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## Three African American Artists and the Black Female Nude in American Art

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THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS AND THE BLACK FEMALE NUDE IN  
AMERICAN ART

by

Chantal D. Drake

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Major: Art History

The University of Memphis

December 2010

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For my favorite person in the world, Peyton James.

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## ABSTRACT

Drake, Chantal D. The University of Memphis, December/2010. "Three African American Artists and the Black Female Nude in American Art." Major Professor: Dr. Earnestine Jenkins.

"Three African American Artists and the Black Female Nude in American Art" examines the nude black female figure in the works of Eldzier Cortor, Dox Thrash, and Archibald Motley. This study on their nudes offers insight into the lives of black women in America, highlights the artists' academic training and admiration of European and classical art, and explores the black female nude from a perspective rarely discussed in the scholarship on American nudes. I argue that the use of the nude, a classical white figure, as a narrator of the black woman's experience offers a visual opposition of what the nude historically represented and how black women were perceived in American art.

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## INTRODUCTION

Black women were rare subjects in American art throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nudes were also scarcely depicted by American artists. Histories of racism and stereotypes and Protestant conservatism prevented the presentation of black women and nudes as subjects within the fine arts. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought significant changes throughout American culture and affected the artworks in the years to follow. Three African American artists represented the black female nude in their work consistently throughout the mid twentieth century. Each artist used an individual style to create innovative images of black women. Collectively their work is a significant contribution to the portrayal of the black nude in American art.

Dox Thrash, Eldzier Cortor and Archibald Motley drew upon different aspects of black women's historical experience in the United States in order to create a new subject within the established canon of Western art. The use of the nude figure highlights the artists' academic training in Western art as well as their common interests in its figurative tradition. My research suggests that Cortor, Thrash and Motley recognized the nude subject as a challenging and powerful means of visually expressing the realities of black women's experiences in America.

In the following chapters, I will briefly examine the historical attitudes in America about the representations of nudes in art and about negative perceptions of black women that influenced their absence in American art. I will describe ways in which Eldzier Cortor, Dox Thrash and Archibald Motley depicted black women specifically as nude subjects. I will also argue that the iconography in their images reflected a critical

time period in American history in which black women became visible within society that had either ignored them or limited them to stereotyped roles. I will also discuss how these nude paintings promoted a new identity of African Americans as artists of the traditional nude figure.

## **Review of the Literature**

Kenneth Clark's 1956 publication, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, is the most well known scholarship on the female nude.<sup>1</sup> Clark was one of the first historians to observe that beginning in the eighteenth century the unclothed figure had to be idealized and preferably of white marble to be considered aesthetically pleasing and acceptable by European art historical standards. If these expectations were not met, then the figure was seen as naked and thus as shameful or obscene.

Lynda Nead offers a more contemporary approach in her discussion of the subject in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*.<sup>2</sup> Nead critiques the nude in art from a feminist perspective and focuses more on sexual implications of the artist and viewer rather than the emotional or stoic nature of the figure. Clark's and Nead's texts provide general overviews of female nudes throughout history and how or why they were or were not acceptable as traditional art forms. While these ideas and perspectives were valuable to the subject of my thesis, neither African American artists nor the concept of the black female figure as nude subject was explored in these resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Studies within the field of American art history have also notably ignored African American artists and representations of the black female nude. In *The Great American Nude: A History in Art* by William Gerdts, nudes from the 1810s to 1970s are discussed within specific chronological frameworks.<sup>3</sup> For example, the chapter “Between the Wars: A Second Golden Age,” discusses nudes from the 1920s-1940s. While the publication would have benefited from showcasing the nudes by Cortor, Thrash, or Motley from this period, Gerdts does not mention any works by these artists or any representations of black female nudes.<sup>4</sup> Erica Doss’ *Twentieth Century American Art* recognizes popular artists, art movements and artworks. She includes African American artists but does not discuss the nude subject in their work.<sup>5</sup>

Gill Saunders’ 1989 publication *The Nude: A New Perspective* offers a critique on the historical scholarship on Western nudes. This “new perspective” is intended to “show how the attitudes of artists and public have changed throughout history.”<sup>6</sup> Saunders also argues that values and social changes have “produced new attitudes to the role and meaning of the naked body in art” since the Kenneth Clark study thirty years earlier.<sup>7</sup> Once again in Saunders’ study, black female nudes are neglected.

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<sup>3</sup> William Gerdts, *The Great American Nude: A History in Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Cortor, Motley and Thrash clearly respond to cultural changes brought on by the two World Wars and migration.

<sup>5</sup> Erica Doss, *Twentieth Century American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective*, (London: Harper and Row, 1989), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Recent scholarship about African American women artists has provided a breakthrough in the research on black female nudes. These sources focus on the nudes that were created by black women about black women to reconstruct their image in art. Lisa Gail Collins' *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* discusses Cortor's *Sea of Time* in detail as it relates to his interest in the Gullah, or Sea Islanders.<sup>8</sup> In Lisa Farrington's "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude," the author mentions the Cortor's nude, "Sea of Time," as "mimicking the same stereotypes observed in the works of white artists."<sup>9</sup> She also devotes two paragraphs to the visual analysis of Motley's nude, *Brown Girl After the Bath*. Farrington suggests that this black nude replicates "certain classic stereotypes of gender," but also allows the "model to have personality, beauty, and some small measure of authority."<sup>10</sup> Collins and Farrington place the artworks by African American women artists within a historical context of the nude and history of black women in America and Africa. However, neither mentions Dox Thrash, the creator of more black female nudes than any other African American artist.

The black female nude has also been discussed in terms of photography, usually within the contexts of nineteenth century colonialism and the images from that period. For example, in *The Body Exposed: Views of the Body, 150 Years of the Nude in Photography*, Michael Kohler studies the black female body in photography as a tool of

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<sup>8</sup> Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (Rutgers University Press, 2002). It is important to note that Collins presents social and cultural histories of the African American experience that are confronted by African American women artists in their contemporary artworks.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa E. Farrington, "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude," *Woman's Art Journal*, V. 24, No. 2 (2003), 15-23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

ethnography.<sup>11</sup> This idea is discussed more in Christaud Geary's *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa* and Barbara Thompson's *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*.<sup>12</sup> Both books discuss the racially driven approach to photographing African women.

*The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* by Deborah Willis and Carla Williams is a more inclusive study providing a holistic perspective on the black female body and nudes in Western photography.<sup>13</sup> The authors include interesting themes and images such as black female celebrities Pearl Bailey and Josephine Baker and cultural icon Sojourner Truth.

For my research, Patricia Morten's *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* provided valuable commentary on twentieth century literature focusing on black women.<sup>14</sup> Another vital source was Jan Nederveen Pieterse's *White on*

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Kohler, *The Body Exposed: Views of the Body, 150 Years of the Nude in Photography* (Switzerland: Edition Stemmler, 1986) Ethnography was a branch of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of individual creatures. Comparing anatomy of different racial groups or types allowed scientists to categorize individuals and cultures as biologically separate from Europeans. In the eighteenth century, this anatomical difference was illustrated in a chart of comparative skulls. In an attempt to showcase the similarities and differences in African and European profiles, the chart illustrated distinctions between cultures by comparing anatomy. The measurement of an angle derived from the profile line from the forehead to the projection of upper teeth was placed on a grid after measuring real life skulls. The chart and lecture accompanying the diagram had been published and copied, making it available to the public. David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in 18th Century* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 205.

<sup>12</sup> Christaud M. Geary, *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2003); Barbara Thompson, *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body* (Dartmouth: Hood Museum of Art, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Morten, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991).

*Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*.<sup>15</sup> This book offered insight into the European colonization and the background of stereotypes that influenced Americans' views of African and African American women. Another essential source for this thesis on the visual representation of the black female body was Betty Ellerson's *Paradigms of Seeing: A Historical Analysis of African Women in Visual Representation*.<sup>16</sup>

A vital source used for background information on the history of African American women was *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* by Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson.<sup>17</sup> Their research on the experiences, struggles and accomplishments of black women in America proved to be an invaluable part of my argument and assisted in my knowledge of American and African American history. Any mention of the collective lives of black women in America can be credited primarily to this book.

A new detailed look into the black female body in Western art is Charmaine Nelson's *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art*. Nelson discusses images of black women in European, American and Canadian art from the late eighteenth century to mid-twentieth century. She focuses on white artists' interpretation of the black female body. Her perspective is that images of black women were produced in Western

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<sup>15</sup> Jan Nederveen Piertse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (London: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Betty Ellerson, *Paradigms of Seeing: A Historical Analysis of African Women in Visual Representation* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Libraries, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999).



culture, but white artists were “invested in the racial differencing of the body and the deployment of registers of blackness organized hierarchically by their proximity to the white body.”<sup>18</sup> Her research is a critical component to the discussion of the black nude and has been vital to my understanding of the subject.

### **Researching the Artists**

The artist Archibald Motley has received attention due to his documented interest in portraying racial types among African Americans. Amy Mooney has written the most recent biography on Motley, *Archibald Motley Jr.*<sup>19</sup> Michael D. Harris, in his book *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, discusses Motley in a chapter devoted to the artist called “Color Lines: Mapping Color Consciousness in the Art of Archibald Motley, Jr.”<sup>20</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier also discusses Motley extensively in her 2003 publication, *African American Visual Arts from Slavery to the Present*.<sup>21</sup> These sources are fundamental in understanding Archibald Motley and his background and interests although his images of the black female nude are still not given attention.

Turning to the subject of Dox Thrash, a catalogue written by John Ittman, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, is the primary source

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<sup>18</sup> Charmaine Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 178.

<sup>19</sup> Amy Mooney, *Archibald Motley, Jr.* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts From Slavery to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

used in the discussion of his work.<sup>22</sup> A chapter written by Kymberly Pinder, “Racial Idiom in the work of Dox Thrash,” introduces the significance of Thrash’s nudes and briefly compares his volume of images of the black female body with Cortor and Motley.<sup>23</sup> She does not discuss the black female nude extensively, but she is the first to recognize Thrash’s interest in confronting the role popular culture plays in disseminating images of black women.

Of the three artists, Eldzier Cortor is the one without a biography or focused critical analysis of his work. Copies of his personal letters, sketches, and exhibition catalogs are available at the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art. These papers were very helpful in my understanding of specific images and Cortor’s intentions when producing certain works. A thesis written by Jennifer Heusel in 2006 titled “A Complete Artist in a Limited World: Race, Art, and Eldzier Cortor” analyzes a number of Cortor’s artworks. More attention is placed on his biography than on his nudes within the context of the African American experience.<sup>24</sup> Romare Bearden’s *History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* offers a useful biography on Cortor and discussion of his nudes as well.<sup>25</sup> These publications do not extensively explore Cortor’s significance in American art, but assist in my interpretation of his images.

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<sup>22</sup> John Ittmann, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, University of Washington Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Kymberly Pinder, “Racial Idiom in the work of Dox Thrash,” in *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, University of Washington Press, 2001), 65-83.

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Heusel, “A Complete Artist in a Limited World: Race, Art, and Eldzier Cortor” (MA Thesis, Indiana University, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Romare Bearden. *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 272-279.

## **Chapter Outline**

In Chapter One, “The Female Nude and Images of Black Women in Early American Art and Culture,” I examine American perspectives on the traditional Western nude, looking at American artists who worked with the subject and how the public responded to their images. I also discuss negative stereotypes associated with black women at turn-of-the twentieth century America. This historical perspective is necessary in order to understand the “visual” challenges that Cortor, Thrash and Motley confronted.

In Chapter Two, “Challenging European Standards of Beauty in the Nudes of Dox Thrash,” I introduce the artist with a brief biography and discuss his watercolors and then his prints. I analyze Dox Thrash’s works that critique the society in which black women dealt with identity issues and European standards of beauty. By deconstructing specific nudes by Thrash, I uncover patterns relative to the artist’s visualization of the issues of race, beauty and identity of African American women in his work. Ultimately, Dox Thrash blends his technique and style in a way that allows him to address certain socio-cultural issues.

In Chapter Three, “Eldzier Cortor’s Southern Comfort,” I analyze several of Eldzier Cortor’s nudes and images that were created to express his perspective of the South. These images were created in response to what he saw traveling to the southern parts of the country on his Rosenwald Grant. I also discuss the Gullah culture and how this was reflected in Cortor’s work.

I focus on Eldzier Cortor’s nudes depicted in urban environments in Chapter Four, “Eldzier Cortor’s Urban Nudes”. Cortor addresses some of the negative

consequences for black women after the Great Migration. These images also give insight to the poverty-stricken lifestyles that African Americans endured once leaving the South.

In Chapter Five, “Reinvention of the ‘Classical’ Nude in Black Nudes by Archibald Motley,” I explore the nudes by Archibald Motley that highlights the influence of nineteenth century European nudes and portraiture. Of the three artists, Motley is the one who worked most closely within the confines of the traditional nude representation in Western art. The iconic Western nude figures that Motley studied throughout his traditional academic training are a leading inspiration for the nudes that are analyzed in this chapter.

I conclude with a review of my study of the nudes by Cortor, Thrash and Motley. By analyzing each artist’s images within their individual themes and perspectives, I attempt to show how these African American artists have created images that contribute to the portfolio of American nudes, reconstruct the traditional definition of a Western nude and offer visual interpretations of the lives of black women in early and mid-twentieth century America.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Female Nude and Images of Black Women in Early American art and Culture

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, “most Americans had never seen an artist’s interpretation of a historic or classical subject, especially one that presented the nude figure.”<sup>1</sup> Aspiring artists, unless fortunate enough to have the instruction of a European-trained artist, were “denied the most direct source of study since the life model was discouraged, if not forbidden, by colonial morality.”<sup>2</sup> The nation’s Protestant origins and the influence of the church made American artists reluctant to approach the nude figure in their work. Pre-Christian, pagan subjects were regarded as immoral and unsuitable for representation. Therefore, most of the American literature about art encouraged visual artists to educate audiences in moral character by portraying Christian themes.<sup>3</sup>

In his book, *The Nude: A New Perspective*, Gill Saunders examines issues of immorality in his contemporary study of historical nudes. Christian philosophy deems the nude as guilty, sinful, and shameful. In Gothic art, nude figures are only found in “the representations of The Last Judgment and the torments of Hell.”<sup>4</sup> The church

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<sup>1</sup> E. McSherry Fowble, “Without a Blush: The Movement toward Acceptance of the Nude as an Art Form in America, 1800-1825,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 9 (1974), 103.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective* (London: Harper and Row, 1989), 10.

considered the female nude a symbol of sexuality and a personification of sexual temptation.

### **The American Nude**

When John Vanderlyn ventured outside of these restrictions with *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos*, 1809-1814 (Figure 1), he and his painting were met with disapproval. The figure lies on white and red cloths in the foreground of a green landscape. Her head is turned away from the viewer with both arms elevated to frame her face. Her body is turned toward the viewer and is illuminated by the light coming down through the trees. A small section of white cloth covers the area between her legs.

This work was strongly rejected by the public.<sup>5</sup> Vanderlyn was also a controversial figure among other American artists. As Saunders notes, “Most practicing artists were aware of the necessity of the nude as a training vehicle, but many others responded negatively to the ‘Ariadne’ and similar works.”<sup>6</sup> They argued that the audiences for this and other nude paintings had not yet “acquired the necessary understanding of the nude in art.”<sup>7</sup> The American public lacked appreciation for the emotional power inherent in artistic nudes and for the excellence of technique required to produce them.

Twenty-nine years later a nude sculpture created by Hiram Powers, *Greek Slave*, 1843 (Figure 2), was met with positive reviews and popular acclaim. The white marble

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>7</sup> Fowble, 121.

figure in *contrapposto* stance turns her head away from the viewer. With chains around her wrists, she covers her private area with her left hand. The *Greek Slave* was perceived differently by audiences because her nakedness was not willing. This contrasted greatly with the obvious availability of Vanderlyn's "Ariadne" created twenty nine years earlier. She became a symbol of the "purest form of ideal triumph of Christian virtue over sin."<sup>8</sup> This sculpture was considered a moral nude, and conservative writers chose this image to represent Christian chastity.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Thomas Eakins was the first artist who fully embraced the nude in America. Eakins believed that depicting the human body in art could express American themes. He pursued nude studies in his own work and encouraged his students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia to paint studies of live models. His nude figure in *William Rush Carving his Allegorical Figure of Schuylkill River*, 1876 (Figure 3), was intended to justify live models. A statue of American icon George Washington and the presence of a woman seated in the composition are included to persuade audiences that the relationship between artist and model during the sessions was strictly professional. Eakins was not successful in making his case, but he changed the historical conversation about nudes and contributed to the portfolio of American nudes with numerous studies and oil paintings of male and female figures.

Thomas Eakins was also critical to the development of the black female nude in American art. Eakins created one of the few black female nudes of the nineteenth-century entitled *Negress* (Figure 4), a nude study completed while he was in Paris in 1876-1879. His ethnographic depiction focuses on three-quarters of the upper body and positions the body in

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<sup>8</sup> Hughes, 217.

light that creates emphasis on her profile and the shape of her facial features and form. This image of the black female body is representative of Eakins' attempts to perfect realistic portrayals of various ethnic groups and races.<sup>9</sup>

Similar kinds of ethnographic studies were common during the nineteenth century, and many of them pressed science into service to prove the ethnic superiority of Caucasians as the dominant race.<sup>10</sup> "Ideals of race" in Europe justified colonization, but in the United States, this was also meant to justify the enslavement of black men and women.<sup>11</sup> In the late nineteenth century, black women could be seen in Western popular culture as grieving or distraught slave mothers, kneeling or beseeching slaves and at the turn of the century as asexualized mammies.<sup>12</sup>

Images of black women may have been rare in the fine arts, but pictures of black women as 'mammies' and 'jezebels' were prolific outside of academic circles. Mammy images became and remained extremely popular figures in American visual culture.

"The standard social assumption was that the mammy was the ultimate servant. She was large, dark-skinned, usually smiling and covered from neck to ankle with clothing. She wore a bandana and an apron, both of which signified that she was a worker doing cleaning, laundry or cooking. And she was a myth."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Braddock, "Eakins, Race, and Ethnographic Ambivalence." *Winterthur Portfolio*, 33 (1998), 135-161.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Curtin, "The Black Experience of Colonialism and Imperialism," in *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism*, ed. Sidney W. Mintz (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1974), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Charmaine Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Marsh, *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art, 1800-1900* (Farnham: Lund Humphries Publishers, 2005), 47.

<sup>13</sup> Michael D. Harris. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 92.



Images like Aunt Jemima (Figure 5) of Aunt Jemima Pancakes were used as marketing tools and popularized characters in films such as the heavysset caretaker in “Gone With the Wind” (Figure 6).

Visual affirmations of black women’s labor history and portrayal of them as mothers in African American communities begin to emerge in the works of African American artists like Cortor, Thrash and Motley. However in twentieth century American popular culture, the “Mammy” stereotype persisted because it made white Americans comfortable.

Other stereotypes that perpetuated myths about black women were those of jezebel and of the tragic mulatto figure. In the early twentieth century, white female nudes became acceptable in the work of photographers like Edward Weston and Alfred Steiglitz. The symbol of sexual and sinful temptation had transferred from all nudes to black women who were often blamed for the sexual relationships between black women and white men. The mulatto or mixed race African American was presumed to be the product of the sexual nature of black women. This stereotype was popular in films such as “Imitation of Life” (1934), “Pinky” (1949), and “Showboat” (1936).

At the turn of the century African American scholars began to address the need to formulate a more realistic and respectable identity for black women. Fannie Barrier Williams wrote about the new black woman in her essay, “The Club Movement among Colored Women of America,” in *A New Negro for a New Century*.

“There are women plain beautiful, charming, bright conversationalists, fluent resourcefulness in ideas, forceful in execution, and women of all sorts of temperament and idiosyncrasies and force of character. All of this is simply

amazing to people trained in the habit of ranking colored women too low and knowing only the medial type. To such people she is a revelation.”<sup>14</sup>

Alaine Locke supported the contemporary presentation of dignified African Americans by publishing Winold Reiss’ and Aaron Douglass’ portraits of black women in his important book *The New Negro*.<sup>15</sup> There was also a new interest in black psychology and literature on black identity. E. Franklin Frazier was the leading black psychologist with scholarship written on black identity as early as 1937. His 1939 book, *The Negro Family in the United States*, explored the formation of African American identity since slavery.<sup>16</sup> Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, discusses identity as being philosophical rather than social.<sup>17</sup> He also argues that black men were invisible because of a failure of their own understanding and will. Eldzier Cortor, Dox Thrash and Archibald Motley’s artworks reflect these attempts to understand African Americans as a significant culture group. Their works also display a common interest in the identity and psychology of African Americans, specifically black women.

The nudes produced by Cortor, Thrash, and Motley were not just seen by black audiences but in popular museums and galleries around the country. The possibility of their works being shown in these art institutions was a result of the shift in American consciousness during and after World War II. The 1940s were a time of a growing

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<sup>14</sup> Booker T. Washington, N. B. Wood, and Fannie Barrier Williams, *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-To-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race* (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900), 424.

<sup>15</sup> Mooney, 33.

<sup>16</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952).

“homogenization of culture.”<sup>18</sup> As Jaqueline Foertsch discusses in her recent study, *American Culture in the 1940s*, global awareness of the “internal affairs of United States democracy” highlighted the socially limited and discriminated condition of African Americans.<sup>19</sup> She goes on to observe that if one world was within the realm of possibility after the wars, unity as a country would inevitably have to take shape. Events that encouraged this new sentiment of American patriotism were the controversial desegregation of troops by President Truman and his integration of black soldiers into a larger military effort.<sup>20</sup> Black citizens, middle class white women and poor whites were all working together in the war efforts.<sup>21</sup>

The major art movement in America during the 1940s was Abstract Expressionism. Rather than concentrate on the subject of war, Abstract Expressionists focused on refining forms and materials that reflected the complexities of modern life.<sup>22</sup> African American artists such as Cortor, Thrash and Motley excited and challenged viewers with their modern depictions of a traditional subject that offered an alternate perspective on the figure and the black female body. These images not only contributed

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<sup>18</sup> William S. Graebner, *American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 78. Most of the artworks I discuss in this thesis were produced in the 1940s.

<sup>19</sup> Jacqueline Foertsch, *American Culture in the 1940s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> John Baur, *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1966.

to the representations of black women but did so using the nude figure, a traditional idealized white form, adding a new aesthetic in the western tradition of art.<sup>23</sup>

Lisa Gail Collins states that, “the absence of the black female nude in African American art is telling.”<sup>24</sup> At closer look, the problem is an absence of research on African American artists depicting the black female nude within American art. African American artists were depicting the black female body, but historians of American art have not acknowledged that work within the discipline. The following chapters will initiate the discussion of these images within American art history and the African American experience.

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<sup>23</sup> The nudes produced by the artists were not just exhibited to black audiences. Many of Cortor and Motley’s nudes were exhibited at mainstream art shows in New York, Chicago and Washington D.C.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 55.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Challenging European Standards of Beauty in the Nudes of Dox Thrash

Dox Thrash (1893-1965) was born and raised in Georgia until his move to Chicago in 1911. He attended the School at the Art Institute of Chicago for four years taking only night classes, because his job as a janitor prohibited him from attending classes during the day. He took a break from the Institute to fight in WWII and on his return to Chicago received funding as a Federal Board student because of his status as a war veteran.<sup>1</sup> He was able to resume his studies for three years taking classes during the day. William Edouard Scott, an African American muralist in Chicago, became an influential artistic role model for Thrash.<sup>2</sup>

Sometime between 1927 and 1929 Thrash moved to Philadelphia. His earliest work was a poster for the Second National Negro Music Festival in 1930.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, while in Philadelphia, he enrolled in Graphic Sketch Club to master the medium in which he would become best known. By 1932, he was exhibiting his work in public. He signed on with the Federal Arts Project and was hired by the Fine Print Workshop of the Philadelphia FAP.<sup>4</sup> A 1939 review of Thrash's work stated that it had

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<sup>1</sup> John Ittman, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Arts Program paid artists for artworks that were usually displayed in government-owned buildings. These works acted as a "morale boost to the public" and provided employment for artists. Federal Arts Program was a part of the Works Progress Administration. Sharon Patton, *African American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126.

“matured rapidly since his association with the FAP workshop and showed Thrash’s emotional yet sensitive understanding of life.”<sup>5</sup> This “understanding of life” would contribute to his approach in depicting the black nude.

Thrash’s images have very little emphasis on the setting or a narrative using props or background. Instead, he addresses black identity issues using the nude subjects as chroniclers. The images that I discuss by Thrash focus on the physical and emotional complexities of black women. His colorful nudes as well as the black and white prints are unique and indicative of Thrash’s style consisting of full figured women, thin applications of paint, visible outlines and realistic treatment of the body.

### **Painting the Nude in Color**

One of Thrash’s earliest nudes, *Yellow Nude*, 1932-37 (Figure 7), uses abstract colors and lines. Although the form is legible, the proportions given to the figure are not naturalistic. The nude sits with her body and head facing the left. Her hands rest left over right in her lap. Her body is outlined in black and characterized by mostly yellow pigment and flecks of green for the shadows.

Some areas on the figure’s body are left white to indicate highlights, and red is used for her lips and nipples on her exposed breasts. Red is also used on an area under the figure’s ear to indicate earrings. Thrash treats the face with minimalist construction, allowing the viewer to recognize the face, but he does not apply enough detail to recognize an individual. The background is light pink, and dark blue encircles the composition to frame the figure.

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<sup>5</sup> Ittman, 18.

This use of color and the title combine as a direct play on the historical term originating in the nineteenth century to describe mixed or very light black men and women. *Yellow Nude* refers literally to the color that Thrash uses in the painting but also alludes to the term yellow that refers to skin color. Yellow, High Yellow and Bright Yellow were all terms used in black and white communities to describe a lighter skinned black woman or mixed individuals.<sup>6</sup> The lighter skinned women were considered the most beautiful and most acceptable in American society, but they were also considered promiscuous because of the mulatto or mixed race stereotypes common throughout late nineteenth century and early twentieth century literature.<sup>7</sup>

Thrash, as will be discussed in the following images, uses subtle elements to present issues facing black women and their identity. His *Yellow Nude*, with its lack of emphasis on either individual beauty or physical desirability, dispenses with yellow as a racial metaphor and its implications while it insists on the literal fact of hue.

In *Useful Imagination*, 1942-1943 (Figure 8), concern with skin color and appearance is once again confronted by Dox Thrash. This watercolor depicts a seated headless nude with only her right side visible to the viewer holding a head in her left hand and combing the hair on the head with her right. A cloud of red, blue, and yellow

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<sup>6</sup> Michael D Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 180.

<sup>7</sup> *The Mind of the South* by Wilbur Cash published in 1941 identifies “Jezebel and Mulatto seductresses as black men’s jealousy and white man’s bestiality.” They were responsible for sins of black and white men. For more of this and several other literary publications focusing on the perception of mixed black women’s in American society see Patricia Morten, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Greenwood Press, 1991), 30.

surrounds and frames the figure. A multi-colored striped scarf covers her lap and drapes around her neck flowing behind her. Her naturally full-figured body is a caramel colored brown with a small amount of green outlining the nipple around her exposed right breast and exposed left nipple.

The head that the figure holds is much lighter than the color of the figure's body. The face looks at the area on the figure where a head should be. Her red lips are closed tightly from the pressure of the figure's thumb on her chin. The head belongs on the body but has been displaced to create a face that is suitable and beautiful according to the European standard. Another interesting element of the composition, a purposefully unrecognizable magazine or book is represented by a white rectangle with a shadow underneath representing pages. A white stroke of paint leads the viewer's attention from the publication to the head in the hand of the figure.

The lack of images of black women in popular women's magazines has led to the contemporary idea that African American's developed an unconscious desire to emulate standards of beauty represented in white publications. In a study conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s, a black doll and white doll were presented to small school age children who were asked which of the dolls was more beautiful. The majority of white and black children agreed that the white doll was the most attractive.<sup>8</sup> This study has been used to confirm the disaffirmation of black characteristics among African Americans.

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<sup>8</sup> Harris, 19.



Recently, this study has been used in more contemporary research that associates it with the preferences of young children only, not as a reflection of black adult opinions.<sup>9</sup> The black press, in fact, played a central role in the promotion of beauty as a means of racial pride. During the late 1940s African Americans established their own black oriented publications like *Ebony Magazine*, *Sepia* and *Jet*. Many photos of African American women presented in publications for black readership were designed to refute destructive and stereotyped images in white popular culture, but lighter skinned African Americans were still most prominent.<sup>10</sup>

In the broader realm of American culture, however, light-skinned black women reigned supreme as the nearest approximation to white standards of beauty. Fredi Washington (Figure 9), a well known black actress in the popular Hollywood film “Imitation of Life,” and Lena Horne (Figure 10), a famous actress in films such as “Stormy Weather” and “Cabin in the Sky,” were portrayed as the ideal black women by white mainstream media. If not vocalized as such, absence of darker skinned women as the glamorous or ultimate black female figure suggested that they were marginally deficient. Since the full spectrum of African American skin colors was not available in popular media of the time, Dox Thrash’s paintings like “Useful Imagination” are valuable as critiques of identity dilemmas that black women faced in the mid-twentieth century.

In a complicated analysis of skin color, Verna Keith and Cedric Herring argues in “Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community,” that lighter skinned blacks had

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<sup>9</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Christaud M. Geary. *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2003), 231.

economic, social and educational privileges.<sup>11</sup> Looking back at the historical context of slavery, fairer skinned slaves brought the highest prices at slave markets and were more likely to be emancipated by their white fathers. The “prevailing racial ideology of that time was that blacks with white ancestry were intellectually superior to those of African ancestry.”<sup>12</sup> This translated into lighter skinned black women having more opportunities as house servants which prepared them with social advantages when freed. Keith and Herring’s main source E. Franklin Frazier, argues that social status of mixed, or lighter skinned blacks had declined by World War I.<sup>13</sup> However, the persistence of this social hierarchy of light skin among black women can be seen in “Useful Imagination” and other works by Thrash after World War I.

Another image that uses the nude as a subject to present the identity issues prevalent with black women is *Seated Nude with Mirror* (Figure 11) from the 1940s and 1950s. The figure sits in front of a white background and covers her lower body with a white cloth as she looks into a hand-held mirror. The skin color of her body is a medium brown with the shadows under her breast and around the outline of her body indicated in red. Her face, however, encompasses reds, greens, brown and blues. Thrash paints her hair mostly black, but the colors used in her face are also used in many parts of her hair as well. The mirror is crucial to this idea of black women’s identity and their image

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<sup>11</sup> Verna Keith and Cedric Herring, “Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community”, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 97., no.3 (1991), 761.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 762.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 764.

within America. Thrash has placed the figure in this composition as the observer and observed.

As Charmaine Nelson observes in *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art*, racial and sexual hierarchies shaped the black woman's contact with white artists. "The white artists experiences of and with their sitters were ideologically charged and reiterated imbalanced power relations."<sup>14</sup> However, no study has examined how these ideologies and relationships are different when both the artist and model are black. Dox Thrash used live models and the basic setup of a figurative drawing class to explore the complicated issue of black beauty through the lens of academic tradition. Racial hierarchy between the whites and blacks takes on new subtlety in his work, which recognizes not only skin color gradations as signifiers of social value but the way in which black women's self regard was shaped by these values.

*Yellow Nude*, *Useful Imagination* and *Seated Nude with Mirror* show Thrash's awareness of the Eurocentric ideals of beauty that reflected cultural and national biases. Extensive racial mixing since slavery presented conflict within the black community stemming from the hierarchal ranking of color.<sup>15</sup> Thrash's decision to paint images like the three mentioned above confirm his desire to confront issues of color and gender that affected black women during the 1930s and 1940s.

*Seated Nude* (Figure 12), also from the 1940s and 50s, differs from the previously discussed Thrash works, because it depicts the back of a black female body. Her face is

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<sup>14</sup> Charmaine Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Keith and Herring, 761.

not shown and both breasts are fully hidden as she looks toward the floor with her body angled slightly to the right. Her left shoulder is covered by a small amount of beige cloth that drapes toward her back almost touching the floor. The background is beige and the draped stool is various shades of brown with blue highlights around the bottom. Her complexion is light brown and her loosely pinned hair is black with subtle blue accents. Her body shape is full and fleshy like the previous nudes but also seems more naturalistic.

Neither highlighting nor hiding blackness, Thrash purposely set this nude in a neutral background with little difference between the color of the figure's skin and the setting around her. This type of study is closely identified with the European academic tradition. By positioning the model with her back to the artist and viewer, Thrash has created a familiar nude study of a black female figure that does not invoke sexuality, but evokes a sense of naturalism and softness to a female form that happens to be black.

Another well-known nude comes to mind. The positioning of the figure, the neutral background and the use of drapery are similar elements in Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *The Bather of Valpinçon*, 1808 (Figure 13). Ingres was a popular painter of nudes in the early nineteenth century, and with Thrash's academic background, this famous image among others was undoubtedly known to the artist. The quantity of nudes Thrash produced was so numerous that it would be difficult to imagine him not being influenced by this and other European artists' works.

In Thrash's *Nude*, 1950s (Figure 14), the round and robust figure's upper body is positioned toward the viewer. Her lowered body is angled toward her left, and her face has a direct and thoughtful expression as she makes eye contact with and welcomes the

viewer into her space. She sits in a decipherable wooden chair and leans on the left arm comfortably and confidently. With her individualized posture and face, this black nude is seen as an aesthetically pleasing portrait and not a scientific study or object of exploitation.

Thrash creates a unique approach to the black female body because his subjects are represented from an identity-conscious perspective. The figures, not the artist, become the messenger, achieving a sense of authority for the black female subject. The notion of beauty, hand in hand with the idea of white superiority, generally served to expel black bodies from the possibilities of aesthetic consideration.<sup>16</sup> Interpretation of black women's identity was ultimately in the hands of a white cultural machine in a colonial society.<sup>17</sup> Thrash replaced this power of interpretation with one firmly in the grasp of African American artists, his figures and the audiences.

### **Thrash's Nudes in Print**

Thrash completed more nudes than any other African American artist working during this time. His prints represent the black female nude as mother, dancer and as individuals, sometime identified by name in the title. Although this chapter focuses mostly on his color images, Thrash's prints showcase the nudes in poses familiar in Western art but entirely unique in the historical representation of the black female body. His preferred medium, the carborundum print in which the image is achieved by creating

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<sup>16</sup> Jan Marsh, *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art, 1800-1900*. (Lund Humphries Publishers, 2005), 47.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 56.

lighter areas on dark background, can be seen as a metaphor. Blackness is the fundamental base of his printmaking method that emphasizes his concern with skin tones and color.<sup>18</sup> This decision to use black as the primary color in his images of the nude female figure is an indication of his interest in encompassing without preference the entire range of black women's skin colors. With such controversial ideas surrounding skin color in American society in the 1940s, Thrash approaches his nude subjects as signifiers of the beauty of the color black.

*Siesta*, 1944-1948 (Figure 15) is an example of a print that uses a black background to showcase the black female body as traditional art subject. White is used to outline and create shadows for the figure and background. The nude reclines in an outdoor scene with the majority of her body in full view. The position of her body and the composition is similar to John Vanderlyn's *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos*, discussed in Chapter One. The figure is also similar to the nude in Ingres' *La Petite Odalisque*, 1840 (Figure 16). Thrash produces a purely black nude image using black materials to approach the inconsistent interpretation of skin color, race, and identity for black women.

Another print on a black background is *Mother and Child*, (Figure 17) from the 1940s and 1950s. The nude sits in an unidentifiable setting with a white cloth around her waist, white cigarette in her mouth and a white shadow around the figure as she balances

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Manoguerra, *The American Scene on Paper: Prints and Drawings from the Schoen Collection* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 311. Carborundum print is a printmaking process in which the artist rubs particles of carborundum lubricated with water over the surface of a plate. He uses a heavy weight to rub the pitted surface evenly while the metal plate holds ink. He then scrapes the desired image into the plate creating a lighter area in finished print. Lines are added by using dry point, aquatint, and etching either before or after the carborundum process.

a baby on her lap and holds it in her arms. The subject of the black mother was rarely depicted in fine art. The images of black women with small children before the mid-twentieth-century usually consisted of the sexless mammy stereotype. Thrash's figure contrasts greatly with a mammy figure in her size and stature. Presenting her as young and thin also highlight her as a sexual and desirable figure. Although Thrash is presenting an attractive black mother, he also incorporates a criticism of the urban black woman by showing her with a cigarette, a negative element Cortor uses in his representations of urban black women as well.

“The idealized image of attentive mother with her happy and healthy babies is a paradigm of white bourgeois society that has often been denied black women within the institution of slavery and beyond.”<sup>19</sup> This positive portrayal of mother and child is an isolated subject within Thrash's prints, creating a contemporary black version of the popular Western Madonna and Child similar to Giovanni Bellini's painting, *Barberini Madonna*, from 1480 (Figure 18). A soft white outline encircles the figures creating a halo of light. This aura could be attributed to smoke from her cigarette, perhaps a more realistic and telling inclusion of this detail. This image specifically associates Thrash's interest in presenting the black woman as traditional subject while also commenting on the contemporary concerns of black women.

As noted in the catalogue of his prints, “Thrash expressed a consciousness of the perception of blacks within the racist structures of American society and western art

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<sup>19</sup> Charmaine Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 31.

history.”<sup>20</sup> Thrash used the nude to depict black women and the struggles they faced as females within a racist, sexist and image conscious society. As Ronald Hall notes in “Euro-Americanization of Race: Alien Perspective of African Americans vis-à-vis Trivialization of Skin Color,” skin color has been dismissed from polite discussion as if it were a relic of America’s historical past.<sup>21</sup> Thrash took advantage of the tension surrounding this prohibited topic by presenting black nudes of all hues in traditional academic poses, and in doing this he not only forced the conversation about race and color, but he also raised issues about African American female identity in the mid-twentieth century.

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<sup>20</sup> Kymerly Pinder, “‘Racial Idiom’ in the Work of Dox Thrash” in Ittman, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Hall, “The Euro-Americanization of Race: Alien Perspective of African Americans vis-à-vis Trivialization of Skin color.” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Sep., 2005), 122.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Eldzier Cortor's Southern Comfort

Eldzier Cortor (1916- ) was born in Richmond, Virginia and moved to Chicago at the age of one. His father, an electrician and one of the first black pilots, did not accept the career path of artist for his son. Cortor maintained his interest in art, and while in high school he worked for the school's poster shop under African American artist Charles White. His artistic activity before and during high school was copying cartoons and comic strips from the local papers. He originally wanted to be a cartoonist.

After dropping out of high school to work, Cortor continued his training as an artist by taking night drawing classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> As a student, he was introduced to African art by Kathleen Blackshear during a trip to the Field Museum as a student.<sup>2</sup> This introduction would "initiate his career as a fine arts painter."<sup>3</sup> He was quoted later as saying, "Blackshear's enthusiasm for African art was the most important influence of all in my work."<sup>4</sup>

Another significant influence was a museum trip to view the work of Eugene Delacroix and Jacques-Louis David. Their "epic style" was something he decided to adapt but instead of the European themes seen in their work, Cortor represented black

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<sup>1</sup>Romare Bearden, *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York:Pantheon Books, 1993), 273.

<sup>2</sup>Jennifer Heusel, "A Complete Artist in a Limited World: Race, Art, and Eldzier Cortor" (MA Thesis, Indiana University, 2006); Kathleen Blackshear was an art historian who taught at the Art Institute. Cortor has mentioned her as a very influential person in his life and his art.

<sup>3</sup> Bearden, 274.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

people as his subject matter. <sup>5</sup> Cortor portrayed most of the women in his paintings with faces that mimic the shape and characteristics of African masks. His portrayals of women had complexions that ranged from light to dark and their settings included elements that are symbolic of women, the time period and African American life and culture. He uses these depictions of women, specifically the nude, to visually reference aspects of the black female experience in America.

Of the three artists living and working in the major northern cities, Cortor alone was particularly interested in the South and the culture that remained there. He made several trips to southern states and Caribbean islands to gain an understanding of black peoples' lives throughout the country and surrounding areas. His travels were a major influence throughout his work and especially his nudes.

In 1940, Cortor secured a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship to go to Charleston, South Carolina, to visit the Gullah or Sea Islanders who retained African attitudes towards the land and social customs. <sup>6</sup> In his plan of work written to the Rosenwald Fellowship Committee, Cortor expressed his interest in the opportunity to paint "Negroes whose cultural tradition had been only slightly influenced by whites."<sup>7</sup> His goal was to "reflect the particular physical and racial characteristics of the Gullah since some assimilation of their background and mode of living would add not only to the

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<sup>5</sup> Bearden, 275.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cortor, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Letter to Rosenwald Committee, N70-47

authenticity of the paintings but also to their intrinsic artistic value.”<sup>8</sup> Cortor also expressed his general concern with painting “Negro racial types” in connection with issues of color, design and composition.

One of Cortor’s first nudes was completed in 1942 and entitled *Affection* (Figure 19). A full figured woman with a red cloth draped around her waist stands in front of a plain, neutral background holding a cat to her breasts and looks to her left. She stands partially behind a round wooden table covered with a white runner. There is a small still life on the table that includes a glass of milk, a pear and a small bowl of grapes. The figure’s face is modeled after an African mask, and her limbs and body are full and round. This nude conveys the sense of isolation many women struggled with when living alone, in rural or urban conditions.

The interior and outside scene suggests that this is a cabin in a rural southern setting. “Affection” is an example of how Cortor began to incorporate the black female form into the canon of western art. Predating his distinctive and elongated mannerist style, it is a direct approach to the female form reminiscent of the voluptuous nudes painted by the Renaissance masters. Placing the figure next to a window with the still life display and the cat is also similar to the works of northern Baroque painters like Vermeer. Combined with the naturalistic style in which form is rendered, the figure within its private home-like setting has reasons to appear nude.

Cortor’s 1945 painting, *Sea of Time* (Figure 20) incorporates items indicative of Sea Island life. In the center of the composition are the face and upper body of the black woman. She wears a blue garment that is open exposing her left breast and shoulder. A

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

thin wooden structure frames her semi nude body, as she pushes a tattered net that hangs from the wooden frame away from her face. A bird flies over her head into the wooden wall as if it was also trapped by the net. A mossy green background is behind the figure and highlights the gold bracelet with a charm around her right wrist. A large seashell rests on top of a torn newspaper at the frame's base. A bent nail sticks out from the bottom left side of the frame.

The Carolina low country is bordered by islands separated from the mainland by small rivers and marshes. Prior to the Civil War, the islands derived their economic livelihood from Sea Island cotton, rice and indigo. White residents fled after the Union soldiers arrived accompanied by New England missionaries and followed by northern plantation superintendents, cotton agents and land speculators.<sup>9</sup> Many black Sea Islanders obtained their land through the confiscation proceedings during the war. The schools opened by the missionaries focused on agriculture and domestic arts, but the missionaries had little effect on the black islanders' politics, religion and social customs and values, which remained close to African origins.<sup>10</sup>

In *Sea of Time*, Cortor has used the traditional elements of a specific culture to create a narrative centered on the female nude. Situating figures within the historical themes associated with their surroundings allow his nudes, and this nude in particular, to stay connected to traditional culture. In a Report of Progress written to the Rosenwald committee, Cortor explains his fascination with the culture's independence and its ability

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<sup>9</sup> Mason Crum, *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1940), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

to keep traditional “life intact with much of its rich African heritage.”<sup>11</sup> In Cortor’s paintings, the setting of the Gullah culture differs greatly from urban interiors that center around problematic social practices and difficult conditions such as smoking, loneliness and confined spaces.

Cortor’s perception of the Gullah as an authentic culture minimally influenced by American society can be seen in the elements he chose to include in the painting. The net and frame secure the figure within the composition, but as she pulls the net back the bird flies out only to be stuck in a position where it cannot go forward but also cannot go back. *Sea of Time* presents the paradox of the Gullah people. Cortor understands that the price of independence and uniqueness is confinement to those Islands. Mason Crum, in his book *Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands* written in the same time period as Cortor travelled to South Carolina, writes, “They have built up for themselves a culture of their own, and because of their separateness, constitute one of the most interesting social groups in the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

Although it was of great interest to historians and anthropologists, The Gullah culture was a rare topic in mainstream discussions about black people in America.<sup>13</sup> Cortor, like the academics, studied the Gullah to understand the African roots of American blacks. *Sea of Time* celebrates the uniqueness of Gullah life by incorporating objects characteristic of the Sea Islands, but by making the semi-nude and dignified

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<sup>11</sup> Cortor, *Archives of American Art* (Washington DC: Smithsonian), letter N70-47.

<sup>12</sup> Crum, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, 66.

female figure central to the narrative, he insists as well upon the contribution of African culture to American creative life.

*Southern Gate* (Figure 21), originally entitled *Lantern Gate* from 1943, depicts a nude figure standing in the center of the composition. She stands tall with a cross around her neck and sunflowers in her hair. Earrings and a red and white scarf covering her hips are her only other accessories. Her torso and limbs are elongated even though her naval area is naturally round and full. Although the figure stands directly in the viewer's gaze, like most women in Cortor's paintings she does not acknowledge the viewer. Behind the figure, a landscape encompasses a church with a tall steeple in the far right side of the composition. Separating the figure from the church is a lake, a tall, aged and worn column and a decorative gate.

The sky is filled with dark storm clouds and with small rays of light casting a shadow of the figure from her right. Her hair and the cloth at her waist blow in the wind. Cortor has intentionally titled this painting and composed this work as a reference to the Great Migration. The woman's faith is in the background of the direction she looks, and the limitations of slavery are represented in the iron gate to her right. The sunflower symbolizes "full of life and glory of past, the pride of the present and richly emblematic of majesty of golden future."<sup>14</sup> This recognition in Cortor's painting is significant because the sun is noticeably hidden behind the figure, and dark clouds hover around her.

Her faith is leading her in an unknown direction, but she takes with her the memory of what black Americans endured in the South. This painting reminds viewers of the strength required of black women who made the journey from the South in search

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<sup>14</sup> Charles B. Heiser, *The Sunflower* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 5.

of better conditions in northern cities. At the terminus of those migrations, as Cortor observes in his paintings, the women found different circumstances and challenges, including powerful emotional tethers to their southern lives.

The relocation of African Americans to urban areas is a major part of the history and experience of black people in America. During 1910-1930, the black population in large northern cities increased by 40 percent. African Americans migrated to urban areas throughout the nation seeking industrial employment opportunities and to create better lives for themselves. Cortor's images place black women within the contexts of their southern roots but also represent them in urban environments after the Great Migration.

*Southern Landscape*, 1941 (Figure 22) has many of the same elements as *Southern Gate*. Although the figure is not a nude, she, like the woman in *Southern Gate* wears a cross around her neck, and has flowers in her hair. In both compositions rural churches signify the importance of religion, references not made in Cortor's paintings of urban scenes. The figure in *Southern Landscape* is placed in a graveyard setting. Her basket is full of fruit and books, two elements that we also see in *Affection*, but it also includes a photograph of a man, the possible resident of the grave she visits. The south is not simply a physical place; it is the emotional center of her history, her stories, and her loved ones.

According to Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, black women's attachment to the South was more than sentimental or even cultural.<sup>15</sup> They left parts of themselves behind, because in many cases women were unable to take their children with

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<sup>15</sup> Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 218.

them for the first several years after settling in the north. In the South and in rural areas, more children meant more hands in the fields to help generate revenue. In the busy cities where black women migrated, more children meant more mouths to feed. In a struggling economy and in a difficult time to find work for most Americans, black women did what was necessary even if it meant leaving their children for a time. In 1937, over 42 percent of black women in the North were in the workforce, compared to less than 25 percent of white women in the north and 26 percent of black women in south.<sup>16</sup>

The women in Cortor's paintings, whether set in the South, Chicago or the Sea Islands, always inhabit an emotional realm between the past and the present of American blacks. His nudes, unlike Thrash's nudes, are not intended to examine issues of beauty within the African American community or make a claim for inclusion within the academic tradition. Cortor's nudes, isolated in their dignity and surrounded by tokens of their histories, intensify the narrative of vulnerability and strength that is the story of black women in America.

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Boyd. "Race, Labor, Market Disadvantage and Survivalist Entrepreneurship: Black Women in the Urban North during Great Depression." *Sociologist Forum*, 15 No. 4(2000): 648.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Eldzier Cortor's Urban Nudes

Cortor's beautiful images of black women in their southern homelands are transformed in America's urban environments. This chapter looks at how his nude subjects respond to the stresses of urban living. The struggles to maintain cohesive social relations and to keep families intact were especially difficult for poor working class women.

The greatest of the migration waves occurred during 1917 and 1918 coincided with a "virtual halt in new housing construction in Chicago exacerbating a shortage shaped by the dual housing market."<sup>1</sup> Migrants moved into homes in the city's most dilapidated neighborhoods. Cortor, a resident in Chicago during this time, would have seen the circumstances in which many black families were forced to live and acknowledged the significance of the Great Migration in history. As an artist, his narration of these circumstances through the nude figure is not only innovative, but links his art practice to social issues.

One of the nudes Cortor painted in the crowded tenements in Chicago is *Room No. 6*, (Figure 23), a painting from his *Room Series* of 1946-47. This is one of the few nudes that Cortor produced that does not show the woman's breasts, because the main figure is down on the bed in the center of the composition. Her body is positioned on the right side of the bed making room for three other figures that share the bed with her.

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<sup>1</sup> James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 135.

Two of the figures have the physical proportion of children. The right hand of the main figure covers the breast of the small girl who lies in the opposite direction facing the main figure. A young boy lies on the left side of the bed in a yellow striped t-shirt. This is the only piece of clothing on any figures in the painting. He lies on his back with both arms folded behind his head. A dingy tattered sheet, red blanket and a green checkered quilt are arranged to expose the pink mattress underneath. The third figure is represented only by legs that stretch out from the bottom of the composition. In the right hand corner a small part of the room can be seen. The bed encompasses the majority of the composition, but a kerosene heater, a newspaper and magazine covered hardwood floor and flower patterned wallpaper decorate the room. A white baby doll leans against the wall on the floor.

This painting was exhibited at galleries in Pittsburgh and New York and was published in the *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune*. Cortor confesses his attempt to combine the “figure studies, the bed, and the other elements of the room as an interesting pattern to show the overcrowded conditions of those who are obliged to carry out their daily activities in the confines of the same four walls in the utmost poverty.”<sup>2</sup> Another combination seen in *Room No. 6* is the variety of different skin colors and tones, a deliberate attempt by Cortor to show the color range of black people in America.

The setting in Cortor’s *Room No. 6* represents the crowded tenements occupied by adults and small children in Chicago and other large overcrowded cities across America. The doll in the composition can also be seen in a photograph by Cortor’s colleague and

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<sup>2</sup> Eldzier Cortor, *Archives of American Art* (Washington DC: Smithsonian), newspaper clipping, N70-47

friend, Gordon Parks. His *Children with Doll*, 1942 (Figure 24) was part of a series he photographed of young Chicago residents during the 1930s and 1940s. In this series, Parks showcased Ella Watson, a black government sanitation worker and her grandchildren who lived on modest means and occupied a small space in Chicago.<sup>3</sup>

Cortor has included a young boy and girl in the painting, just as Parks incorporated both a small boy and girl in his work pictured with a white doll. The doll in Cortor's *Room No. 6* could symbolize the white children that black women were often hired to keep, affording them the opportunity to have their families with them in the city. The doll also represents the absence of black dolls for young black children to own as toys. Black images in the form of dolls or as characters were rare in books in the 1940s.<sup>4</sup>

*Room No.5*, 1946-1947 (Figure 25) depicts a single figure through the reflection of a mirror. A centrally placed vanity is the focus of the composition. A cat, an element used in *Affection*, lies in the center of the vanity with its form mimicking the reflection of the nude in the mirror directly above it. The cat looks toward its owner, which happens to be in the direction of the viewer as well. A lit cigarette rests on the left arm of the vanity and a chipped teacup sits on the right. There are missing handles on the dresser drawers. An opened envelope is tucked in the frame of the mirror. The ornate wooden vanity sits on a tattered red rug atop a hardwood floor. The wall behind the dresser is covered in old newspapers and magazine pages that depict only white subjects and several letter and number combinations. The wall on the right has peeling wallpaper, a

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 230.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Gail Collins discusses this absence of black toys and images for black children in Chapter 5, "Brown Crayons and Black Dolls: The Art of Coming of Age" in her 2002 book, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*.

recurring theme in Cortor's indoor images. The tattered wallpaper is a signifier of poverty and the conditions in which many black women and black families were forced to live.

This element is included in many of Cortor's images and is attributed to the southern habit of papering walls with newspapers, old magazine covers and calendars. The nude figure sits with her legs crossed and head resting on her hand as her arm is balanced on her knee. Her torso and limbs are elongated compared to the proportion of her head. The bed is not shown in the painting, but is implied by the iron rail that is shown in the mirror. The figure's breasts are fully exposed as she sits under the single light bulb hanging on a string from the ceiling. The only hint of the outdoors is through a window behind the figure with a torn sheet or cloth as its cover.

This painting is similar to an element in another Parks photograph, *Ella Watson and her Grandchildren*, 1942 (Figure 26). In this photo of the same poor Chicago family in the previously discussed photograph, the adopted daughter of Watson sits on the bed, her face reflected in the mirror of a vanity visible to the viewer.<sup>5</sup> She, like the figure in Cortor's painting, looks away from the viewer, but unlike Cortor's painting, the viewer is able to see where the young lady's attention is directed. On the left side of the composition Watson and the three grandchildren (two of whom were photographed with the doll) are seated near the doorway of the room where Watson's daughter is seated.

In Parks' photograph, the cramped interior is made more evident by his positioning of the children and their grandmother in the kitchen. The view through the

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<sup>5</sup> Special thanks to Dr. Earnestine Jenkins for highlighting the significance of this photograph in the discussion of Cortor's painting.

kitchen reveals a door leading outside. This perspective from the bedroom door allows the viewer to recognize the small and confined spaces that defined living conditions for many Chicagoans. The conditions in the urban tenements were a reflection of overcrowded inner cities where housing was old and city services were scarce.<sup>6</sup> Cortor uses the black female body to report the conditions of these environments by placing his nudes within the confines of the small and poverty stricken homes.

### *Americana*

Eldzier Cortor was given several awards and was received considerable attention and honorable mention for his nude, *Americana* (Figure 27) in exhibitions and shows throughout 1947. The painting depicts a standing black female nude in an interior setting with one leg in a basin of water and a towel wrapped loosely around the back of her body as if she is stepping out of the bath. A table with a pitcher of water is positioned in the lower left corner of the composition and a table with a photo of a young woman and haphazardly placed tablecloth is on the right. Her nude body and inclusion of a basin of water reminds the viewer of a Venus or Greek goddess as they were often depicted with water and a towel in sculptures from the Hellenistic period. However her stance and direct eye contact convey a figure of patriotism or honor as the title suggests. Lady Liberty comes to mind. Once again, newspapers and posters with sporadic images of a general, a boxer and strategically placed words “peace,” “true story” and “love” cover the wall that is her backdrop. Dried corn husks hangs from the ceiling mimicking mistletoe

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas C. Battle and Donna Wells, *Legacy: Treasures of Black History* (Washington D.C: National Geographic society, 2006), 150.

and a chicken is in the foreground. A picture in a frame sits on the table to the figure's left.

Although it is difficult now to find a colored reproduction of *Americana, Homage to 466 St.*, 1987 (Figure 28) depicts a small image of this painting on a magazine cover in a mailbox. The composition is focused on a series of mailboxes on a black and white tiled wall with only a few boxes opened to reveal what is inside. A home magazine and letters fill one, as a newspaper identified only by the word "Courier" hangs out of another. This painting depicts the towel in *Americana* as red and presents the figure as even more monumental, although she seems proportionately too tall in both compared to the size and construction of the interior.

While *Americana* was on display at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh before the exhibit opened a vandal damaged the painting. In a letter from the Institute to Cortor, the incident is described as follows, "some vandal knocked the nipples off the breasts of your nude, *Americana*, and slashed the belly with a knife." The impasto nipples were found in the trash, and the slit was a clean cut and could be restored. Cortor's letter written in response to this vandalism expressed how much time and effort was put into this work. He explained that he had never worked as hard on any other painting and that it was a summary of the years he spent in the islands of South Carolina. Carnegie Institute was certain that the only people who would have had access to the work are the installation men and janitors. The damage was restored and the painting became an award winning image with art critic Dorothy Grafly commenting that the image "prods the imagination

for in its bearing it combines a wholly modern sense of fear and bravado.”<sup>7</sup> This is an interesting choice of words when the public’s reaction is considered.

The act of malice toward *Americana* was a reflection of how some Americans perceived the black female body. The cut off nipples and cutting open of the abdomen are direct actions to prohibit the body’s natural responsibility to nurture or carry life. This idea is even more interesting once the title of the painting, “Americana,” is taken into consideration. In 1947, the public was resistant to the changes that were taking place in American society and culture, and in the world. However, Cortor gained acceptance for this subject, and especially this particular work.

Darlene Clark Hine has been mentioned once in this chapter for her book *A Shining Thread of Hope* that offers a chronological history using personal accounts and data research on black women in America. The circumstances that Hine and other scholars have recorded about black women in urban communities in America during the 1930s and 40s are visualized in Cortor’s work. His inclusion of black nudes in his repertoire of representations of black women offers significant contrasts between the images of black women seen in artworks and visual culture in the past.

Cortor produces admirable and attractive depictions of the black female body of all colors to approach black experiences in America, especially the critical period in Chicago when many black people moved their families there during the Great Migration. His inclusion of the black female body to represent the Gullah people and their culture reveals his wide interest in the black experience, and the use of African masks as primary

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<sup>7</sup> Cortor, *Archives of American Art* (Washington DC: Smithsonian), review in unidentified newspaper article, N70-47.

inspiration for faces of black female nudes takes his interest in the black experience beyond America and into historical traditions from the past.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Reinvention of the “Classical” Nude in the Black Nudes by Archibald Motley

Archibald Motley (1891-1981) was originally from New Orleans but moved to Chicago at the age of two. Because of his parent’s affluent status and mixed heritage, the Motley’s lived in a white area in Chicago rather than “Bronzeville” or other black neighborhoods in the city.<sup>1</sup> He was interested in the arts from an early age. While attending Englewood High, he trained as a draftsman, and his work “consisted mostly in European American nudes and figure and still life drawings.”<sup>2</sup> He received high marks on his high school transcripts in anatomy and life drawing, essential skills for a portraitist.<sup>3</sup> He entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1914 and his first paintings were exhibited in Chicago’s annual exhibition in 1920.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1920s, with encouragement from the black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, Motley made the decision to paint black subject matter.<sup>5</sup> With his combination of interests in black life and talent in painting in the European tradition, trying his hand at the nude black female body could be seen as a gradual progression. He began painting black women consistently during the 1920s, experimenting with multiple

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<sup>1</sup> Bronzeville was the predominantly African American South Side of Chicago from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 63<sup>rd</sup> Streets. Amy Mooney, *Archibald J. Motley Jr.* (San Francisco: Pomegrante Communications, 2004), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Barnwell, *Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art* (Newark: Newark Museum, 1989), 141.

<sup>3</sup> Mooney, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark: Newark Museum, 1989), 234.

<sup>5</sup> Barnwell, 142.

shades and colors of mixed and lighter skinned black women. Naming the works titles such as *Octoroon* and *Mulatress with Figurine and Dutch Seascape*, his focus on types and differences in black women's skin color would translate into his nudes that he would complete during the midcentury. He received a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1929 to study in Paris. This was the only fellowship given to a black artist for international research at the time.<sup>6</sup> Motley was the best known black artist in Chicago.<sup>7</sup> He was also the first artist to establish the social life of African Americans in cities as memorable subject matter.<sup>8</sup> He held the same ideas about the direction of African American art as Alaine Locke, placing him in the realm of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>9</sup>

With Motley's renown, even though he painted fewer nudes than Cortor and Thrash, his images are the best known. Most of Motley's images of the female body are black or of mixed heritage like himself, but a nude white figure also makes up his catalog of nudes painted during the 1940s. Thrash and Cortor are similar in their placement of black women in settings that provide a narrative of black life and black identity, but Motley's works differ with the inclusion of white and mixed figures. This introduces a new topic, "whiteness," into the nude works by African American artists.

One of Motley's first nude images is the white female nude painted in 1930.

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<sup>6</sup> Barnwell, 141.

<sup>7</sup> Romare Bearden. *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 154.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>9</sup> Mooney, 33.

*Nude (Portrait of my Wife)* (Figure 29) was painted six years after they were married. The figure does not acknowledge the viewer, but like a studio model she is aware of the presence of the artist. Motley depicts her body from the head to the lower torso and places her against a burgundy wall or backdrop. She does not smile or have any telling expression as her arms fall close to her sides and her breasts are fully exposed. Her red hair glows against the contrast of her pale white face from the lighting that radiates on the right side of her face and body. The bob styled haircut comes toward her face and draws the viewer's eye toward her red pursed lips. Her fleshy body is naturally depicted with realistic creases in portions of skin in the fuller parts of her torso. Motley's wife, a woman of German American descent, had very light porcelain skin and the lighting and his choice to depict her in front of a burgundy background accentuates her full figure and curves and her pale complexion.<sup>10</sup>

Although Motley was interested in depicting the many facets of African American life, he was also a portraitist and completed at least three portraits of his wife. The inclusion of this nude in the discussion of his other black female nudes can serve as an important point of comparison, because this is the only work that focuses solely on the figure and does not include any props or detailed background. Motley's compositions of other nudes that will be discussed are centered on the nude figure but also create settings in which to analyze the subject beyond the figure. His wife's nude image in this painting shows more similarity to his portraits than to his nudes. His other nude paintings are a part of a body of work that creates a dialogue about the context in which the women are shown. His paintings of mulatto women, such as *Octoroon* (Figure 30) from 1922, are

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<sup>10</sup> Mooney, 19.

rendered with a plain backdrop or background similar to the manner in which he painted his wife nude. Unlike the nude portrait of his wife, none of his other nudes that will be discussed are treated with such exclusivity.

The nude female figure has influenced generations of artists since the Greek Classical period. Replicas of well-known sculptures have been produced continuously throughout history. The female nude based on the Greek ideal form emerges in each new style, art movement and period. European artists like Ingres and Degas brought modernity to this classical subject, and academically trained African American artists who were introduced to the modern European works drew influence from them while also providing insight about black women in American society.

In Motley's nude painted *Brown Girl After the Bath* (Figure 31) painted in 1931, the year after *Portrait of My Wife*, he depicts a light brown woman. Motley has intentionally titled it to allude to her color. The term brown is rarely used to describe a person's race. It is used to describe someone's skin color and more than likely is used for medium tones. Medium brown skin tone was the preference for many women according to St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton's ethnographic study of black Chicago in 1940.<sup>11</sup> As in the paintings of mixed race women such as the previously mentioned *Octoroon*, the uses of terms that describe types of African Americans were commonplace within Motley's work.

The *Brown Girl* is seated on a stool with a red towel draping away in a manner that suggests she let it go once she was seated. Her body faces the left side of the

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<sup>11</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I A Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 40.

composition and is reflected in the mirror on the vanity in front of her. Her reflection faces the viewer, including her gaze in the mirror. Her right arm leans on the left side of the vanity and holds her makeup brush. Her left arm rests in her lap and holds the makeup powder. She wears gold earrings and black patent leather heels with unbuckled straps. Her short black hair is slicked toward the back of her head, and she wears red lipstick. Her body, like the nude portrait of Motley's wife, is realistically portrayed.

The setting of the painting includes a vanity, a curtain and a rug. The vanity is cherry wood with gold handles and a threefold mirror that is fully open to reflect the headboard of a bed on the opposite wall. A table lamp with an orange floral print lampshade sits on the right side of the armoire and illuminates the nude figure's face, breasts and torso. A small jewelry tin sits in front of the lamp. A vase of white and yellow flowers stands in the middle and lowest part of the armoire. Her stool rests on a multicolor striped rug with reds, yellows, blues and white. A deep red curtain is pulled open in the right side of the composition.

European conventions of portraiture are used in the setting. Neo-Classical portraits of women presented in luxurious dress and fabrics would make eye contact with the viewer. In these images, women were usually depicted sitting in a room or setting with elements that would be included to insinuate the sitter's interest or status.<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun's painting of 1788, *Marie Antoinette in a Blue Dress* (Figure 32) uses both flowers and drapery to construct the portrait of the queen. This and other images

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<sup>12</sup> Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2002), 96.

show the traditional themes that Motley recycled for *Brown Girl* and confirm his interest in elevating African American art to the standard of traditional Western ideals.

Amy Mooney in her biography of Motley suggests that he investigated racial types in this painting. Other writers have charged that he was experimenting with the caricature of black urban women in his work.<sup>13</sup> However, the placement of the figure in this setting reveals more about his interest in what this representation of the nude affirms to the audience than as racial type. The inclusion of a vanity, an element of furniture used in Cortor's work as well, makeup and flowers confirms her status as a woman of means concerned with her femininity and beauty. Black women were seldom depicted with this interest highlighted in images prior to the mid-twentieth century.

Motley's nude portrait of his wife is devoid of allusions to her status, interests or personality. *Brown Girl* and other images that will be discussed use the traditional signifiers of wealth and prominence in Western portraiture to convey the importance and respectability of African American women. The nude in *Brown Girl After the Bath* has an unidentifiable role in society but is clearly identified as a positive portrayal of a nude black female.

### **Nudes Behind the Scenes**

Other nudes by Motley follow this European theme of iconography. *Between Acts*, 1935 (Figure 33) is an interior scene that depicts two nudes preparing for a performance. A dark black man in an ill fitting tuxedo with cane in hand, top hat, and

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<sup>13</sup> Phoebe Wolfskill addresses this notion extensively in her article, "Caricature and the New Negro in the Work of Archibald Motley Jr. and Palmer Hayden," *Art Bulletin*, XCI, No. 3, (2009).

smoking a cigar stands with his back to the half-opened door with his attention on an unidentified source. A portrait of a mixed or light-skinned figure hangs next to the door acting as guardian or overseer of the actions that take place in the room and the people in it. On the other side of the portrait is a vanity, a lamp, perfume bottle and powder case. One of the nude figures stands in front of the mirror in a manner that blocks the front of her body from the viewer, but her face is visible.

Her backside is presented to the viewer as she holds a hairbrush in her right hand above her head, and her left hand sits comfortably on her head. A holster or similar item is around her back and mimics the curve of her very feminine body and other than her white high heels it is her only accessory. She stands on a circular multi colored rug. Different shades of the colors blue, pink and green radiate around a white circle in the center of the rug directly under the figure. Her pose is evocative as if she is posing for a photo. Her right leg extends out slightly causing her left hip to stick out creating a slight curve throughout her body and causing her large round buttocks to slightly touch the arm of the second nude figure.

The second figure in the composition is seated facing the viewer with her legs crossed smoking a cigarette. Her complexion is the same as the figure who stands in the mirror. She is seated near the standing nude figure, but her reflection does not appear in the mirror. She wears a similar holster but the strap on her left shoulder has fallen down her arm, possibly from the contact with the first figure's hip. She wears black knee high stockings and white high heel shoes. With one exposed breast and navel visible, she appears to not care that a spectator is in the room. She looks down and seems calm and accepting of what she has just done or is about to do on stage. The manner in which she

sits should allow her genitalia to be visible to the viewer. Motley has played down this area of her body giving very little attention to what should be more pronounced in her position.

An empty chair at the bottom right hand corner of the composition has a pink robe hanging on the back. This inclusion of the unworn robe is an attempt to show viewers how comfortable these women are with their bodies and occupation. One can assume since it is on the back of the empty chair it is meant for the figure in the mirror, but she prefers to stand nude rather than wear something that is meant for covering her. This intimate setting and look into a dressing room of an entertainment hall is an interesting backdrop for the black female nude subject. It was a reality in many cities that mixed race women would have been entertainers for white males. As mentioned in the discussion of Thrash's work, American society interpreted the lighter skinned women as the most beautiful of the black women because of their likeness to white and European women.

Motley has showcased the beauty and femininity of the black woman as attributes that can be used to their advantage to survive and make a living. This concept, although not new to the black public was something new in American art. A black woman's comfort in her body and in her sexuality has been made the central focus in *Between Acts*. Motley has not only depicted two black nudes as the central focus but highlighted the women's professions as performers for gentlemen's entertainment. This was an interesting and daring move on the part of Motley who in 1933 had just returned from Paris and its less inhibited attitudes.<sup>14</sup> In 1925 Paris had recently been introduced to the

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<sup>14</sup> Mooney, 26.



erotic dancing sensation, Josephine Baker.<sup>15</sup> Motley may have been responding to this contemporary subject matter in his paintings, but he undoubtedly was relying on his knowledge of popular French masters, such as Edgar Degas and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, to present the black female body in such settings. Mooney hints at Degas' similar constructions of images of women in her discussion of *Between Acts*, but does not offer visual evidence to assist in her argument.<sup>16</sup> Toulouse-Lautrec often created images depicting burlesque dancers and their activities on stage and off. In *Nude Woman Before a Mirror*, 1897 (Figure 34) and *La Grosse Maria*, 1884 (Figure 35) Motley may have found inspiration for the performers in *Between Acts*.

A similar composition and theme can be seen in Motley's work, *Backstage*, 1959 (Figure 36). Created more than twenty years later, the women in *Backstage* are much lighter and their poses are more provocative. The composition resembles the earlier painting. A nicely dressed man is reflected in a mirror where the doorway was located in *Between Acts*. The man rests his hand on a table covered with a pink tablecloth. He has a light complexion as well. Directly in front of the mirror, although not reflected, is the first nude figure. Her back is parallel to the floor as she bends over to dry her hair with a blue towel, the color scheme for the room. Her buttocks are toward the right side of the composition, but the viewer is able to see her backside in its entirety because of the angle of her body. Her bare breasts point to the floor as she stands in white high heels on a purple carpet in the center of the small room.

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<sup>15</sup> Harris, 139.

<sup>16</sup> Mooney, 101.

The other nude figure in the painting sits in a chair on the same rug looking into a mirror on the vanity while trying on a large red hat with white feathers. A red robe is draped over her knees. Her right leg peeks out under the robe to show her red high heels. Her long black curly hair hangs down to her bare breasts. A photo of a man, a vase of flowers, perfume bottle and powder box occupy the space on the vanity. A blue hat box, in the right corner of the composition, and a black cat lying halfway between the purple carpet and blue floor, finish the composition.

With each figure in the room including the man in the picture having the same skin complexion and with the inclusion of the black cat within the painting, Motley might be alluding to their mixed race or black ancestry. The man in the mirror appears to be more sophisticated than the man in the doorway in *Between Acts*. His light blue suit fits perfectly and he stands tall facing the women with confidence. The man in the earlier painting has his back toward the viewer and looks down the unseen hallway. In “Backstage,” the man stands in the precise location where Motley would have been painting from this perspective. The mixed race or black ancestry symbolized by the cat may include Motley as well.

The settings of *Between Acts* and *Backstage* can be found in French Impressionist works by Edgar Degas. In Degas’ series of dancers and bathers, women primping and preparing to perform or drying off after a bath are similar to Motley’s depiction of women in these two works. In particular, the poses in *Backstage* resemble ones in Degas’ *Before the Mirror*, 1885-1886 (Figure 37) and *Breakfast upon Leaving the Bath*, 1895 (Figure 38). In *Before the Mirror*, a woman adjusts and pins her hair while sitting at an armoire with hairbrush, perfume and a hair comb on the armoire before her. The

nude figure in *Breakfast upon Leaving the Bath* bends over to towel dry her hair in a manner similar to the first figure in *Backstage*.

### **Painting Himself -Painting the Nude**

In *Self Portrait (Myself at Work)*, 1933 (Figure 39) Motley paints himself as an artist with very obvious connections to his French training and the connection to European artists and the depiction of classical nudes. He wears a beret and artist coat over a white collared shirt and holds a traditional palette in his left hand and a paintbrush in his right. He looks toward the viewer with a nude depicted on the canvas in the right side of the painting. Since the primary image in the composition is his self portrait, her body is only half visible.

The interesting fact in this self portrait is that he has chosen a nude subject as the subject of the composition he paints. He did not choose an image that was his well known work, but a new nude figure study. There is a classic bronze nude statuette in the bottom left hand side of the composition to allude to his interest in the nude and Western traditions of the figure. A lamp and elephant sculpture sit on an end table in between Motley and the canvas on which he works.

The figure in the painting has a lighter complexion than Motley. Although her lower legs have not been painted fully, and her torso is split down the center by the edge of the painting, her body is portrayed in a manner that echoes the classic nudes in the European tradition. Her left hip sticks out in *contrapposto*, a position of the figure seen in Greek sculptures. Her lower body is full and natural and unlike the breasts in both the *Portrait of my Wife* and *Brown Girl After the Bath*, her breasts are small and upright. Her

hair is bobbed in a style similar to Motley's wife's, but her features are much darker, especially in the treatment of her eyes.

In Motley's first *Self Portrait* 1920 (Figure 40) Mooney describes the artist as announcing a "newly attained status as professional portraitist, nothing distracts viewer from artist."<sup>17</sup> Applying Mooney suggestions, the inclusion of this black female body in his second portrait allows the viewer to consider the subject he is shown painting worthy of and appropriate for an artist of his stature. With the nude's form is reminiscent of iconic Greek female nudes like *Aphrodite of Knidos* (Figure 41) by Praxiteles from the Late Classical Period, Motley's choice of this subject claims his membership in the international company of artists and his position in the history of art.

In *Myself at Work*, Motley uses natural light from the window on his left side as the source of light that not only showcases his skin tone and color, but highlights the nude in the painting. The different shades of brown and tan he uses in the self portrait assist in providing a range of color to compare him and the nude figure. With a crucifix as the main focal point on the white wall between the canvas and the artist, the intention of this painting is to present Motley within the European artistic tradition. Christian, trained in the practice of the European Masters and a student of the classics, Motley desires not only to incorporate African American subjects in the canon but to position himself as an African American artist of stature equal to that of a Western artistic master. The black nude figure in the painting has been included to show his talent and interest in the subject, but she is also being elevated to a European standard by her classic pose, lighter skin and European features.

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<sup>17</sup> Mooney, 4.

Although the literature emphasizing Archibald Motley's concern with skin color and types has overshadowed his interest in painting the nude figure, a correlation between each theme is necessary to a complete understanding of his work. Each figure, except for the figure in *Brown Girl After the Bath*, has close to white skin, if not white like the portrait of his wife. Archibald Motley may have been critiquing the stereotype of the oversexed and promiscuous mulatto female figure in American culture. In Motley's paintings, light skinned women are not overtly sexualized even when they work in the entertainment industry where the emphasis is placed on physical beauty. Instead, black women of all hues are admired, worthy of aesthetic consideration and deserving of a place in the Western tradition of the nude in art.

## CONCLUSION

During the late 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, Eldzier Cortor, Dox Thrash and Archibald Motley created images that reconstructed perspectives on viewing and thinking about black women and the nude form in American art. The time period in which these images are produced reflect a shift in American consciousness and a transitioning and changing world after the wars. These shifts can be attributed to The Great Migration after WWI and the rise of black consciousness. Their consideration of African American culture and their academic training in traditional Western subjects assisted in their depictions of the black female nude and a new artistic' perception of the traditional subject.

Art training in the United States followed the European tradition of drawing and painting from life, including the unclothed human body. As students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, they followed this model. They also had free access to the great European print, drawing, painting and sculpture collections of the Institute. Despite enduring attitudes of the American public about the immorality of displaying nude bodies, especially female bodies, much of the European art that guided student artists included female nudes. An interesting avenue for further research on these artists would focus on education at School of the Art Institute during the 1910s and early 1920s when Thrash, Cortor and Motley studied.

Dox Thrash used his nude images to draw attention to issues of identity in black culture and American society. While concentrating on a black female nude in a minimal setting, Thrash creates a figure in which the image and identity of black women are

confronted. Skin color and European ideals of beauty were major concerns in Thrash's paintings. Racial consciousness is also present in his prints where black is the essential state of the carborundum printing process. My analysis of his nudes is one of the only detailed examinations of his work as a visual affirmation of these issues and concerns. I also discussed his work as a transformation of the classical Western nude as a symbol of the European beauty ideals to figures that critique and confront these issues in terms of black women's identity.

Unlike Thrash's nudes, Eldzier Cortor's are not concerned with the social hierarchy of color. They are concerned with physical and emotional endurance. Cortor represented nudes in settings that visually relate aspects of black women's history. By observing the living conditions of black people in Chicago and traveling to South Carolina to study and depict the culture of the Gullah or Sea Islanders who retained their African traditions, he offers viewers a variety of scenes and compositions in which to think about black culture in America as a whole. Cortor's nudes narrate black women's physical and psychological experience of the Great Migration including their leaving behind families and southern roots that included slavery, survival and a culture of resistance and celebration. Relocated in the cities where they had hoped for better lives, Cortor critiques the conditions and new challenges in which many black women were forced to live.

Archibald Motley depicts the black nude in compositions familiarized through representations of European women in modern art through the work of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec. Scholarship on Motley has identified his interests in promoting himself as an artist in the European tradition. I have argued that these interests were

transferred into his images of the black nude figure as a promotion of himself as an artist and black women as acceptable subjects in this tradition. Each composition showcases his talent as an artist of the figure but also of black culture and identity through his many choices of skin color and the setting in which he places them.

My examination of the three artists' nudes addresses the issues facing artists and black women during the mid-twentieth century. Thrash's nudes are identity-conscious urban women who represent the issue of blackness in an social and economic culture that placed its highest value on white skin and constructed a descending hierarchy of yellow, brown and black. Cortor's nudes reflect the historical and contemporary history of black women in America. Motley's images can serve as a link between the images of Cortor and Thrash by using the Western nude figure to confront the issues analyzed in the two artists' work. Cortor's figures and Motley's may have inhabited the same neighborhoods, but the artists painted very different scenes. Cortor's figures live in poverty, and their nudity expresses vulnerability. Motley's nudes express ownership over their bodies and lives. Like Thrash, Motley presents black nudes in traditional academic nude poses, thereby making a claim for their inclusion in the Western tradition. Although the context of the nude subject vary in the artists' work, the artists' mutual respect for the nude female form and black women is shared. The images and the artists who created them confront issues of black identity with personal perspectives on beauty and form.

Thrash, Cortor and Motley helped transform images of black women from negative stereotypes of jezebel and mammy to subjects of aesthetic worth while addressing social themes of racial identity and the circumstances of black women in America. While uplifting the black woman in their images, they also redefined American



nudes in art by presenting the nude figure in a historical American context. Although these are not the only African-American artists who depicted this subject, their work has combined a variety of cultural concerns and artistic expressions rarely discussed in modern art history.

Scholarship on the subject of the black female nude shifted from European depictions of African women to African American women artists reinterpreting the black female nude in their work. The intention of this thesis, however, is to place these artists within a context to examine the black female nude in America from the perspectives of African American male artists. This consideration of their work has highlighted a gap in the discussion of American nudes, and it has revealed the relevance of black women within the subject of the female form in American art.

Further exploration into black female nudes by African American male artists during and after the 1940s could complete the study of the black female body as a critical subject in the history of Western nudes and American art. The image of the black female nude is not just a figure that represents artists' knowledge and highlights their skill in rendering the female form. It can symbolize an aspect of black women's lives and identity that no other figure is as successful in representing. My research and analysis of the nudes by Dox Thrash, Eldzier Cortor and Archibald Motley has identified the importance of the black female nude and discussed the topic within a framework of scholarship on both the nude and the history of African-American women.

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1. John Vanderlyn, *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos*, 1809-1814, oil on canvas, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia





2. Hiram Powers, *Greek Slave*, 1843, marble, Yale University Art Gallery



3. Thomas Eakins, *William Rush Carving his Allegorical Figure*, 1876, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art



4. Thomas Eakins, *Negress*, 1867-1870, oil on canvas, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco





6. Vivien Leigh and Hattie McDaniel in a Still from *Gone With the Wind*, 1939, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/01/books/review/White>



7. Dox Thrash, *Yellow Nude*, 1932-37, watercolor on paper, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman.



8. Dox Thrash, *Useful Imagination*, 1942-43, watercolor on paper, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman.



9. Photo of Fredi Washington, Reproduction courtesy of Donald Bogle in *Black Women in America: a Historical Encyclopedia*.





**10.** Photograph of Lena Horne, Courtesy of Shomberg Center, in *Black Women in America: a Historical Encyclopedia*.



11. Dox Thrash, *Seated Nude Holding Mirror*, 1940s-50s, watercolor on paper, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman.



12. Dox Thrash, *Seated Nude*, 1950s, watercolor on paper, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman.



13. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *The Bather of Valpinçon*, 1808, oil on canvas, Musée de Louvre.



14. Dox Thrash, *Nude*, 1950s, Watercolor on paper, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman.



15. Dox Thrash, *Siesta*, 1944-45, carborundum print, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman.



16. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Petite Odalisque*, 1840, oil on canvas, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums.



17. Dox Thrash, *Mother and Child*, 1940s-50s, carborundum print, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered* by John Ittman.

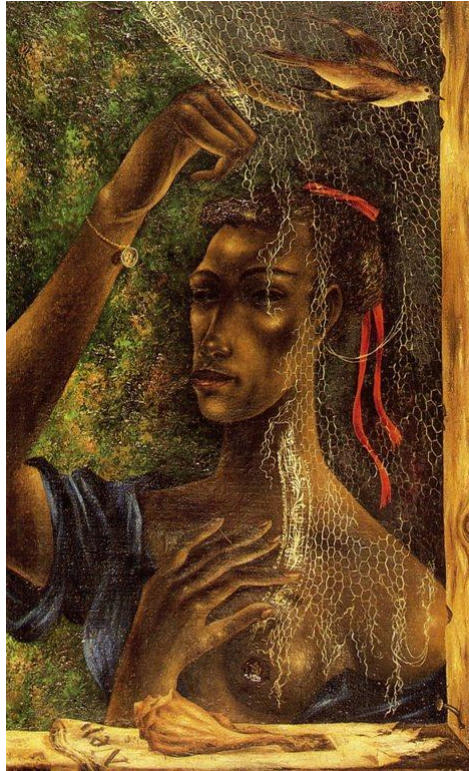




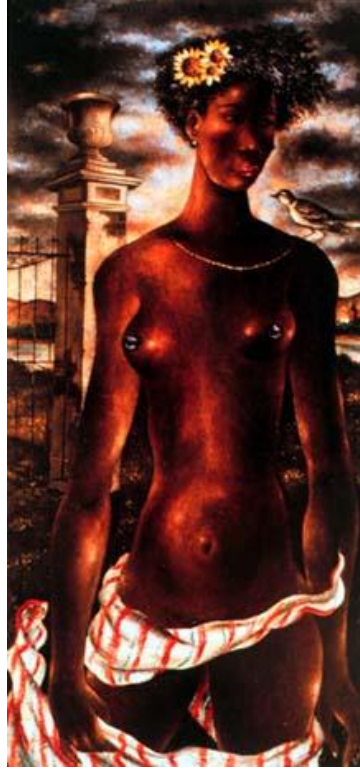
18. Studio of Giovanni Bellini, *Barberini Madonna*, 1490, oil on wood, Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum



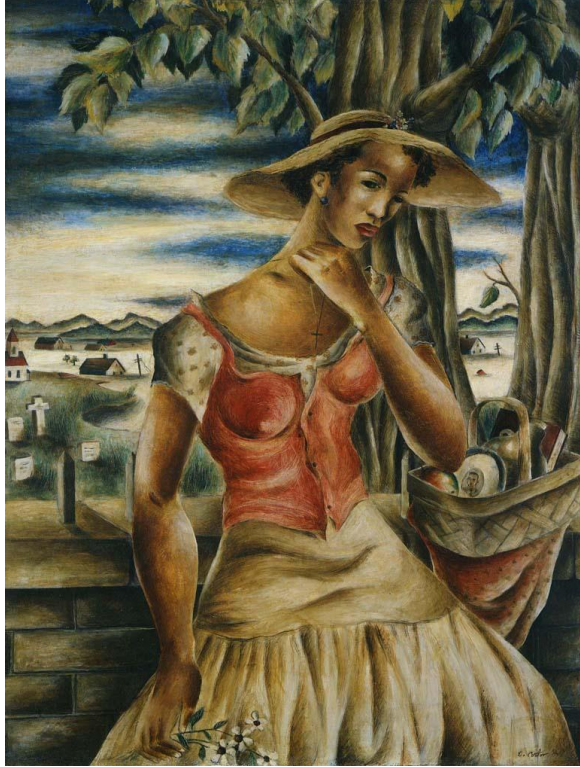
19. Eldzier Cortor, *Affection*, 1942, courtesy of Eldzier Cortor Papers, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



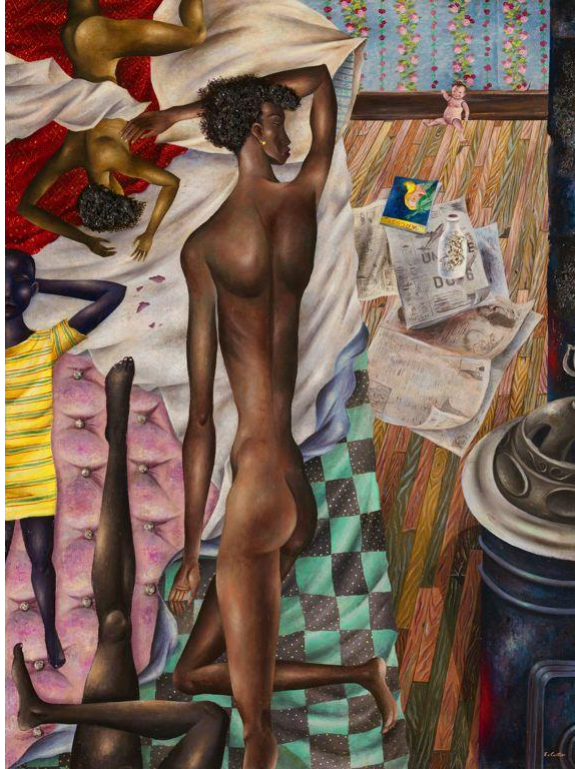
20. Eldzier Cortor, *Sea of Time*, 1945, oil on canvas, collection of International Business Machine Corporation.



21. Eldzier Cortor, *Southern Gate*, 1943, oil on canvas, National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC.



22. Eldzier Cortor, *Southern Landscape*, 1941, oil on canvas, collection of Sgt. and Mrs. Selden Rodman.



23. Eldzier Cortor, *Room No. 6*, 1946-47, oil and gesso on masonite, Art Institute of Chicago.



24. Gordon Parks, *Children with Doll*, 1942, The Gordon Parks Foundation.

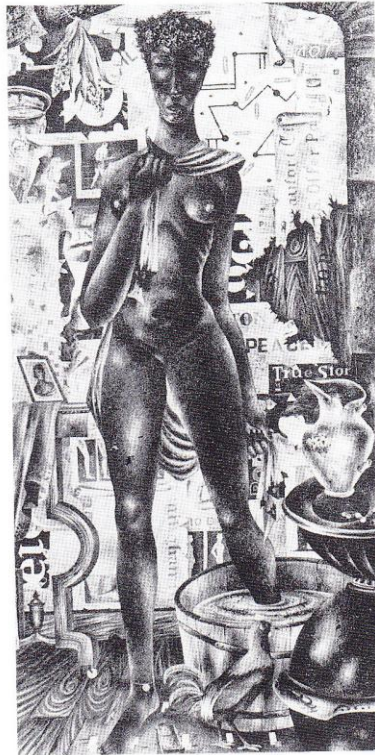


25. Eldzier Cortor, *Room No. 5*, 1946-47, oil on canvas, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Richard M Rosenfeld, Los Angeles, California.





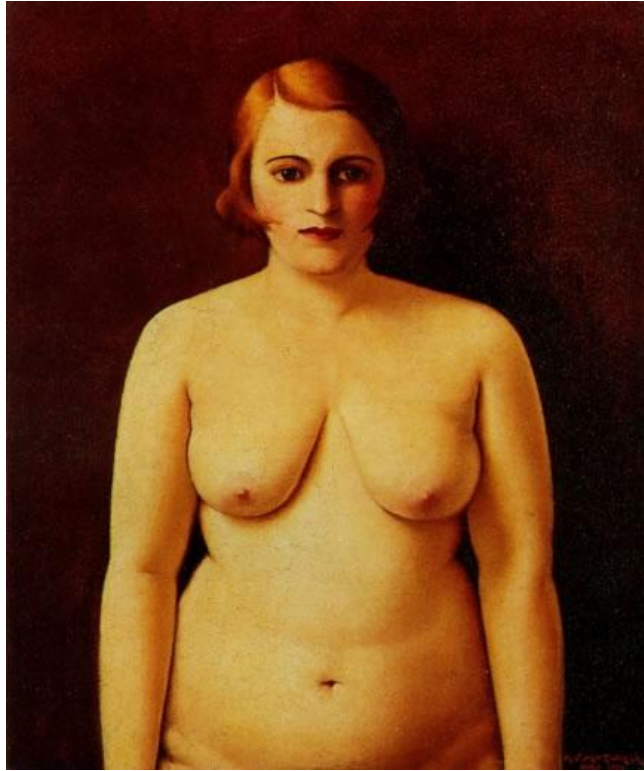
26. Gordon Parks, *Ella Watson with her Grandchildren*, 1940s, The Gordon Parks Foundation.



27. Eldzier Cortor, *Americana*, 1947, oil and impasto on canvas. collection of Felicia C. Ford, Chicago, Illinois.



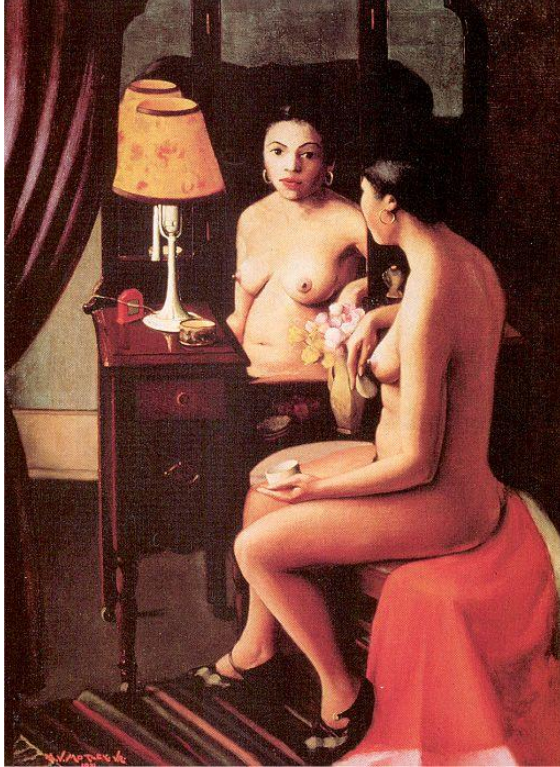
28. Eldzier Cortor, *466 Cherry St.*, 1987, oil on canvas on masonite, collection of artist.



29. Archibald Motley, *Nude (Portrait of my Wife)*, 1930, oil on canvas, collection of Archie Motley.



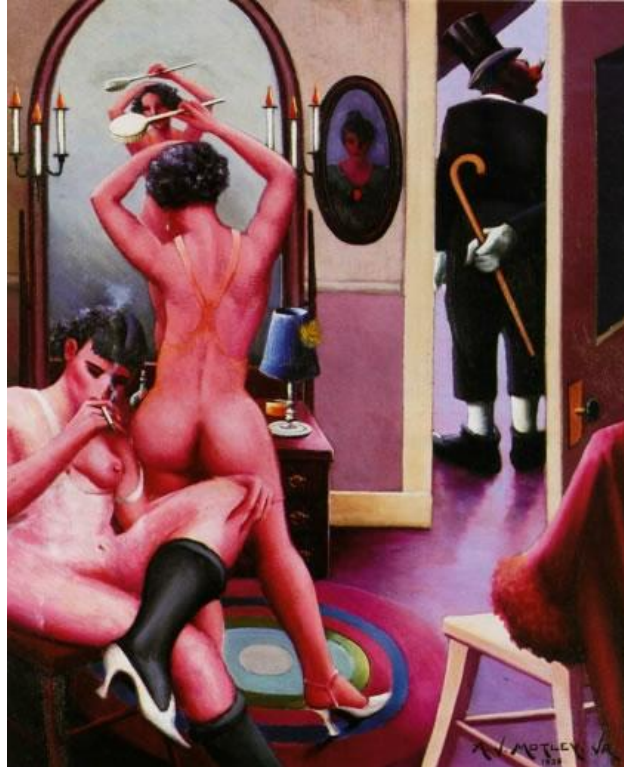
30. Archibald Motley, *Octoroon*, 1922, oil on canvas, Chicago Historical Society.



31. Archibald Motley, *Brown Girl After the Bath*, 1931, oil on canvas, Chicago Historical Society.

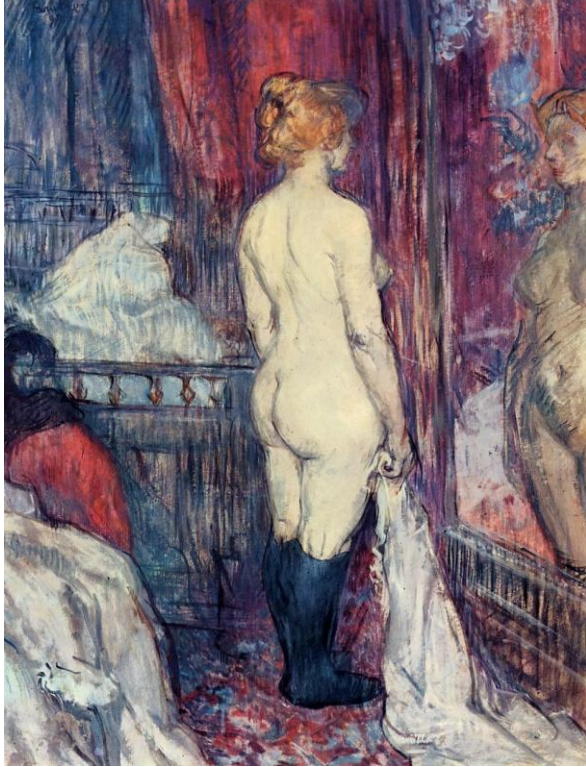


32. Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Marie Antoinette in a Blue Dress*, 1788, oil on canvas, Versailles.

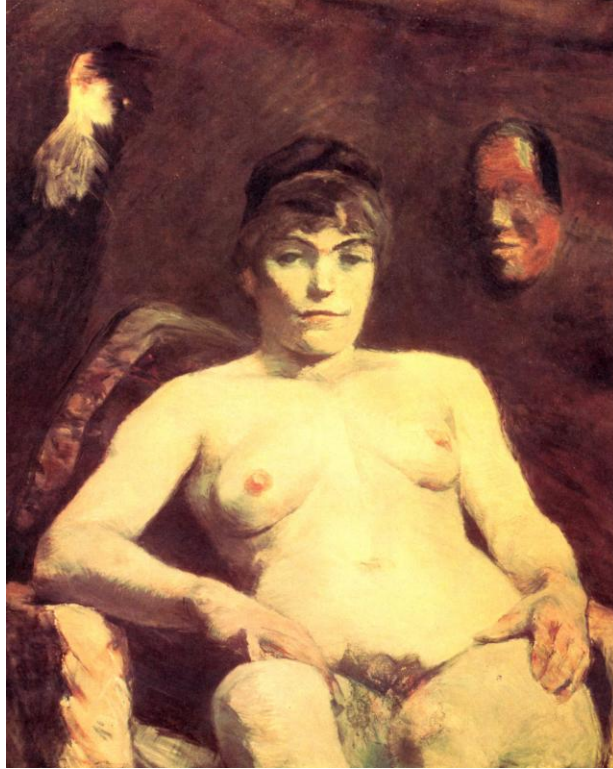


33. Archibald Motley, *Between Acts*, 1935, oil on canvas, Terra Foundation for American Art.





34. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Nude Woman before a Mirror*, 1897, oil on cardboard, collection of Mrs. Enid A. Haupt.



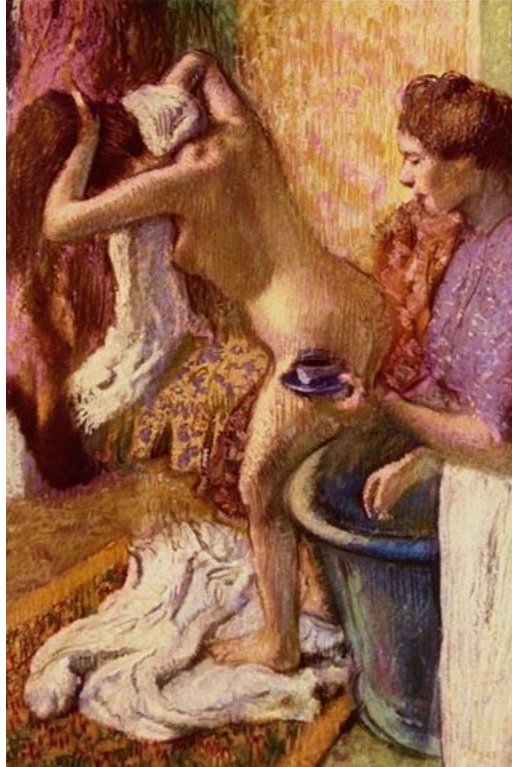
35. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *La Grosse Maria*, 1884, oil on canvas, Van der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal.



36. Archibald Motley, *Backstage*, 1950, oil on canvas, Archibald *Motley Jr.* by Amy Mooney.



37. Edgar Degas, *Before the Mirror*, 1885-1886, pastel on canvas. Kunsthale, Hamburg.



38. Edgar Degas, *Breakfast Upon Leaving the Bath*, 1895, Private Collection of Marlborough Fine Art, London.



39. Archibald Motley, *Self Portrait (Myself at Work)*, 1933, oil on canvas, Chicago Historical Society.



40. Archibald Motley, *Self Portrait*, 1920, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.



41. Praxiteles, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, 500-350 BC, Marble. Pio-Clementine Museum, Vatican, Rome.