

# Living with Black Americana

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## Collecting African-American Memorabilia

### Quick Facts About Black Memorabilia:

- Most collectible black memorabilia was produced from the 1920s through the 1950s, although some collectors seek items dating back to the Civil War era as well.
- Some of the most rare and valuable items deal with the controversial topic of slavery, and not everyone approves of these being traded on the secondary market.
- Black memorabilia is collected for many different reasons and by people of all races and nationalities. Not all collections have a negative connotation nor are they amassed due to bigotry. Many uplifting aspects of African-American culture can be incorporated into a collection.
- Many valuable pieces of black Americana have been reproduced or counterfeited. If you're interested in starting a collection, it's wise to make sure any piece you're investing a good sum to own is indeed legitimate before making that purchase.

### The Difficulty with Black Memorabilia

Certain areas of collecting can be hard to understand at times. Over the years, I've found that our predecessors didn't always have the best of taste when advertising products and purchasing decorative items for their homes.

Black Americana consistently falls into one of these difficult to grasp categories, especially when dealing with items produced from the '20s through the '50s which insensitively stereotyped blacks with consistency. The derogatory nature of these items reflects a different time in American history when it was acceptable to have black stereotypes not only in the home, but everywhere.

People ate at Coon Chicken Inn restaurants, bought Gold Dust Twins laundry powder in at the local market and outfitted their kitchens with Aunt Jemima, Uncle Moses and other caricatures. Should we simply sweep these items under the proverbial rug and forget that they exist? The answer is no.

It seems to me that it really doesn't matter whether having these items in a home long ago was right or wrong. What matters is how these objects make you feel today. If you associate them with discomfort, you can certainly choose not to own them. If you appreciate them for their historical value and collectible nature, that's another matter entirely. In fact, some people find them to be interesting just because they're so ridiculous to us now.

### The Question of Slavery and Collectibles

Documents and artifacts reflecting the history of slavery are also important in this field, and one of the most difficult aspects to address.

Some people feel very strongly that documents and items associated with holding slaves should never be sold, for any reason. Others believe ignoring the past to be disrespectful to those who lived through the challenges of enslavement, even though remembering it can often be very disturbing.

But, we must remember that an entire war was fought over this issue right on American soil. It's engrained in our history, right or wrong, and at some point in our lives we are all obligated to learn about it as American citizens. Actually choosing to collect slavery related items or Civil War memorabilia with a slavery bent is certainly a very personal decision, but it's not always a reflection of character and we must keep this in mind.

### So Who Collects This Stuff?

I have known a few people who didn't want "Mammy" items in their home because of the negativity they represented. The same thing goes for advertising memorabilia or any other type of collectible shedding a less than favorable light on black history.

Others have a completely opposite reaction. Thinking back several years, I can remember a co-worker in Houston asking me where she could purchase some of these stereotypical items for her home.

Puzzled, I had to ask why she'd be interested in owning something so offensive. I could tell she'd given the matter quite a bit of thought when she answered me.

She wanted to own all types of black Americana because they were a reflection of her cultural heritage. Her ancestors dealt with more hardships than she would, thankfully, ever know. But acknowledging these difficulties and triumphs through her varied collection reflected an important aspect of her lineage when incorporated into her home's decor.

Collecting takes a different turn in these terms. It's not just a matter of fun, frivolity and amassing things to fill a home. It becomes a personal endeavor to make peace with the past and ensure a prosperous future free of racial barriers.

### **Finding Positive Influences Through Black Memorabilia**

On the other side of the coin, choosing items produced by black artists, or featuring musical or literary talents, actors, and sports figures in a positive light can serve to balance a collection while entertaining and educating the owner. There are many, many items you can choose to collect that offer inspiration and help to banish negativity.

For instance, collecting items relating to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. can fall into this category. Letters, programs from speaking engagements, and items that were owned by either Dr. King or members of his family are all considered historically important, and yes, collectible.

### **Pursuing a Well-Balanced Collection**

Opinions differ, but I tend to agree with the belief that collecting black Americana can comprise a wide variety of items. A well-balanced collection would show the both the bad and good, painful and positive to be complete.

However, what we chose to collect is a very personal choice. The folks that only shop for more offensive representations of black culture often want them based on the novelty and collectibility of the objects, not necessarily hatred for others. Just as we can't make assumptions about people based on the color of their skin, we must not make assumptions about what motivates people collect either. If we've learned anything through the decades about tolerance and understanding, perhaps this example points to those ideals.