

## The Star-Ledger

### **Black (bric-a-brac) is beautiful and has educational value**

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Even some of Diann Kirby's friends are offended by her collection.

Many wonder why a proud black woman would keep a framed print on her wall picturing black boys jumping into a pool with the caption, "Last one in's a n----."

Nonetheless Kirby, 57, defends her collection, which covers the walls and shelves of her Plainfield home. It has value, she believes, far beyond its substantial dollar worth.

"A lot of young kids today don't realize what our ancestors went through," said Kirby, who has a 22-year-old son. "Just like the Jews don't want people to forget the Holocaust, I don't want my son to forget what black people went through."

It's certainly hard to forget when inside Kirby's home.

Seemingly every square inch is covered with items depicting black people, many of them in a stereotypical, derogatory fashion. A cookie jar from the Coon Chicken Inn depicts a very dark, big-lipped buffoon figure with a wide grin on his face.

The Coon Chicken Inn was a popular restaurant chain in the Northwest from the 1920s to the 1950s. Patrons would walk through a giant rendering of a black person's mouth to enter the restaurant.

Kirby is not alone in her penchant for black bric-a-brac. She began collecting 35 years ago, and over the last 10 years, she said, the market has become huge.

"When I first started collecting, black collectibles were something people had hidden away because it was politically incorrect," she said. "Then people like Whoopi Goldberg and Bill Cosby started collecting, and the prices and popularity really skyrocketed."

An Internet search using the phrase "black memorabilia" yields more than 139,000 Web sites that deal with the genre. There are black collectible clubs, trade shows, magazines and books.

Kirby and some fellow collectors recently sold off parts of their memorabilia at a collectibles show in Plainfield. One of those in attendance was Plainfield resident Dorothy Henry, who says that like it or not, these artifacts are a part of history.

"I collect because my grandfather, who I knew, was a slave," said the 81-year-old, who grew up in Louisville, Ky. "It's a part of our history; it's not really us, but the white man's version of us."

Not all of Kirby's black memorabilia is racist. She also has dolls that portray blacks as doctors, lawyers and musicians. And on the Web site goantiques.com, an original 1915 photograph of Booker T. Washington can be had for \$3,950. A piece of the slave ship Clothilde can be purchased from the online antique dealer for almost \$30,000. Some of the highest priced items relate to slavery -- chains, manacles, slave deeds and brass tags used to identify slaves.

Objects that depicted black people in a degrading fashion began to be made in the 1820s, in response to the growing abolitionist movement, according to John Thorp, director of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, located on the campus of Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich.

"Those who depended on slavery used the shuffling, bumbling character to dehumanize African-Americans," Thorp said in a phone interview. "It was part and parcel to the defense of slavery."

Thorp said these racist images served a purpose for white slaveowners. They wanted black people to be seen as helpless and dimwitted, and therefore better off -- and even happier -- as slaves.

A prime example of this is the "mammy" caricature. The mammy -- an example is Aunt Jemima -- is an asexual, overweight, maternal figure, designed to perpetuate the notion of the happy slave.

"No slave was really like that; they weren't fed enough," Thorp said.

According to the Jim Crow museum's Web site, the mammy character's "wide grin, hearty laughter and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery."

At the black collectible show in Plainfield, a bottle of Mammy brand soda cost \$75. Several Aunt Jemima items also were on display.

A variety of items are available on the black collectible market, including racist literature such as "The Story of Little Black Sambo," written by Helen Bannerman and published in 1899, and racist fishing lures and pencils.

After awhile, these items became part of America's mainstream culture, Thorp said. Disney, for example, depicted black children as "tar babies" in the 1946 film "Song of the South," which the company has since banned.

"These items became so ubiquitous that people began to take them for granted," Thorp said.

Although these images are offensive, he said they need to be preserved to educate and to stop the cycle of racism. Thorp said racist merchandise is still being produced today, such as T-shirts bearing slogans like "Pimp Daddy."

Although the controversy over these highly sought items may never be settled, Kirby insists the past must be remembered.

"A lot of people still find it derogatory, but these figures were from a time when black people were oppressed," she said.

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