

Artifacts of Racism

Black memorabilia serves as a shameful reminder of U.S. bigotry.

By Courtenay Edelhart

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D. Michael Bowen is an unlikely collector of black memorabilia.

He's white, for starters. And he lives in Mooresville, where, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, only eight of the 9,273 residents are black.

By Bowen's own admission, his massive collection of more than 3,000 pieces of black Americana is unsettling. An entire room of his house is filled with the likes of mammy cookie jars, pickaninny dolls, black-faced, leering figurines and other bigoted images.

A few pieces are less provocative. The collection includes an original photo of a well-dressed Joe Louis flanked by dignitaries, and an 1854 slave collar, the original padlock still dangling from its chain. But most of Bowen's pieces exploit racist stereotypes.

That's the point.

"I feel these pieces probably ought to be in a museum or something, because they have historic value," he said. "It's amazing that it wasn't that far back that people were this blatantly racist. Obviously I don't condone it, but it's part of our country's history."

Most collectors of black Americana are African-American. Celebrities, including Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey, say they draw strength from such items because the antiques are symbolic of the struggles of their ancestors.



Collector D. Michael Bowen of Mooresville holds a slave collar from 1854 that was used in Athens, Ga. Bowen collects and preserves African-American historical memorabilia; he has more than 3,000 items, ranging from as early as 1844 to the present. -- Matt Detrich / The Star

Michigan has a whole museum dedicated to emotionally charged black memorabilia. The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia is on the campus of Ferris State University in Big Rapids.

"The material is offensive. We know that," said museum director John Thorp. "But when it's presented in the correct context, it can be used to teach tolerance.

"It's one thing to read about hatred and oppression in books, but looking at material objects has a lot more impact. It's a very powerful experience of the extent to which racist things permeated white society up until at least the civil rights movement, and sometimes later."

The Rev. Boniface Hardin, president of Martin University, displays several relics of slavery in his office, including slave chains, leg irons and handcuffs. He says they remind him how far African-Americans have come as a people, and inspire him to fight remaining obstacles to equality.

Hardin steers clear of stereotypical items, though.

"The labels and stereotypes that grew out of that kind of imagery are still hurting us today," he said. "We shouldn't be promoting that."

Hardin found such pieces so painful that, in the 1960s, he refused to eat watermelon, a fruit used often in racist imagery.

There are plenty of images of blacks grinning over watermelons in Bowen's spare bedroom. Stereotypical images were frequently used to promote commercial goods, and for years could be found on posters, menus and labels on food products. Remnants remain today, including Uncle Ben's Rice and Aunt Jemima syrup.

A lot of memorabilia consists of common household items -- lamps, banks, pitchers, salt and pepper shakers and clocks. Just about anything used in the home was at one time emblazoned with a leering black face with exaggerated features, or an overweight woman in a headscarf.

Bowen, 54, collects historic documents, too. His papers include an 1844 handwritten receipt for a slave and a 1920s era application for Ku Klux Klan membership, restricted to a "white, male Gentile person of temperate habits, sound in mind and a believer in the tenets

of the Christian religion, the maintenance of White Supremacy and the principles of pure Americanism."

Bowen didn't set out to collect the artifacts of racism. The owner of a Plainfield mortgage company just liked antiques, so he spent much of his leisure time perusing shops, garage sales and auctions.

Started by chance

Bowen was out hunting for clocks in 1997 when he bought his first piece on impulse at an estate sale. It was a tiny box of Sharpoint Wire Cobbler's Nails from the 1930s. The top was emblazoned with the face of a grinning black man with bulging eyes and oversized red lips.

The item obviously was old, so an intrigued Bowen picked it up for 50 cents. When he later looked it up in a book, he discovered it was worth \$80.

"That was a pretty good investment," Bowen said.

Realizing there was money to be made, Bowen bought more and more artifacts until the collection outgrew his house and overflowed to his workplace. But Bowen never got around to selling the memorabilia, even when he stumbled upon duplicates of pieces he already owned. He doesn't even know what the collection is worth.

"I started out investing, but now it's a heritage thing," he said. "I really wish I could buy a trailer or something and take it around to schools, but who has time for all that with a business to run?"

For now, Bowen settles for inviting friends and fellow antique lovers over for private showings.

Among those who've seen it is Scott Davis, 44, of McCordsville, a longtime friend.

Davis, who is African-American, brought his daughter to Bowen's house to view the collection, which moved him deeply.

"It was pretty devastating. I grew up after the civil rights movement, so racism for the most part was just something I read about in books," he said. "I had no idea of the lengths people went to to demoralize African-Americans.

"When I picked up the slave collar, I literally trembled. It showed what our forefathers endured before they had their freedom."

As difficult as it is to see them, Davis is glad antique collectors are preserving such artifacts.

"It's necessary to see that and to know we were once that kind of society," he said.

Bowen knows not everyone agrees with that.

Some oppose preservation

He once watched a black woman pay \$50 for a racist figurine at an antique store, only to smash it to bits right there at the sales counter.

"It broke my heart," he said. "These pieces are rare, and they're history."

Bowen believes that his collection ultimately makes viewers more sensitive about racial stereotypes and the pain they cause.

"You look at this, and you want to make sure this kind of dehumanizing, embarrassing stuff isn't repeated," he said.

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