
Descriptive Summary:

Title: The Lester Glassner African American Experience Collection  
Date Span: [ca. 1850- ca. 2005]  
Acquisition Number: N/A  
Creator: Lester Glassner  
Donor: Lester Glassner  
Date of Acquisition: 2009  
Extent: 25 boxes; 50 linear ft.  
Language: English  
Location: Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State  
Processed: 2011, Marjorie Lord

Information on Use:

Access:  
The Lester Glassner African American Experience Collection is open for research.

Reproduction of Materials:  
See Archivist for information on reproducing materials from this collection, including photocopies, digital camera images, or digital scans, as well as copyright restrictions that may pertain to these materials.

Even though all reasonable and customary best-practices have been pursued, this collection may contain materials with confidential information that is protected under federal or state right to privacy laws and regulations. Researchers are advised that the disclosure of certain information pertaining to identifiable living individuals represented in this collection without the consent of those individuals may have legal ramifications (e.g., a cause of action under common law for invasion of privacy may arise if facts are
published that would be deemed highly offensive to a reasonable person) for which the SUNY Buffalo State assumes no responsibility.

Preferred Citation:
[Description and dates], Box/Item number, The Lester Glassner African American Experience Collection, Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State.

Biographical Note:
Born February 23, 1939, Lester Glassner’s childhood was spent among a variety of towns and cities in upstate New York, including Buffalo, Geneva, Auburn, and Lockport, as he moved frequently with his parents who, by necessity, followed employment opportunities occasioned by the war. Life in the years during and immediately following World War II offered little in terms of nurturing a bright and cheerful childhood. Lester, as a young boy, must have sensed this and either by chance or sheer determination, frequently accompanied by his mother Beatrice, was able to find his way out of this lack-luster reality through two unusual venues: the 5-and-10-cent stores and the movie theatres. Lester had a certain amount of after-school freedom. He went to the movies and as he recalls in his book, the B-rated Hollywood movies, trashy, low-budget and dumbed-down as they were, had a healthy contempt for reality. The stars who populated these films became the basis of a vast collection of signed "8 by 10 glossies" that he amassed over a period of years, as well as the impetus for an active interest in early theatre architecture and interior decorator of movie houses. The other venue was the "5-and 10s" as they were called, such as Kresge's, Neisner's, Grants, and Woolworth's. Every time the Glassner family moved, there was a new one to be explored. Wandering the aisles of these magical stores offered a virtually endless variety of wonders for an imaginative child. He loved all the plastic tawdriness of this merchandise, and as he recalls, the fantasy-filled contents of the dime stores were his "tickets to a land that lay somewhere over the rainbow - object lessons in how to survive the dreariness of war and post-war reality." At the time of publication of Dime Store Days, Quentin Crisp noted in the foreword that Lester's memory "dwell[ed] not on the sparseness of these years but on the brittle ornaments with which he desperately tried to decorate them." In the years following the publication of the book, Lester Glassner lived with his various collections in a small private museum, actually a 4-story town house on E. 7th Street which was also his almost comfortless home until his death.

Perhaps his Black Memorabilia collection grew from these early days of browsing in the dime stores. Certainly these items were available in such places, in addition to their proliferation in souvenir shops. His friend, Eda Sutcliffe Kenney, in a recent telephone conversation recalls that Lester's early involvement with African Americans stemmed from a love of their music. She mentioned his frequent solo visits to the jazz clubs, during his Lafayette High School days, especially on Buffalo's east side, and he innately sensed the enormous talent of Billie Holliday and other black artists. His involvement with
African Americans and their culture expanded to include film, and as he matured in age and experience, he wanted it all - the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful and the humorous. The collection is vast, numbering over twenty boxes, with many items represented in numerous and perhaps unnecessary duplication. But Eda related that friends and family knew of Lester's collecting mania in this area and whenever out and about, purchased items for him that they thought he might like, or might not have. Chief among these was his father Abraham Glassner who routinely haunted Kelly's Flea Market for him.

Starting the collection was a deliberate and conscious effort, one that eventually became so important that Mr. Glassner moved what had become his "museum/residence" from lower Manhattan to Harlem, just a year or so before his death. It was also a decision made well before Black Memorabilia became a capital letter phrase, before it became the rather controversial racial/economical/political issue that has concerned black as well as white collectors ever since.

The 1981 nostalgia-laden book of photographs and text entitled Dime Store Days was authored by Lester Glassner, with accompanying photos taken by his friend Brownie Harris. This wonderful book offers the best autobiographical introduction to the man whose Black Memorabilia Collection is now housed in the Archives and Special Collections of E. H. Butler Library. This book is available in the Archives & Special Collections Department.

**Historical Background on the Collection:**

Black Collectibles, Black Memorabilia, Negroabilia, Black Americana, Black Ephemera—the term or phrase is a matter of personal choice. Nevertheless, they all refer to a vast array of items made in, or with the image of an African American. Kenneth Goings, in his 1994 book Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping continues this definition: "...literally tens of thousands of such items were produced in the United States, Europe and Asia from the 1880s through the late 1950s...almost universally derogatory with exaggerated racial features that helped to prove that African Americans were not only different but inferior as well." These items were developed by whites, manufactured by whites for a white audience.

Many amateur and professional writers and collectors, both popular and academic, generally agree with Goings' historical perspective that the market for these items emerged shortly after the birth of the "New South" following Reconstruction. A consumer culture developed with a commercial attitude that appealed to members of the white working class who were ready and willing to purchase anything that enhanced their social status, self-esteem and racial superiority. The advertising industry capitalized on this craving for a psychological "feel-good," promoting catchy phrases, slogans and
distinctive trademarks making use of black images and themes involving both adults and children, in a stereotypical and derogatory way. Humor was pervasive in the advertising as well as the products: the comical element was there to mitigate the inherent backdrop of disparagement and hatred - just enough humor to keep the customer interested and the product desirable.

Most Black Memorabilia were produced as tourist souvenirs, usable household goods, decorative articles and "works of art" - cheap, mass produced and sold in variety stores. There seemed to be little or no attention paid to detail or aesthetics as manufacturers were after the quick sell, the cute stereotype, and the hook that would snag the customer. It is from this era that Aunt Jemima, Uncle Mose, Uncle Rastus, Sambo, the Mammy and the Pickaninny became familiar, endearing and lovable (although always laughable) characters in the white zeitgeist of American popular culture. They always appeared happy - I'm OK, you're OK. The black and white populations lived relatively segregated from each other and for a while these images and stereotypes continued to exist unchallenged.

Production of these items began to slow a bit during the 1930s and 1940s, and those that were produced seemed a little less virulently racist and disparaging. The Second World War, Rosa Parks, the Korean War, the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and the ensuing social and political turbulence, events that were shattering to say the least, helped incidentally to relegate Black Memorabilia to the attics and basements. Items were packed away, forgotten or, worse, discarded. The next generation unpacked the boxes with an entirely new perception of what was left behind, seeing the contents as historical symbols, still not pleasant by any means, but as curiosities, possible collectibles. As more and more African Americans achieved middle and upper class status during the 1990s, they also acquired the taste and desire for antiques and had the disposable income with which to purchase what they wanted.

Although whites were the original consumers of these items, before they took on their new status as memorabilia, by the turn of the twenty-first century the market for these objects, now seen as historical artifacts, had become 75% African American. And with this new market a new set of controversies developed, primarily over who should be purchasing these, if anyone, and why - what are the motivations (conscious as well as unconscious) for dealing in this "stuff" - for collecting and buying/selling these items for frequently large sums of money. Some African American collectors make their purchases solely to keep the items out of the hands of whites, and further, to prevent whites from "owning" blacks in this new way and possibly making money at their expense. Other Black collectors want to keep their history "in the family" so to speak, yet others have sheer economic interest in a profitable investment. Many black as well as white collectors are knowledgeable connoisseurs in this regard. There are annual meetings, shows,
conventions, websites, frequently published price guides, catalogs and encyclopedias to keep them informed of the market for these artifacts. However, it is important to consider yet another viewpoint: there are many who feel that circulating Black Memorabilia by any ethnic or racial group for any reason amounts to trafficking in racist images. Counter this with the much more laissez-faire policy that in a free society anyone should be able to collect anything desired without being blamed, harassed or persecuted.

For further reading, the following books and articles were consulted in preparing this essay:


Scope and Contents: N/A

Inventory: See separate inventory.