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Two New Exhibits Open at the Anacostia Community Museum

The Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum opened two exhibitions Sunday, Nov. 12—“Two Hundred Years of Black Paper Dolls: The Collection of Arabella Grayson” and “D.C. Undercover: The Photographs of Steven M. Cummings.” Both shows are on view through April 29, 2007.

“Two Hundred Years of Black Paper Dolls: The Collection of Arabella Grayson”

In today's world, where the click of a mouse can change the appearance of a computer character, the pleasure of outfitting paper dolls with scissors seems increasingly antiquated, but for centuries it provided children hours of gratification. Who would have thought that these seemingly innocuous paper playthings, generally considered purveyors of fashion, could be accurate indicators of society's changing attitudes and perceptions about people of African descent? Collector Arabella Grayson doesn't remember playing with paper dolls as a child. But her acquisition of one more than ten years ago and subsequent concern about the selection of paper dolls available to black children set her on a journey to understand this form of popular culture presented in this exhibition of her collection. Reflecting the values and customs of the day, African American paper dolls have ranged from stereotypical images beginning in the mid-1800s with depictions of “Sambos,” “mammies” and “savages” to more accurate and positive representations of significant historical figures, celebrities and icons of contemporary times.

Grayson's curiosity led her to a bookstore where she found, in 1994, Addy, a beautifully illustrated and packaged slave girl paper doll, and the only African American doll in the American Girls Collection. Said Grayson, “I wondered why the Black girl had to be a slave...would I actually buy this cute little slave girl for (a young child of mine) to play with?” Research into the first African American paper doll, the existence of which was a minor mention in the Addy literature, revealed an enslaved African girl based on a character from the book “Uncle Tom's Cabin. “Topsey” was created in 1863 -- the year of the Emancipation Proclamation -- to promote the book. Since that time, she has

collected more than three hundred dolls, 110 of which are presented in this display. Not on display but discussed in the exhibition, is the earliest paper black paper doll noted, “Protean Man and Metamorphic Costumes” published by S & J Fuller, London in 1811, which is not stereotypical in appearance.

For a large part of their history, African American paper dolls have reinforced negative stereotypes of people of color. This began changing with the advent of the civil rights movement 40 years ago and the exhibition features dolls created by pioneering black and white illustrators who have presented more realistic images. Along with information on fashion of the day, these dolls also offer historical and social reference points on lifestyles, stature and racial imagery, according to Grayson.

Through her collection and this exhibition, Grayson seeks to raise awareness about the subtle yet powerful messages of identity and societal roles imparted by these toys and the care one needs to exercise in exposing children to manifestations of popular culture—whether paper or cyber.

The exhibition features black paper dolls from Europe, the United States and Canada, including:

- **Pantin, 1950s** – Modern version of puppet-like cardboard doll from the mid-1700s with movable joints attached by metal nails featured along with its predecessor, the articulated (jointed) paper doll, (ca. 1885, Germany).
- **Mammy and Her Thanksgiving Dinner, 1912** – One of the “mammy” dolls representing the caretakers of children. The dolls usually had no accompanying outfits implying they had no life outside the care of their young wards.
- **Torchy Brown** – Created by African American illustrator Jackie Ormes based on her Pittsburgh Courier comic strip character. The doll appeared in the paper’s Sunday edition in the 1950s as a sophisticated world traveler who championed social causes.
- **Tom Tierney paper dolls** – A series of black paper doll books drawn from history, entertainment and sports areas created by the first (white) established artist for Dover Publications beginning in the mid-1980s through the late 1990s.
- **Nyla, 1993** – The Little Caribbean Girl, the first paper doll Grayson acquired.
- **Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, 1999** – The former South African leader and her outfits featured in SA City Life Magazine.

The exhibition also offers a special interactive feature to those whose memory of paper dolls may be faint.

Grayson is a writer, photographer and actor. She earned her master's degree at Mills College in Oakland, Calif. Grayson is the author of "Precious Playthings: An Illustrated History of Black Paper Dolls, The First 200 Years," which is pending publication.

D.C. Undercover: The Photographs of Steven M. Cummings

"D.C. Undercover: The Photographs of Steven M. Cummings" represents a portion of a larger body of work developed during a 15 year period by Cummings. He has trained his camera's eye on "the middle" of the African American community as he describes his subjects—not the extremes of rich and poor. When invited to do the exhibit, Cummings reviewed his work and observed that many of his most enduring images were of people wearing hats. Featured in "D.C. Undercover" are 32 black-and-white photographs in which Cummings' imbues a timeless mystique to each slice of life image. An additional 40 color images are impressive portraits of women wearing dramatic hats. Expanding his photo tableau is an audio/video presentation of more of his images set to the music of Grover Washington Jr.

This exhibition represents the first one man showing of the work of this prolific and talented photographer. Cummings has served as staff photographer at the museum since 2001.

The newly renamed Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum opened in southeast Washington in 1967 as the nation's first federally funded neighborhood museum. Today, it is recognized as a national resource creating critically acclaimed exhibitions, engaging public programs and innovative community documentation initiatives focusing on African American culture and history from a community perspective. The museum's collection of more than 6,000 artifacts features significant holdings in art, religion, photography and family history dating to the early 1800s. Located at 1901 Fort Place S.E., Washington, D.C., the museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Information: (202) 633-1000. Tours: (202) 633-4870. Reservations: (202) 633-4844. Web site: <http://anacostia.si.edu>.

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