality.

### **History of FAP**

The following section will provide information on the FAP which was the leading arts relief program during the New Deal. The FAP existed within a package of relief and art patronage programs that were enacted during the 1930s to counter the ongoing effects of the Great Depression. The preceding art relief programs, which were more selective in terms of quality than the FAP, were first enacted on 12 May 1933 under the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA). The Civil Works Administration (CWA) was formed in the same year and managed the FAP's precursor, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and was headed by Edward Bruce. The PWAP ended in June 1934 and produced over 15,000 works of art and employed over 3,000 artists. The Treasury Department set up the Section of Painting and Sculpture and became known as 'the Section' in 1934, also headed by Edward Bruce. The remit of 'the Section' was to employ the most skilled artists available to paint public buildings. Following the success of the PWAP, President Roosevelt recognising the need for financial relief, issued Executive Order 7034 on 6 May 1935. In July the same year the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) was formed

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<sup>44</sup> Bill V Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African American Cultural Politics 1935-1946*, (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press) p.83

<sup>45</sup> Richard A Courage, Charles White and the Black Chicago Renaissance, <http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/Charles-White-and-the-Black-Chicago-Renaissance> accessed 26/8/21

and ran until 1938. Like 'the Section', TRAP's remit was to award commissions to seasoned artists on a competitive basis and only employed 328 artists during its existence. In recognition of the limited scope of TRAP, the severe decline of the art market and the desire to maintain the culture industries, there was the necessity for a wider relief program to support the arts. Buoyed by the success of the PWAP, the WPA in August 1935 began Federal Project Number One (Federal One). There were five divisions of arts relief programs, Music, Theatre, Writers, Art and the Historical and Records Survey, which was added later in the year. None of the relief projects were designed specifically with African-Americans in mind, even though they were the worst affected by The Great Depression.<sup>46</sup>

The FAP was headed by Holger Cahill (1887-1960), who served as National Director from 1935-1943. Cahill, an Icelandic immigrant who had a succession of labouring jobs before arriving in New York in 1913, where he studied writing and journalism at New York University. Through the 1920s and 1930s, Cahill, forged a career in the New York art world, holding curatorial positions at Newark Museum and a stint as acting director of the Museum of Modern Art. Cahill, was also ideologically very much aligned with the goals of the FAP, Cahill drew his influences from John Dewey, John Cotton Dana, and Thorstein Veblen. Dewey was a philosopher and education reformer who believed that art should operate within and reflect the community that it represented, putting down associations with class and elitism and bringing art (and art education) within the scope of community.<sup>47</sup> John Cotton Dana was an American museum and library director who wished to enhance the role that libraries played within communities, transforming them from information centres for the select few into full community hubs in which a greater number of people within the community could benefit from its use.<sup>48</sup> Thorstein Veblen was an American economist who was best known for 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen was very critical of capitalism and coined the term conspicuous consumption – essentially Veblen was critical of the upper classes and the means in which they perpetuate social status with expensive and wasteful leisure activities, which

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<sup>46</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, 'The Beginnings' pp.3-13

<sup>47</sup> John Dewey American Pragmatist Website, <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/> accessed 24/8/21

<sup>48</sup> Carl A. Hanson, Access and utility: John Cotton Dana and the antecedents of information science, 1889-1929. *Libraries & Culture*. 29, Vol 2 1994 pp.186-204

produce the illusion of superiority.<sup>49</sup> Hemingway rightly offers a more complex amalgamation of Cahill's philosophy towards art than has been reported in other histories on Cahill.<sup>50</sup> John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934), was released only a year before the founding of the FAP, which somewhat de-couples Cahill from Dewey's ideas. Hemingway finds commonalities between Dewey's to Cahill's pre-FAP speeches that he examined, establishing key commonalities in their attitudes towards democratic participation in art and their belief that art should become a part of the everyday human experience within the communities that people lived.<sup>51</sup>

Cahill can be seen as an idealist for left-wing, democratic, artistic values. The ideology of the FAP stood in firm contrast to the dealer-gallery system, the traditional, commercial means of art dissemination up to and post-FAP. Therefore, the ideology of the FAP can also be viewed through the lens of class conflict, that of a progressive grass-roots, working-class approach to art education, appreciation and dissemination, attempting to assert itself in a system that had previously been driven by ideologically-opposed market forces. Whilst African-American equality was not strictly on the agenda for Cahill, there was a recognition within the FAP, that black cultural development should be supported. The inclusion of African Americans in the FAP, was part of its remit, is evidenced by WPA Assistant Director, Thomas C. Parker, who gave a speech at the Tuskegee Institute, an African-American technical college in Alabama, in July 1938. In his speech he explained the relationship between black cultural progress via the arts and the role the FAP played in assisting that progress

The Four Federal Art Projects of the Works Progress Administration have endeavored to give full expression to the contributions of the Negro. Within the necessary limitations of a relief program, seeking to integrate the fabric of our National Culture pattern, Negro artists,

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<sup>49</sup> University of Chicago, Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) Economics, <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/university-chicago-centennial-catalogues/university-chicago-faculty-centennial-view/thorstein-veblen-1857-1929-economics/> accessed 24/8/21

<sup>50</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson make only a minor reference to Dewey's influence on Cahill. .p. XXI  
Likewise, O'Connor attributes Cahill's ideas to Dewey, Francis O'Connor, *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930's by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, (Boston, New York Graphic Society) 1973 .pp 16-17

Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p.152

<sup>51</sup> Hemingway, *Artist on the Left* pp. 150-151

writers, musicians and actors in all sections of the country have been given new opportunities to realise their vital role.<sup>52</sup>

The Illinois Federal Art Project (IFAP) began fully in October 1935, once funds were released by the WPA. In terms of administration, the art program was divided into seven administrative districts. None of the artists were specifically allocated to a particular area, they were 'loaned' as required to undertake works.<sup>53</sup> In terms of structure the IFAP was divided into five main divisions, Easel, Mural, Sculpture, Graphic Arts and Index of American Design (IAD) and employed 775 artists and administrators between 1935-1943. Unfortunately, a precise breakdown on the numbers of white and non-white artists were not recorded. There was also an exhibition division which shared the works of artists with the public, artists were kept informed of where their paintings were being displayed.<sup>54</sup> Originally, the percentage ratio of artists who were relief and non-relief was 90 to 10 per cent. The intention of the 10 per cent non-relief was to give the state a means to hire established and skilled staff to ensure the smooth running of projects.<sup>55</sup> This figure changed significantly over the course of the project, due to constant budget adjustments and was a cause of issues from the outset.

Increase Robinson (1890-1981) became the IFAP's first State Director on 6 October 1935. Robinson's original name was Josephine Reichmann, but took the name Increase from her husband, following the death of her husband and to separate herself further from her mother, who had the same name and was also a practicing artist. Robinson came from a lineage of Chicago artists and prior to her tenure on the FAP was an artist, gallery owner and tour guide and was considered knowledgeable by some of her peers.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, the artists that served on the Project did not hold a favourable opinion on Robinson and was seen as 'dictatorial' and 'provincial', as well, Robinson said "no nudes, no dives and no social propaganda" in relation to

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas C. Parker, at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, Holger Cahill papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Reel 1105 Frame 0616-0635

<sup>53</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois*, . p.7

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., .p 23

the artworks that would be allowed on the IFAP<sup>57</sup> FAP participant Aron Bohrod commented on Robinson “Personally, I considered her to be a forbidding New England WASP type... I know that Mrs. Robinson wasn’t well liked, but I think was principally a matter of her symbolising the kind of authority artists never had to contend with.”<sup>58</sup>. A consistent theme with the artists interviewed by Mavigliano and Lawson in their book *The Federal Art Project in Illinois*, was their displeasure for Robinson. Robinsons’ own ideology was clearly influenced by the dominant modes of thought in the preceding decades which not only influenced the course of art production but also had its locus in white-European traditions and influences in the wider cultural milieu, including Jim Crow segregation. As mentioned, aside from Motley, no African-American artists were admitted to the FAP during Robinson’s tenure. Whilst overt claims of racism cannot be levelled at Robinson, the exclusion of blacks was intermixed within an ideology which Robinson clearly espoused. Issues with Robinson’s management of the IFAP can be reduced to the issues of relief quotas, artistic quality, FAP guidelines, and art education as these issues form the corpus of issues lodged against Robinson by the CAU. The interaction between Robinson and the CAU, do not exclusively lend themselves to an explanation of African-American exclusion, but it does demonstrate that her ignorance was grounded in political-ideological viewpoint which was antipodal to the left-wing ideologues (which included pro black members) that were vying for more democratic inclusion on the IFAP. The level of African-American inclusion on the IFAP, after Robinson’s departure also serves to evidence the squandered opportunities that the CAU eventually assisted in realising for those artists also.

Locally, the IFAP satiated the desire of Chicago artists to develop a mural school in which they could further enhance their craft. The artists who were part of the Chicago Mural School, demonstrated a multi-faceted interpretation of the contemporary United States that was evident in their murals as well as a distinctly alternative view to the social conditions. Interest in

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<sup>57</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois*, p 25

Robinson quoted in Mary Lackritz Gray, *A Guide to Chicago’s Murals*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London) 2001 .p xxvi

<sup>58</sup> Correspondence between authors and Aron Bohrod, Mavigliano, .p24.

WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) A term indicating a wealthy white person with disproportionate amount of wealth and political influence. Found in

Mobei, Zhang, WASPs, Abstract. Accessed Online 10/01/2021

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen692>



muralism as a new means of communicating political and social ideals (especially for a poorly literate populace) had gathered apace in the years preceding the Great Depression, owing to the growth in popularity from the Mexican mural painters. In this case the muralists on the IFAP, muralism had a new means of informing the public and was not simply a matter of adorning buildings with academic, bourgeois decoration.<sup>59</sup> Muralism came at a suitable time for politically motivated artists wishing to explore a new-found means of representing politics and social ambition in art. Likewise, the FAP found an ideological basis in such a view of muralism and art more generally. From the top, this was principally down to the leadership of the FAP and Holger Cahill's own ideological standpoint and wish to employ Dewey's philosophy into practice, therefore a supporter of the mural medium. For grass-roots artists however, the path for a politically engaged artistic medium was more difficult to locate. The Mexican muralists came at a perfect time for American artists looking for new ways to reflect upon the existing and everchanging social conditions of the US and a new medium that no longer required private patronage and changed the way in which art was utilised by the artist in the community. Becker discusses that Chicago had already developed a mural tradition in the Progressive Era 1904-1917 and continued until the beginning of the New Deal in 1933.<sup>60</sup> This is not the focus of this study, but it is a worthy area for future comparison with a view to analyse how Chicago art changed from the New Deal. This mural tradition was further enhanced by the IFAP and the artists of the Chicago Mural School, who painted socially-conscious murals that reflected their political ambitions and challenge existing power structures as well as assert the meaning of art within the community. There is more information further in this chapter on the details of the interactions between the CMS, CAU and IFAP and the impact upon African-American artists.

Self-education was the primary means by which the artists explored muralism, taking their inspiration from Italian masters such as Giotto, Piero della Francesca and American contemporary Thomas Hart Benton, as well as the Mexican muralists. Muralists for the project were selected from the easel division, based on previous experience or a distinct interest in

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<sup>59</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays, 'Avantgarde and Kitsch'* (Boston, Beacon Press) 1961 pp.3-22

<sup>60</sup> Becker, *Art for the People*, pp.47-53

murals. Muralists had to seek out sponsors for their murals, which would then supply the necessary funds for the materials needed. The relevant institution requested the mural, selecting the theme. Upon agreement with the head of the mural division, interested artists would then submit sketches to be eligible for selection. The division head would then approach the institution with five sketches from different artists allowing them to select which one they found most appropriate.<sup>61</sup> Once selected, it was down to the muralist to paint in the manner that they felt fitting, this was a stipulation from Holger Cahill that ensured that the artist was firmly part of the creative process and not simply an executor of instruction. In testament to the popularity of the mural program, at the closing of the IFAP, they had an unachievable backlog of commissions that went unrealised.<sup>62</sup>

The murals created under the auspices of the IFAP were diverse in terms of styles and themes. The principal styles utilised under the Project were regionalism and social realism. Regionalism focused on developing a 'sense of place' in America, stylistically, the regionalists can be grouped as producing realistic, conservative and precise artworks.<sup>63</sup> The three most influential Chicago muralists that served on the FAP were white artists, Edward Millman, Mitchell Siporin and Edgar Britton. They were heavily influenced by the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.<sup>64</sup> The trio of Mexican artists were nicknamed Los Tres Grandes. All three Chicago muralists travelled to Mexico to learn from and work with the Mexican muralists. Millman and Siporin were a big influence on White both politically and stylistically, as they were both committed leftists artists.

The interested parties that would form the CAU first met in 1934, the artists that attended included Edward Millman, Wallace Kirkland, Jan Fabion, John Groth and John Walley. They discussed the need for a local organisation to represent their interests and to cooperate with other artist unions in San Francisco and New York. The majority of union members were not overly concerned with politics.<sup>65</sup> Merlin Pollock who served as a supervisor for the mural

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<sup>61</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois* p.17

<sup>62</sup> Becker, *Art for the People*, pp.97-99

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois* pp.19-22

<sup>65</sup> Ibid .p.31

division, surmised the political motivations of the majority of CAU artists said: “As long as they had their art projects to work on and got their monthly \$94.00, they were willing to leave the political aspects in the hands of the few more dedicated souls.”<sup>66</sup> As the CAU sought to further establish itself and gain legitimacy, it affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1937, but that relationship was short-lived due to the AFL’s perception of the CAU as radical and AFL’s reluctance to support strikes or political upheaval and were also segregated.<sup>67</sup> In 1938, the CAU aligned itself with the United Office and Progressional Workers of America (UOPWA) which was an adjunct of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) a left-wing union, more accommodating to African-Americans, which served the general ambitions of the CAU for recognition of the new ‘worker-artist’ paradigm.

The factions within the CAU can be reduced to two distinct groups. The La Bohemes and The Radicals,<sup>68</sup> but this does not adequately explain the bifurcation. Both sides wished for greater artistic freedom within the Project and both certainly agreed on the need to remove Robinson as quickly as possible. ‘La Bohemes’ certainly shared the ambition of achieving artistic freedom on what they could produce on the Project but did not share the political ambitions of their left-wing counterparts. The Radicals, principally left-wing artists such as Edward Millman, Mitchell Siporin, Morris Topchevsky and Gustaf Dalstrom pursued the interests of the CAU with greater political ambitions than their counterparts. Interestingly, it was the more apolitical artists within the CAU that wished to challenge Robinson’s narrow interpretation of American Scene painting and it is here that the divergent issues of African-American civil rights and artistic freedom essentially became synonymous with the time that Robinson would head the IFAP. It can be seen that the desire by ‘La Bohemes’ in advocating for greater artistic freedom, made the CAU more politically buoyant, therefore, assisting the Radicals in advocating their own distinct political ambitions, in which African-American participation on the IFAP was central to their ideological standpoint.

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<sup>66</sup> Merlin Pollock, Correspondence with the authors  
Found in, Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois* .p31

<sup>67</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois* p.32

<sup>68</sup> Becker, *Art for the People*, p.95

The most poignant of these protests against Robinson's dictatorial management of the Project, came on 12 December 1936, when the CAU staged a sit-down strike protest at the Illinois state WPA Office. The strike lasted for one week and although at the time it did not achieve anything of note. It demonstrated an early commitment by left-wing artists to the shared goals of overcoming Jim Crow and freedom of artistic interpretation. The four protesters were Morris Topchevsky, Mitchell Siporin, Adrian Troy and Karl Kahler, the last of whom was fired from the Project, due to protesting whilst being paid.<sup>69</sup> The New York FAP had an Artists' Union of its own and they had been protesting much more fervently in 1936. Famously, 231 artists were arrested on 1 December 1936, when they held a sit-in in the WPA offices, resulting in the largest ever single arrest in New York history at the time.<sup>70</sup>

The sit-in in Chicago never garnered the fanfare that the Artists' Union in New York enjoyed in highlighting the issues that it sought to address. The New York protest was about cuts to WPA funding, the Chicago sit in, however, did demonstrate the solidarity between left-wing politics and the pursuit of equality for African-Americans. According to Richard Courage, Charles White had picketed alongside his fellow-traveller artists Millman and Siporin, before being allowed on to the Project.<sup>71</sup> It is unknown whether White had protested at the picket line with these artists or whether Courage was referring to a different occasion or protest. What is known, is that by the time of the protest Topchevsky, Millman and Siporin were friends with White. All were politically cognisant, left leaning artists who shared a common set of ideas around and attitudes towards art and politics.

The lack of a cogent artistic approach for leftist artists from within their own cultural sphere meant they had to look outward for inspiration. As Patterson notes, the Soviet Union did not provide a suitable approach, as the Socialist Realist doctrine had not been decided upon until at least 1934. This lack of an example for a socialist aesthetic left a discursive space which allowed

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<sup>69</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois*, p.44

<sup>70</sup> Hemingway, p.177

<sup>71</sup> Richard A Courage, *Charles White and the Black Chicago Renaissance*, <http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/Charles-White-and-the-Black-Chicago-Renaissance> accessed 26/8/21

artists to engineer their own formulation of socially and politically committed art.<sup>72</sup> By contrast Mexican muralists provided the example of a politically engaged art, an alternative to the dealer-gallery system and also served as an example of the potential of a possible new relationship between art and the state. Patterson also charts the evolution of Mexican influenced mural painting in the 1930s US, highlighting that ideas around mural painting moved away from the notion of the decorative toward the socially conscious Mexican example, by way of its proximity and accessibility.<sup>73</sup> The Social Realist aesthetic that grew in Mexico provided an example of representing disenfranchised groups and acted as a ready-packaged means of social protest against the structural and ideological injustices of the 1930s and the artists that dominated the CAU and CMS, such as Millman and Siporin embellished this approach. It was not only the aesthetic and political qualities that the Mexican muralists served as an example, the murals that were executed in Mexico, such as *Rivera's Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, which is perhaps the most clear-cut example of the doctrine that was absorbed from the Mexican muralists. The painting shown here, part of Rivera's gargantuan fresco at the Palacio Nacional, in Mexico City, clearly demonstrates Social Realism's critique of society, even for the casual reader, the motifs employed by Rivera are blatantly critical of capitalism and Nazism.

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<sup>72</sup> Patterson, Jody, *Modernism for the Masses: Painters, Politics and Public Murals in New Deal New York*, PhD Thesis (London, UCL) 2009 p.44

<sup>73</sup> Patterson, p.28

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**Fig.8 Diego Rivera, *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City, fresco, (detail), 1935**

Edward Millman *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by artists and administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*. "Contemporary artists everywhere have witnessed the amazing spectacle of the modern renaissance of mural painting in Mexico and they have been deeply moved by its artistry and meaning. Through the lessons of our Mexican teachers, we have been made aware of the scope and fullness of the 'soul' of our own environment. We have been of the application of modernism, toward a socially moving epic art of our time and place."<sup>74</sup>

Edward Millman, a Chicago native, was educated at the Art Institute of Chicago under Leon Kroll and John Warner Norton, the latter being Chicago's most productive pre-WPA muralist. Millman, who had an interest in muralism early in his career, served as mural project supervisor for IFAP and was one of the more politically engaged members of the CAU. Millman was instrumental in assisting the plight of African-American artists, once allowed onto the Project, White undertook training with Millman and the influence of Mexican-inspired social-realist art upon White is clear.<sup>75</sup> Recognition of the quality of artistic production CMS operating under the auspices of the IFAP was acknowledged in 1939, when Millman and Siporin were commissioned by 'the Section' to paint murals at the post office in St. Louis, Missouri, this represented the highest award given for an artistic commission under the WPA of \$29,000.<sup>76</sup> Hemingway's investigation into the IFAP, firmly establishes both Millman and Siporin as leftists. Mitchell Siporin was born in New York to immigrant parents who instilled a deep sense of political activism in him from a young age. Siporin was firmly in the camp of the leftist artist, being a member of the Chicago John Reed Club. Siporin was also an artistic contributor to the socialist magazine *New Masses* from 1931 and later a politically active member of the CAU.<sup>77</sup> Both Millman and Siporin were signatories to the Call for the American Artists' Congress, in 1935. The American Artists' Congress formed in 1936 to appeal to artists who were firmly opposed to

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<sup>74</sup> Edward Millman, in Francis V O'Connor, *Art for the Millions* p.64

<sup>75</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp.159-160

<sup>76</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois*, p.44

<sup>77</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left* pp.159-160

war and fascism, the organisation was part of the CPUSA's Popular Front. Hemingway also highlights Siporin's Haymarket Martyrs series of drawing on an 1886 workers' rights protest in Chicago, as an example of his commitment to left-wing artistic and political values and his early thoughts on muralism. Hemingway also traces Siporin's ambitions in relation to establishing a proletarian art in his contemporary writing, demonstrating Siporin's view of himself as a young revolutionary artist.<sup>78</sup>

### **Criticism of the FAP/WPA/New Deal**

There were numerous instances of controversy with IFAP murals, mainly centering around the left-wing overtones of the paintings, which traditionally featured scenes of racial and social equality. The IFAP muralists were also consistently under fire from the anti-New Deal *Chicago Tribune*, who led an orchestrated campaign against the IFAP, particularly Millman, and Siporin, citing their murals as un-American in theme and design and displaying overt communist influences. The newspaper had earlier been successful in challenging the production of the IFAP muralists in 1937 when Millman's *Blessings of Water* mural was removed from the Bureau of Water in Chicago City Hall.<sup>79</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson also provide examples of issues with murals in public schools, although most were well received by their patrons.<sup>80</sup> Robert Jay Wolff, who served as the CAU President for a time remarked upon the issues with criticisms of the IFAP. "It was an easy matter to play the union against the Project and to use one to discredit the other. In this way word went the rounds that the unemployed incompetents on the Project sought to perpetuate their employment by forming a union... Ironically, the artistic reputations of this community was being enhanced by those very artists whom it (Chicago) denounced and vilified"<sup>81</sup>

Like all New Deal projects, the FAP was wound down in as the United States became more deeply involved in the Second World War, artists were redeployed to military units, including

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p.172

<sup>80</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois*, pp.20-25

<sup>81</sup> Robert Jay Wolff "Chicago and the Artists Union", in Francis O'Connor, *Art for the Millions*, p.241

many of IFAP's muralists. Throughout the life of the FAP, relief quotas were adjusted constantly by the National Office, due to budget adjustments, resulting in ever-varying numbers of artists being allowed on relief. This was due to the way in which Project One was fiscally arranged, as WPA funding was solely based on Congressional approval, with Democratic goals often being stymied by Republican objections. Although the artists on the FAP could not realise their ambitious goals of realising the artist as a cultural worker and ensuring further state patronage of the arts, the IFAP itself achieved local, as well as some national success, as IFAP muralists were selected for murals in other states as well as undertaking works for 'the Section', demonstrating that the IFAP muralists produced ideologically-driven art that was clearly popular. The formation of the CAU and the reticence of Increase Robinson to engage fully with the remit of the FAP, provided the necessary conditions for politically engaged artists to challenge the narrow interpretations of art and to fight for opportunities for those excluded from the Project, including African-Americans, although the most well-financed years of the Project were somewhat squandered under Robinson's tenure. Mavigliano and Lawson acknowledge that the murals that were produced under IFAP, captured both the public imagination and official endorsement. Mavigliano and Lawson believe that this was down to the way the murals were produced in full view of the public lessening the mystery around the IFAP. Holger Cahill, regarded the FAP as a success and in relation to the IFAP muralists specifically said to Siporin "...the windy city's cultural development has been extraordinary...because of you, Eddie Millman and Eddie Britton."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, 'The Federal Art Project in Illinois' p.61



## Chapter Two: Analysis and Discussion

The mural as an ideological tool, presented a vastly different medium for the artist than the easel. As discussed in the previous chapter, muralism became important in the Illinois' FAP, both Motley and White engaged with federally sponsored muralism at an important time in terms of African-American visual identity in art and visual culture and represented an early opportunity to redress the racist visual culture that was being espoused by the white power structure in the United States. This chapter will firstly discuss Motley's murals at Nichols Elementary School, Evanston, Illinois. These murals although destroyed provide an enlightening insight into Motley's views on race and class, as they represent quite possibly the only free paintings that he was able to execute under federal patronage without the approval of Robinson or abiding to TRAP's creative restrictions. Although destroyed, the sketches of *Negro Children*, *Dance Scene* and *Bands Playing* are detailed and provide interesting insights that add to the historiography on Motley and place him in a more ideologically conservative camp than previous histories on Motley have done so. Following the examination of the murals, the chapter will discuss Motley's wider oeuvre and place the Nichols murals within in relevant historiography as this the only analysis of them and provide a rationale for the more conservative placement of Motley's political leanings, especially compared to White.

The next part of the chapter will examine two extant murals by Charles White. Both *Five Great American Negroes* and *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* represent excellent examples of White's typical contributions in this era and were painted in WPA years whilst under the tutelage of his CMS mentors. The connections between White's art and politics are easily established and White had a firm grounding in the social realist aesthetic which provided him a suitable medium with which to provide a establish a strong. White engaged with very different tropes and styles to Motley and close examination of White's murals yields new insights and challenges existing historiography on the interpretations of several of White's character representations.

The chapter will then compare the works of these artists, which will provide an enlightening basis to elucidate the pluralities of both their representation of African-Americans as well as

their own attitudes towards art, race, politics and class. Through the analysis of themes, colour, composition and an analysis of motifs, this chapter will elucidate the similarities and differences of the of the artist's work. Importantly, it will also demonstrate that they were both similar in their ambitions to represent African-Americans in a positive light, but they were very different in their approach and interpretation to art and the means it could be used to engender equality for their own people. Motley tended to focus on the everyday, African-American that came across in his Bronzeville and nightclub scenes, a theme he stuck with his WPA murals. Whereas, White made African-American heroes the key central theme of his contributions to federal muralism.

## Motley's Murals at Nichols

Shortly before the inception of the WPA and the FAP, Motley undertook three murals at Nichols Elementary School, Evanston, Illinois in 1935 under the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, a local precursor to the WPA, under the auspices of FERA. Unfortunately, the three works named *Negro Children*, *Bands Playing* and *Dance Scene* were destroyed or stolen. No known images of them exist, Nichols Elementary School hired an art conservator in 2004 as part of a school history project to examine what had happened to Motley's murals. Upon close examination of the walls where the artworks were placed, it appears that the murals had been sliced from the wall and covered over with a similar looking material then painted over.<sup>83</sup> Fortunately, Motley's sketchbooks survived and they contain sketches as well as the dimensions and placement for the respective paintings.

The murals at Nichols were not Motley's only foray into federal muralism. Motley's TRAP mural *Stagecoach and Mail* which he undertook in 1937, which is not considered in this study because of the limitations of artist's input in Treasury murals, therefore rendering them less valid as implements with which to read into the artists own perceptions or their race and class. The freedom to paint that was fought for by the CAU is an important measure with which to extract meaning from the artist's work and which is why Motley's Nichols murals are worthy of consideration, as they were undertaken before the formation of the FAP and the tumultuous Robinson years. Although it is not possible to define how Motley came to be selected to paint the murals at Nichols, for Motley as a black artist to be allowed the freedom to paint murals of African-Americans in positive settings in a public school renders them worthy as analytical tools, despite their destruction.

Mooney attests to the accuracy of Motley's sketches in comparison to his extant works and it is rational that the sketches for the three murals at Nichols Elementary School were indeed very close to the actual paintings that were undertaken at the school.<sup>84</sup> At the time, the murals would have occupied the school's music room, which today serves as a media arts lab.

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<sup>83</sup> James Cuffe, 'Archibald Motley Mural at Nichols, (Email correspondence with Nancy Alexander) 4 June 2018

<sup>84</sup> Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.* p. 95

According to Nancy Alexander, a former teacher at the school, the artworks were approved personally by F.W Nichols, whom the school was named after and served as the institutions first principal.<sup>85</sup> Although the colour schemes and the specifics of Motley's stylistic choices for these works will perhaps never be truly known, it is reasonable to assume that the choices would have matched Motley's other contemporary works, in terms of colour and composition.

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<sup>85</sup> James Cuffe, 'Archibald Motley Mural at Nichols, (Email correspondence with Nancy Alexander) 4 June 2018

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**Fig.9 Archibald J. Motley Jr. Stagecoach and Mail, 1937 4ft 3' x4ft, Wood River Post Office, Illinois TRAP**

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**Fig. 10 Archibald. J Motley Jr., *Negro Children Sketch*, 1935, Archibald Motley Papers, Chicago Historical Society**

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**Fig. 11 Archibald. J Motley Jr., *Dance Scene Sketch*, 1935, Archibald Motley Papers, Chicago Historical Society**

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**Fig. 12 Archibald. J Motley Jr., *Bands Playing Sketch*, 1935, Archibald Motley Papers, Chicago Historical Society**

## Negro Children

The first of the paintings discussed here is *Negro Children*, which measured 24.7 x 198cm and ran along the top of the south wall of the room above the blackboard and entrance door. The mural features eight scenes of numerous of children at play, being accompanied by parents in some scenes. The sketch does not provide details on the colour scheme that Motley would have employed for this painting, nor does the material receipt for Motley's work at the school, but it is very likely that he would have continued unabated with the vivid colour schemes that he employed on his contemporary easel paintings.

From left to right the mural has various scenes of children at play. The first scene on the left-hand side of the mural is of a male parent holding hands with a small girl with a dog sat beside them. The second scene is of two small female children holding hands. The third scene is of a child riding a bicycle whilst a heavyset adult looks on. The fourth scene features a lone female child using a skipping rope. The fifth scene features two old looking boys who appear to be wrestling each other. The sixth scene is of two boys playing a playground game, with small toys, possibly dice or jacks. The seventh scene features a mother and father watching their child play on a seesaw. The final scene features a parent with a small child being pulled along in rudimentary cart, there is also a girl waving towards the audience. The mural can be credited for its depiction of African-American children. The image certainly spoke to an imagined experience for the mainstay of black children in the 1930s. Motley's employment of an imagined reality of how black children would be perceived along the same lines as white children and would partake in same hobbies and habits of their white counterparts. The applicability of such imagery may have been fine at Nichols Elementary, Evanston. At that time, Evanston was a quiet spill-over town on the outskirts of Chicago, which was far from the realities of Chicago's ghetto and underfunded schools. The reality of early life for black children in Chicago and the US would have been vastly different from what Motley represented. Schools were still segregated in the US until the 1954 Brown Decision, although both Motley and White attended a desegregated school, schools for African-Americans were traditionally underfunded

by comparison to white schools. NAACP lawyers were active in bringing cases to court as early as the 1930s.<sup>86</sup> The essential point from this image is that it represents a mid-step in terms of African-American self-perceptions which were exuded in Motley's art. Whilst the image certainly positive in its representations of African-Americans. There are still problematic aspects which must be addressed.

A closer inspection of the sketch also points to Motley's use of racial caricature in this mural, the heavyset female, would have very likely emulated the 'mammy' stereotype, likewise, some of the children, have a visual quality to their hair which indicates the imitation of the 'picaninny' stereotype also.<sup>87</sup> Motley's use of both these stereotypes is very apparent in *Lawd Mah Man's Leavin'* 1940 and points to the wider issue of negative stereotypes in his artwork. Richard Powell, who has written extensively on Motley and can be considered a leading scholar on African-American art and the Harlem Renaissance asserts that this painting is a satire and therefore the issues with the use of caricature are only surface issues and should be viewed as a non-realistic commentary on the Great Migration.<sup>88</sup> Powell's opinion does nothing to explain the presence of the same stereotypes across Motley's oeuvre and the assertion that, like blues music, the painting had a secondary meaning that sometimes had to be subtle as to not overtly challenge the discourse of white power. The connections made with satire and caricature within the corpus of his work, is understandable, Motley can be seen as a pioneer of African-American visual culture in the years that he operated, recognising that he had to represent blacks to whites in a format that they'd be familiar with and recognise. The engagement with the visual tropes that are associated with the discourses of white power in his mural painting means that is a clearer case to imbue Motley with an ideological unconscious class bias. Wolfskill establishes the connection between Motley's pastiche and the personal truths he found in the stereotypes of Southern incomers into Chicago. One must question the motivation

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<sup>86</sup> US Library of Congress, *School Segregation and Integration*, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/school-segregation-and-integration/> accessed 25/8/21

<sup>87</sup> Ferris State University Museum of Jim Crow Memorabilia, 'Picaninny' <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/picaninny/homepage.htm> 'Mammy' <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mammies/homepage.htm> Accessed 30/8/21

<sup>88</sup> Richard Powell *Ed.*, *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*, (Durham NC, Duke University Press) 2015 pp.109-113

for adding such caricature into artworks in which children were the primary audience. Assertions made by Powell in relation to the racist nature of works, as satire, certainly do not apply in this setting, yet the same visual tropes were employed for this painting.

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**Fig. 13 Archibald J. Motley Jr., 1940, *Lord Mah Man's Leavin'*, 76.5x102.2cm WPA, Federal Art Project, gifted to St. Louis Art Museum in 1943. Source: Whitney Museum <https://whitney.org/media/1257>**

Phoebe Wolfkill explored the issues of racial caricature in Motley's work and notes that there was very little complaint as to the use of the stereotypes from Motley's work at the time and he was not the only African-American artist to do so. The reception of art produced by African-Americans during this era was viewed with a racial bias also, believing that their racial heritage meant that the art produced was both primitive and amateur.<sup>89</sup> Motley's art was critically praised by Alain Locke in 1930 writing that ... "more and more fascinated by the grotesqueries and oddities of Negro life, which he sometimes satirically, sometimes sympathetically depicts. His style, once curiously restrained, is now highly imaginative, free in rhythm, riotous in color, a combination of Dutch Realism with American humor and tempo"<sup>90</sup>

### **Bands Playing/Dance Scene**

Both *Bands Playing* and *Dance Scene* typify what defines Motley in current historiographical writing, that of a jazz age modernist. In terms of composition, both paintings could be seen as a compartmentalised reconstruction of his earlier *Blues* painting.

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**Fig. 14 Archibald J. Motley Jr, *Blues*, 1929, Oil on canvas, 80 x 100cm. Collection of Valerie Gerrard Browne. Source: <http://nasher.duke.edu/motley/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2011/10/web-Blues.jpg>**

*Dance Scene* features an energetic scene of dancing couples. Clearly, the characters that Motley wished to represent were African-American and dancing to jazz or swing music. For the

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<sup>89</sup> Phoebe Wolfkill, *Caricature and the New Negro in the work of Archibald J. Motley Jr*, The Art Bulletin, Vol. 91, 3, p.347

<sup>90</sup> Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present*, (Albany NY, J.B Lyons Press) 1936 pp.69-70



contemporary viewer, the associations with jazz, a contemporary bulwark of African-American popular culture, indicated by tightly-packed couples with interlocked bodies is obvious. The various angles and forms taken by the characters clearly add to this feel for the painting. The African-Americans in this scene by Motley, are represented as sophisticated, clearly the protagonists are well-dressed in suits and dresses.

*Bands Playing* features a panorama of a large jazz band in clear expression of their music. The animated characters were clearly playing to an energetic and rhythmic piece of music, which is evidenced by the body language of the characters. The high-pitched angle of the instrument and blown-out cheeks of the trombonist on the left-hand side, the open and dancing expression of the conductor in the centre and the pianist who is arched over his keys in full expression of the music. Like *Dance Scene* the figures are well-dressed, sophisticated and cultured. In terms of form, Motley would have employed linear techniques to emphasise the characters. Motley moved away from a more painterly style that can be associated with his portraiture paintings. Like *Blues*, Motley would have used vivid colours to bring feel to the scenes, giving the bandsmen and the dancing couples a visceral, syncopated musical quality which is present in *Blues*. Additionally, it must be noted that Motley was showing African-Americans at leisure and associating his characters with a freedom from the confines of white western music and the rigidity of contemporary society.

The matter of class strife between middle-class and working-class African-Americans from the 1920s formed a strong part of the corpus of Motley's subjective pastiche. It was this curiosity of these Southern incomers, their idiosyncrasies and seemingly odd colloquial chatter that inspired Motley, which is evidenced in his representation of African-Americans.<sup>91</sup> Mooney analyses Motley's representations of class and race in his easel works noting the sophisticated settings and representations of women that he undertook portraits of.<sup>92</sup> Whilst working for the IFAP easel division, Motley embarked on a series of paintings named *The Evolution of the American Negro Series*. No art historians have considered the works in terms of extracting

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<sup>91</sup> Phoebe Wolfkill, *Caricature and the New Negro in the work of Archibald J. Motley Jr*, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91, 3, 2009 p.354

<sup>92</sup> Amy M Mooney, *Archibald. J. Motley Jr*, (San Francisco, Pomegranate Books) 2004 pp.38-43

Motley's perceptions of race and class from them. The series was incomplete set of paintings in which Motley sought to chart the history of African-Americans from the capture of slaves in Africa to the modern-day members of American society. The only known painting in circulation is *Africa* which was painted in 1937. The painting features a scene of African tribesman in a ceremonial setting, dancing around a fire in head-dresses and carrying drums and spears. The figures are represented sympathetically in linear fashion, juxtaposing them against a painterly background which is dominated with different hues of red emanating from the fire which the characters are dancing around. A closer look at the faces of the characters shows that Motley employed the caricatured big red lips trope to the characters. This painting speaks to obvious tropes relations of nobility, tradition and primitivism, which were employed by other contemporary artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance such as Aaron Douglass.<sup>93</sup>

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**Fig. 15 Archibald J. Motley Jr. *Africa*, 1937, 30x40in, oil on canvas, WPA Federal Art Project Source:**

**<https://www.wikiart.org/en/archibald-motley/africa-1937-1937>**

Motley's papers reveal his intended list of those paintings and they are named as follows.<sup>94</sup>

1. Africa
2. Slave Hunters
3. Introduction of Slavery into the United States by the Dutch (Virginia 1619)
4. A painting typical of the Old South- Negro Slaves at Work in Field and Docks, Loading and Picking Cotton
5. The Slave Market
6. The Negro in the War
7. Abolition of Slavery
8. Negro in the Trades

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<sup>93</sup> David C. Driskell et al, *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York, Abradale Press) pp.106-9

<sup>94</sup> Archibald J. Motley Jr, *Evolution of the American Negro Series notes*, Archibald Motley Papers, Chicago Historical Society

9. Negroes in Education
10. Negroes in Business
11. Negroes in Politics
12. Negroes in Science
13. Negroes in Literature
14. Negroes in Religion
15. Negroes in Arts

Motley's employment of this subject matter, again, points to him portraying African-Americans in a better light. However, the series also demonstrates an acceptance of the view that African-Americans were once dull and ignorant and it was the civilised processes and paternalism of the white power structure that engendered this evolution. This acceptance of white notions of blackness is further evidenced in his letter to the Harmon Foundation, a philanthropic organisation that supported black art and culture.

"For years many artists have depicted the Negro as the ignorant southern "darky" to be portrayed on canvas as something humorous; an old southern black Negro gulping a large piece of watermelon; one with a banjo on his knee; possible a 'crap-shooter' or cotton-picker or chicken-thief. This material is obsolete and I sincerely hope with the progress that the Negro has made he is deserving be to represented in his true perspective with dignity, honesty, integrity, intelligence and understanding. Progress is not made by going backward. The Negro is no more the lazy, happy go lucky shiftless person he was shortly after the Civil War. Progress has changes all this."<sup>95</sup>

### **Motley's Ideology, Du Bois and the Talented Tenth.**

There is a difficulty in assigning Motley to a definitive ideological standpoint. He was not overtly political, in his artwork, nor his personal life. There is a distinct disconnect from the ambitions

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<sup>95</sup> Archibald Motley, "How I Solve My Painting Problems" found in Amy M. Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.*, (San Francisco, Pomegranate Books) .p.93

of representation of African-Americans in a positive manner which he espoused and the wider movement of achieving equality for African-Americans, which was evidenced in his lack of connection with the Harlem Renaissance in his 1979 AAA interview and his lack of involvement with the political fervency during the WPA years.<sup>96</sup> Wolfskill also rightly recognises the problems that occur with representation within Motley's easel works. Namely, that the incoming Southerners provided, not only a worthy subject matter with which to showcase the nuances and polemical aspects of Bronzeville, but also to represent the idiosyncrasies of a perceived lower class.<sup>97</sup> Art historians Robinson and Greenhouse attribute this to the 'old settler' mentality of middle-class blacks in Chicago.<sup>98</sup>

There is a case to assign Motley into the realms of Du Bois' Talented Tenth ideology. This belief, coined by northern philanthropists and written about by DuBois in the 1903 book *The Negro Problem*, a collection of essays by contemporary African-American luminaries.<sup>99</sup> In the 'Talented Tenth' philosophy, DuBois argued that the most talented African-Americans were needed to drive the race forward and Motley, a talented northerner of middle-class persuasion would have certainly fit the bill. With regards to Motley's treatment of Southern blacks in Chicago in his easel works and his Nichols paintings and his treatment of representation in portraiture of middle-class jazz-age subjects clearly aligns him in terms of outlook with this philosophy. Du Bois approach advocated for a focus developing examples of unswerving examples of respectability and talent. Motley's careful representation of African-Americans would have supported the outlook of this philosophy in the realms of visual culture. Du Bois called Motley "a credit to his race" in a 1925 edition of *The Crisis*.<sup>100</sup>

In 1926, Dubois wrote an essay on the "Criteria for Negro Art" believing that art should be used as a propaganda tool for the improvement of social and racial conditions in society. Motley saw DuBois speak in Chicago, in a letter dated March 3 1928 Motley requests the addresses of Paul

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<sup>96</sup> Archibald Motley AAA Interview

<sup>97</sup> Phoebe Wolfkill, *Caricature and the New Negro in the work of Archibald J. Motley Jr*, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91, 3, 2009 pp.343-365

<sup>98</sup> Jontyle Theresa Robinson and Wendy Greenhouse, *The Art of Archibald J. Motley Jr.*, (Chicago, Chicago Historical Society) pp.21-23

<sup>99</sup> Booker T Washington et al, *The Negro Problem*, (USA, J. Pott Publishing) 1903

<sup>100</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, *The Crisis*, July 1925 pp.134-135

Robeson and Roland Haynes.<sup>101</sup> Motley received a response from Du Bois' secretary supplying the addresses and explaining that he was lecturing in the West. <sup>102</sup> Other than this correspondence, there does not appear to be any contact between Motley and DuBois following his Guggenheim fellowship application which Du Bois supported in 1929.<sup>103</sup> Du Bois' statement with regards to propaganda is likely where the similarities between DuBois' view and Motley's view of the trajectory of civil rights and visual culture depart. Motley never expressed a desire to use art as propaganda in a covert sense and indeed his ideas around using art as a vehicle to enhance the position of African-Americans was not set in a political agenda in which propaganda would be a reasonable assessment of Motley's outlook on art and politics. Mooney also discusses Motley's relationship with Du Boisian thinking, but on the subject of black otherness. In her book, she discusses the relationship with Du Bois avantgarde employment of contemporary psychology and his concept of double-consciousness, relating it to Motley's early easel works and his self-portrait.<sup>104</sup>

### **Motley's Complexities**

The findings of this research, point to a more complex and polemical view of Motley's internalised biases and their subsequent expressions in his federal patronage. As discussed, the findings of Powell and Mooney, are less convincing when considering Motley's WPA contributions. Motley certainly did not embody the approach of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist stance, although, Motley did to some degree express it in the visual language he engaged with for his protagonists. Motley's early portraiture paintings attest to the positive notions of a new visual language, yet Motley's caricatured street-scenes and his FAP

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<sup>101</sup> Archibald John, Motley, 1891-1981. Letter from Archibald J. Motley Jr. to W. E. B. Du Bois, March 3, 1928. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

<sup>102</sup> Letter from unidentified correspondent to Archibald J. Motley Jr., March 7, 1928. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

<sup>103</sup> Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.* p.10

<sup>104</sup> Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.* pp. 9-11

Evolution of the American Negro series point to different perception of how he saw African-Americans or wanted African-Americans to be perceived.

The contradictions that Motley expressed in his works, on the one hand, in his early artistic career, demonstrated that he was committed to redressing negative stereotypes of African-Americans and wanted to unwind perceptions of African-Americans in contemporary visual culture. On the other hand, Motley engaged with problematic visual tropes that somewhat reversed his earlier goals. Additionally, Motley's abandonment of a more positive representation of African-Americans, was replaced by an aesthetic in which the more insalubrious elements of contemporary black Chicagoan culture comes to the fore. Local art-historians Robinson and Greenhouse attribute Motley's attitude towards incoming settlers from the South, which was further entrenched by the 1919 Chicago Race Riots.

Motley's murals at Nichols Elementary School, displayed visual tropes that were akin to white notions of black people. Yet, Motley clearly followed DuBois, there was limited contact between the pair, but the case for placing Motley within the Talented Tenth philosophy is not obvious. As an African-American at the forefront of his field, Motley would have certainly been the type of person DuBois had in mind. However, Motley's AAA interview demonstrates in retrospect that he did not believe in the existence of the Harlem Renaissance. In turn, this demonstrates that Motley did not believe in the Talented Tenth philosophy as Motley would have seen the Harlem Renaissance as an opportunity to challenge the discourse around art and its relationship with race. It is very difficult to place Motley ideologically as his beliefs moved and changed over time.

### **Charles White Mural Analysis Five Great American Negroes**

Charles White's *Five Great American Negroes* (Fig. 16) strongly demonstrates White's loyalty to black subject matter and highlights the way in which the artist sought to promote the plight of African-Americans. White utilised a survey taken from the *Chicago Defender* newspaper to

provide him the characters for this mural.<sup>105</sup> This strongly places White within the realms of the Social Realist tradition, by utilising a survey, White essentially democratised his subject matter, thus ensuring the content of the painting was a reflection of the opinions and beliefs of the demographic he sought to represent. Hemingway aptly connects White's relationship to left wing ideals and the wider goal of the CPUSA to highlight different allegories of class consciousness and conflict, recognising that although the subject matter is dislocated from the tropes used by others in the CMS, White's murals fit the mantra of the CPUSA in terms of choice of subject matter and fitting in the notions of wider class struggle and this is reflected in his representation of Frederick Douglass, who bears a resemblance to Karl Marx.<sup>106</sup> The painting shows prominent African-American's of the recent past and (contemporary) present and demonstrates the importance of the progress of African-American's since the end of slavery. The mural protagonists, Booker T. Washington (centre), Sojourner Truth (left), Marian Anderson (top right), Frederick Douglass (centre, embracing slave) and George Washington Carver (bottom right, with microscope).

The mural reads from left to right, moving from the leading figure of Sojourner Truth on the left to the modern-day achievements of Marian Anderson and George Washington Carver on the right. Sojourner Truth can be seen leading a trail of long suffering and impoverished slaves to their freedom from the background to the foreground. Both Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington are the former 'leading men' of African-American progress in this mural. Washington takes centre stage, delivering his Atlanta Compromise speech. Behind Washington, Frederick Douglass, is comforting a slave as he looks on earnestly. On the right-hand side of the painting, the characters of Marian Anderson and George Washington Carver represent the achievements of modern day African-Americans in concert-singing and science respectively as a young black student looks on them in conversation with his teacher. Sojourner Truth who occupies the foreground of the painting on the left-hand-side, was an abolitionist and orator who managed to gain her freedom in 1826. Truth was the first free black woman to win custody

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<sup>105</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*.p.173

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

of her infant son from a slaveowner in 1828. In the years following Truth delivered speeches protesting slavery and advocating for recognition of women's rights. Her most famous speech was titled "Ain't I a Woman?" which was delivered at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851, although the exact wording attributed to Truth's speech has been debated, due to later published editions likening her accent to that of a Southerner, when in reality Truth had a unique accent as she originally spoke low-Dutch and was from the northern environs of New York State. As well as this, Truth also assisted in recruited black soldiers for the Union Army during the American Civil War and tried unsuccessfully to secure land grants from the federal government for former slaves.<sup>107</sup>

The central character in White's mural, Booker T. Washington, was perhaps the most well-known but controversial of White's black heroes. Washington endorsed segregation in his Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895 and was the Principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Although Washington appeared to be an accommodationist and to pander to whites in order to sustain the schooling at Tuskegee; the reality of Washington's position was that he was content to let history be his judge and funnelled funds from white benefactors to fight peonage cases for African-Americans.<sup>108</sup>

The character at the top of the mural singing into the microphones is Marian Anderson. Anderson was a classical and spiritual singer who came to the forefront of African-American civil rights in 1939 when she was barred from performing to an integrated audience by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a patriotic all-white, heritage organisation, which observed Jim-Crow segregation restrictions. The incident caused a great deal of consternation in the contemporary press and the DAR was rounded upon by Eleanor Roosevelt as well as the NAACP. Between them, they jointly organised a concert at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, with a mixed-race audience 75,000 people, as well as being broadcast on national radio. The incident was a springboard for her career as a singer and Anderson strongly supported civil

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<sup>107</sup> Carleton Mabey and Susan Mabey, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend*, (New York, NYU Press) 1993 . pp.67-82

<sup>108</sup> Louis. R Harlan, Booker T. Washington, *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, (Oxford, OUP) 1986



rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>109</sup> Whites' rendition of Frederick Douglass can be seen in the mural embracing a slave and looking somewhat Marx-like. Douglass was an abolitionist, author and social reformer who was famous for his best-selling 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Following the American Civil War, Douglass campaigned for the enhancement of rights for freed slaves, as well as womens suffrage. Douglass went on to release two further auto-biographies about his life and travelled to Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>110</sup> The character on the right-hand side utilising a microscope is George Washington Carver. Carver was an African-American scientist and inventor who was noted for his work in agricultural science. Born a slave, Carver and his older brother were adopted by his owners after his parents were kidnapped and taken to a neighbouring state. Carver served as an agricultural professor at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he taught for forty-seven years. Carver made advances in crop-rotation, peanut farming and disseminating information to Southern farmers via a wagon that was financed by a philanthropist Morris Ketchum Jesup. Carver attracted a great deal of celebrity during his active years and found many new uses for derivatives of peanuts, such as flour, paste, insulation and although none were commercially successful his innovation won him a great deal of scientific reverence. In his career, Carver met with three US Presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge and also studied with the Crown Prince of Sweden.<sup>111</sup>

Although, the mural is not as controversial and overtly political as his later works are, it clearly shows the centrality of black people in his art and the ways in which he wanted to demonstrate the achievements of black people. This is apparent, for example, in White's representation of Booker T. Washington, his highly muscular tone and centrality in the image is typical of White's representation of African-Americans. White's portrayals of African-Americans stood firmly in contrast with stereotypes of the era. There is no trace of aggrandisement to white, middle-class

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<sup>109</sup> Craig Simpson, *DC's Old Jim Crow Rocked by 1939 Marian Anderson Concert*, <https://washingtonareaspark.com/2013/03/14/dcs-old-jim-crow-rocked-by-1939-marian-anderson-concert/> accessed 23/8/21

<sup>110</sup> Marianne Ruuth, *Frederick Douglass: Patriot and Activist*, (Los Angeles, Holloway House) 1991 pp. 118-119

<sup>111</sup> US National Parks Service, George Washington Carver, <https://www.nps.gov/tuin/learn/historyculture/george-washington-carver.htm> accessed 26/8/21

or elitist artistic ideals. *Five Great American Negroes*, not only demonstrates a mid-step in terms of White's artistic choice, but also his awareness of the importance of placing the artwork firmly within the zeitgeist from which it came. The comparison to his later mural *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* and his later lithograph work which feature the same stoic and strong trope for his characters.

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**Fig. 16 Charles White, *Five Great American Negroes*, 1939-40, oil on canvas, 5ft x 12ft 11in., Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington D.C**

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**Fig. 17 Charles White, *Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, 1943, egg tempera (fresco secco), 11ft 9in. X 17ft 3in., Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia**

In 1941, White was awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, his original plans were to travel to Mexico, like his mentors at the CMS. White was unable to realise this aim due to draft board restrictions following the United States' entry to the Second World War. Instead, White enrolled at the Art Students League in New York and studied tempera painting under Harry Sternberg. Following his studies, White spent three months researching African-American history in preparation for his 1943 mural, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*. In his application for his fellowship renewal, White stated the mural was to be a contribution to the 'united front of all races of people', additionally, White wrote in his report that he wanted his mural to combat 'forces in America that would oppress the Negro are not representative of America, but rather the same element we are fighting in Europe and the Far East'<sup>112</sup> The painting is situated in the Wainwright Auditorium of Clarke Hall at the Hampton Institute, Virginia, measuring 11ft 9in x 17ft 3in. The mural proved popular in both production and reception, students keenly monitored its development, some assisted White with paint mixing and posing as models. The production of the mural took White around six months and was unveiled on 25 June 1943 and attracted positive attention in several popular editorials.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left* .p.261

<sup>113</sup> Barnwell, *Charles White*, p, 34

At first glance *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* reads as a complex cacophony of black faces and bodies. The bronzed figures with unnaturally equal digits, full forms, accompanied with a scene symbolising the machinery of democracy gives the mural a distinctly metallic feel. Contemporary reviews rightly trace White's stylistic sympathies to that Mexican Muralists, the figures are akin to that of Rivera's and the dynamics of spatial representation are likened to Siquieros.<sup>114</sup> White clearly engages with cubist techniques, represented by the flat edges of the knuckles on the oversized hands, the oddly kinked chain hanging from the left hand (right in picture), as well the torso of the Peter Still character, which is distinctly rectangular.

Thematically, the mural charts the symbiotic relationship between African-Americans and the United States, featuring civil rights heroes and heroines of yesteryear and (contemporary) present-day, who laid the groundwork for freedom and the fight for equality post-slavery. The oversized hands at the top of the image, indicate this transition, the slaves that are chained around the neck and held by the right hand (left in picture) are a contrast of the released chain in the left hand (right in picture) in which the open cuff of the chain is located close to the raised hand of George Washington Carver, denoting the achievements since freedom. Additionally, this is indicated by the left arm of Frederick Douglass gesturing towards the post-slavery and contemporary heroes and heroines. Aside from this trope, the painting can be read from the stricken form of Crispus Attucks in the bottom left, wheeling round to the bluesman Leadbelly in the bottom right.

The bottom left corner contains a scene of the stricken Crispus Attucks (1723-1770), the first non-white to die in the Boston Massacre. As well, a muscular, angular man, pins a 1775 Provincial Congress anti-slavery declaration. Barnwell asserts that Attucks was a soldier, he was actually a sailor and dockworker. Barnwell also states the soldiers killing Attucks are black British soldiers.<sup>115</sup> This is incorrect, a closer inspection of the soldiers, although bronzed like the rest of the figures, have blue/green eyes and noticeably thinner noses than the African-Americans portrayed in the painting. The soldiers present at the Boston Massacre were from

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<sup>114</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left* .p. 262

<sup>115</sup> Barnwell, *Charles White* .p. 32

the 29<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot. The only known non-white members of the regiment were black drummer boys, who were 'gifted' from the Admiralty.<sup>116</sup> From this scene, it is clear that White wanted to demonstrate that the history of the United States and African-Americans were synonymous. The Provincial Congress declaration is an indicator as to the time in which the US became a nation and makes for easier interpretation for the casual viewer.

In the centre of the mural atop a horse is Denmark Vesey (1767-1822), Vesey's rebellion was stopped before it had chance to get under way, there is also some polemic as to whether Vesey had indeed planned a rebellion at all as the trial was conducted in secret.<sup>117</sup> Vesey's selection for this mural was likely inspired by the novelist and composer Paul Bowles, who was a fellow-traveller and short time communist. Bowles wrote an opera on Vesey in 1939.<sup>118</sup> Interestingly, Vesey gazes towards the fallen Attucks. This could be seen as way in which White encouraged the viewer (likely an African-American given the murals location) to recognise the injustices that had been imposed on African-Americans throughout the history of the US, thereby asking them to be critical of the contemporary situation regarding racial injustice. The upper left corner of the mural is a scene of slave uprising leader Nat Turner (1800-1831), who led a rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, the same state in which the Hampton Institute resides. The rebellion in which over fifty whites were killed, caused a national outrage and resulted in harsh repercussions for African-Americans within the county and further afield. The scene contains a great deal of iconography in relation to Turner who is holding aloft a torch. As a civil rights hero, Turner himself is symbolic, but White employed other elements which relate to Turner's story. Turner's story is a unique one in which a full confession was given before he was put to death. In the confession, Turner cites that from an early age he believed that he had been chosen by God for a special purpose, this was apparently echoed by his peers due to his exceptional intellect from a young age.<sup>119</sup> Closer to the uprising, the deeply religious, slave-

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<sup>116</sup> Ed. J. Southern, Hugh Edward Everard, *From the History of Thomas Farrington's Regiment, The Black Perspective in Music*, Iss 1, Vol. 2, Autumn, 1973 .pp 10-13

<sup>117</sup> James O'Neil Spady, *Power and Confession: On the Credibility of the Earliest Reports of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy*, *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 68 Issue 2, 2011 pp287-304

<sup>118</sup> Melissa J. De Graaf, Ed. Naomi Andre, Karen M. Bryon and Eric Saylor, *Blackness in Opera*, (University of Illinois Press, Champaign) 2012 .p 187-190

<sup>119</sup> Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA.* (Lucas and Deave, Baltimore, USA) 1831 .p 11 accessed online 10/01/2021 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/turner/turner.html>

come-preacher, claimed he had 'visions' and 'signs' that instructed him to 'put down the yoke' and kill his masters with their own weapons and start a rebellion. White treats Nat Turner's narrative with a lot of detail and sympathy and this is reflected in the scene. The background features four bayonets, with a fire and black smoke behind are pointing upwards in the direction of Turner. The background underneath Turner's left arm shows a fire on the horizon in which the smoke billows into a clever stylistic segue featuring an African-American angel-slave character. This is indicated by the wings and the ragged clothes of the character who looking down on Turner, who is pointing to the distance with her right hand and carrying a sword in the left. The similar dichotomy in clothing can be attributed to Turner also, his ragged shirt, clearly contrasts strongly with his bright, patterned waist-coat, redefining Turner as a luminary and hero, countering the white narrative of Turner as a dangerous, violent rebel.

Like Five Great American Negroes, Frederick Douglass makes a return in this mural also, looking decisively less Marx-like than White's earlier rendition. Douglass' character is much more detailed than his previous iteration with distinctly sullen eyes, Douglass holds out his left arm, gesturing to the progress and freedom that is present in the characters on the right-hand side. Shielded within his out-stretched arm is a line of Union line infantrymen, marching right-to-left, presumably on their way to liberate those characters on the left-hand side. The character in the upper right corner of the mural is Peter Still. Still purchased his own freedom in 1850 and secured the freedom of his wife Vina and three children in 1854. Still is represented in cubist form, with White's typical 'strong hands' trope being employed here. Still's torso is represented in cubist form as a rectangle. Still's arms are aloft and in his right hand, Still holds a red banner emblazoned with 'I will die before I submit to the yoke'. Barnwell cites this as a declaration from his autobiography.<sup>120</sup> Again, Barnwell is incorrect here. Still never wrote an autobiography of his own. Still's biography was recorded by Kate E.R Pickard in her book *The kidnapped and the ransomed; being the personal recollections of Peter Still and his wife "Vina," after forty*

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<sup>120</sup> Barnwell, Charles White p.32

*years of slavery* which was released in 1856.<sup>121</sup> As well, there is no reference in the book to the statement on the flag that Still is carrying. This is a visual trope that White engaged with, bringing together his racial and class-conscious beliefs into art, overt left-wing references are not especially strong in painting, given the size of the mural and the small part Still occupies.

Behind the songster in the bottom right corner is the actor and singer Paul Robeson, who achieved a great deal of fame in Britain and Europe. Robeson features as one of White's modern heroes. Around the time of the production of the painting, Robeson made a name for himself as an actor and aligned himself with left-wing causes and civil rights agendas in the US and Europe. After spending time in Britain, Robeson became an advocate for the republican side during the Spanish civil war. Robeson also supported the Council on African Affairs, which advocated for decolonisation of European ruled nations in Africa.<sup>122</sup> In the years following the 1940s, Robeson was caught up in the anti-left-wing clampdowns of the McCarthyist era. By 1950, Robeson's career was ruined, his passport revoked and he settled in Harlem, setting up *Freedom*, a monthly newspaper with contributions from civil rights advocate W.E.B DuBois and featured artistic contributions from White, which ran until 1955.<sup>123</sup>

The last of White's heroes is the bluesman Leadbelly in the bottom right of the mural holding the guitar. Leadbelly was discovered by folklorist John Lomax in 1933 whilst collecting folk songs for the Library of Congress. Lomax befriended Leadbelly who was released from the notorious Angola Farm State Prison in Louisiana in 1934 and is rumoured to have sung for his freedom. Leadbelly was a controversial character and served numerous further prison sentences in the years following. Leadbelly was also a popular musician with associations with the left, Richard Wright wrote a feature in the *Daily Worker* praising Leadbelly and attacking

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<sup>121</sup> Kate E.R Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed. Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and his Wife "Vina," after Forty Years of Slavery*, (New York and Auburn, Miller, Orton and Mulligan) 1856  
Electronic Edition supplied by Documenting the American South,  
<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pickard/pickard.html> accessed on 27/8/21

<sup>122</sup> Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bun, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement*, (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press) 2005 p.320

<sup>123</sup> Freedom Papers Digital Collection, NYU Libraries, accessed 28/8/21 <http://dlib.nyu.edu/freedom/>

John Lomax for exploiting Leadbelly.<sup>124</sup> Leadbelly only made \$200 from his most famous song 'Irene' in 1933. Leadbelly later recorded the obviously left-wing 'bourgeois blues' in 1937, however, a 1962 *Negro Digest* article attests also that Leadbelly wrote songs in support of Republican Wendell Wilkie who ran for President in 1940.<sup>125</sup>

The scene located under Douglass' outstretched left arm and in front of the Union line infantry soldiers is a scene indicating the modern African-American family.<sup>126</sup> The father is facing the viewer with a holding up a rolled-out blueprint in his hands. The mother and the baby behind the father, look towards the present-day heroes in White's mural whilst the father looks outwards towards the viewer. This scene symbolises the achievements that have been realised for the family by the heroes featured in the mural.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Both Motley and White wished to use the power of their art to change the perceptions of African-Americans within the realm of visual culture. The following section will compare both Motley and White in respect to their art based on their respective ideologies and their attitudes towards race and class. The first section will identify contrast the ideologies of Motley and White and the relationship to their artwork. Following this, the section will discuss the different aspects in which they represented their race, combined with this also be a discussion on the relationships between class perceptions of both artists. The last part of this comparative analysis will discuss the respective styles of the two artists.

The first aspect of this discussion will cover the respective ideologies of the two artists. For White, the case for linking him to the radical left of American politics and a distinctly militant pursuit of those goals associated with it. For Motley, his artwork is related to a positive representation of his race within a distinctly middle-class ideology, which made imbued otherness in his work but not to a discouraging extent, certainly not in the era that it was produced. Motley's kinship with the values espoused by Du Bois' 'Talented Tenth' certainly speak of a conservative outlook on

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<sup>124</sup> Michael Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press) p.150

<sup>125</sup> Carter Price, *Negro Digest*, April 1962

<sup>126</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p.261

progress of race relations and a belief, reflected in his murals and his wider works that the way forward for representing blacks was a middle-road in which the engagement with the tropes of the white power structure were still present. In terms of the difference in ideology, one can make comparisons with Booker T. Washington and Du Bois. The central character in White's *Five Great American Negroes*, Washington's approach for advancing the race in terms of education was from below. Washington believed that African-Americans would need to learn technical and practical skills that were required in the communities that they lived in order to achieve a level of parity with whites. In that sense, Washington's approach from a left-wing perspective encompasses the goals of social mobility within the working-class, whereas Motley's ideology, related to notions around the 'Talented Tenth' speak to a conciliatory outlook on race relations.

In terms of class, White certainly came from a distinctly working-class artistic and political approach, whereas Motley was middle-class. This of course informed their respective ideologies, but one must also consider wider factors which influenced them as people and as artists. The first aspect of this, is the age difference between Motley and White. Motley was born in 1891 and White in 1918, meaning Motley was twenty-nine years older than White and grew up in a vastly different era to White for African-Americans. Whilst Motley's formative years as an artist took place before the chaos and erosion of race relations in Chicago and clearly this informed his reality about what was possible as an artist. Motley originally practiced as a portrait artist and it was not until the jazz era genre scenes started to appear that we see more complex interpretations of Motley's outlook on his own race. Although Motley's approach to representations of African-Americans can be seen as positivist. The problem with representation of working-class demonstrates a clear relationship between perceptions of race and class. Motley's problematic working-class Bronzeville characters were not present in his murals for Nichols Elementary School, the absence of them speaks to a lack of kinship with those members of his race in which he did not see in same sense as he did himself and did not wish to promote like his night club scenes.

White's relationship with class in his work and his representations of African-Americans, as oppressed and struggling certainly speak to a zeitgeist in which African-Americans were firmly on the backfoot. White's formative years as an artist culminated with his time on the FAP. *Five Great*



*American Negroes* was painted when White was just twenty-two. The shift that occurred in terms of outlook and style between Motley can be seen as symptomatic of the respect eras in which they lived, Motley's era was one in which an engagement with whites, their ideas, art was deserving of consideration, we see this in the aggrandisement to white ideals in his artwork and his discussions with the Harmon Foundation and disassociation with the Harlem Renaissance. White's art, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in an anti-thesis to the visual culture of the white power structure in an era which saw a more militant approach to race relations as the upheavals of the Great Depression and the opportunities New Deal projects recast perceptions of black people in the field of visual culture.

In terms of style, it can be argued that both Motley and White shared similarities. Motley's representations at Nichols and his wider genre scenes spoke from a vibrant distinctly modernist persuasion. Although one cannot extrapolate this to a firm political standpoint, as with White, it does demonstrate that Motley was engaging in artistic techniques that went in contrast to the ideals of the white power structure. The same can be seen said for White, his social realist aesthetic was grounded in relationships with working class and social issues. The relationship between modernism and social realism place both Motley and White in terms of their basis as new means of explaining the world in which they lived in ways previously unallowed by the white power structure. There are of course differences in style, outlook and representation of African-Americans.

Indeed, both artists can be seen as representative of their respective class standpoints. Motley as a middle-class, old-settler, Chicagoan, whose switch to modernism from a more traditionally European painterly-portraiture style can be seen as a means to express aspects of African-American life in which his previous approach did not allow. Motley's representation of jazz age Americans are distinctly middle-class and positive in their representation of African-Americans as sophisticated, educated. The positive tropes that Motley associated with the leisure, fun and associations with the freedom of jazz music and in that sense it can be seen that Motley wanted to examine the zeitgeist from the middle. Interestingly, White's relationship with class in his artwork is distinctly in the form of protest, as discussed, he clearly was a communist, if not a fellow-traveller who followed the path laid out by the Mexican muralists in terms of his

construction of his murals and the manner in which characters are represented. White opted to paint heroes for his murals, although representations of the contemporary working class in America cannot be read from this. The characters present in his *Five Great American Negroes* mural were selected from a survey that was taken in the *Chicago Defender* about the audiences favourite heroes. Playing to the democratic values in his ideology, White framed the experience of African-Americans as very different from Motley. White's form of heroic representation is understandable. It allowed him to tell a story of the struggle for equality in black history and relate it to the present day in ways which were familiar to the viewers when it was made. Whilst we can say that it is easy to read White's image in terms of the social protest aspect, the visual tropes borrowed from the Mexican muralists in terms of the strong forms and angular bodies, the intermixing of Marx with Frederick Douglass speak of the age in which White were formative artistic years for White and White like Motley can be seen as products of a more tumultuous but more ambitious age.

## Conclusion

To close the analysis, it is necessary to summarise the findings of this paper. This paper argued that the FAP and other state funded arts projects offered a unique case study due to the murals that Motley and White undertook for the FAP. Those murals have provided new insights into the work of the artists and this represents a new contribution to historical knowledge. The approaches to analysing the work of Motley and White by means of a comparative analysis has offered a clearer position of Motley's ideology and places and demonstrated the plurality in which Motley and White sought to redress negative images of African-Americans. Establishing the similarities in terms of stylistic base grounded in protest against the contemporary conditions in US society and a desire to redress the negativity present in the visual culture of the period. In terms of the differences, Motley and White were distinctly different in their ideological approach to their art and this reflected in both their style and composition and their approach to representing African-Americans. In addition to this, this paper has also contributed to histories around the FAP in Illinois, most histories on the FAP focus exclusively on New York.

This paper also contributes to the African-American art history of Chicago also, both artists were Chicagoans who trained and made their name in the Windy City. In addition to this, this paper has also offered new contributions into the work of Charles White, in particular, the themes that are at play within the mural *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*. In terms of originality, this paper has provided the only examination thus far of Motley's murals at Nichols Elementary School. This thesis has shown that the contributions of both Motley and White, contributed to redressing negative stereotypes and places a greater importance on the New Deal years as a useful basis for extracting meaning from their contributions as they represent the only time artists could paint without adjusting their interpretations for the benefit of external forces. In addition to this, the murals at Nichols also point to a deeper relationship between Motley's ideology with respect to views upon his own race. The paper has also linked Motley's ideology with Du Bois' notion of the 'Talented Tenth' and established this connection in line with other historians who have written on the

relationship between Motley and Du Bois. The comparison upon class lines has allowed the finer nuances of Motley and White's approaches to be enhanced, whereas previous surveys on African-American artists would tend to group them together.

The areas of future research that this study has identified are as follows. In general, the history of the Illinois FAP is deserving of a revisit, as well, a deeper examination of the art was produced on the project would yield a greater appreciation for the plurality of the artworks in general. A further revisit with respect to analysing the FAP as a progressive force for African-American civil rights on a national level as well as more nuanced study of Illinois. The proximity of left-wing artists to the direction of Charles White's art and political outlook is another aspect which is deserving of further investigation. Histories place the relationship with left-wing politics and African-American firmly within a distinctly internal culture, however, the relationship between the artists such as Millman and Siporin and the political wrangling of the FAP years should be considered in this here also. With respect to muralism in Chicago, the examination of the evolution in styles and approaches from Progressive era to WPA era murals would be an excellent survey also as this would plot a clearer path in which the social effects of the New Deal arts projects on Chicago's cultural production could be better understood.

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