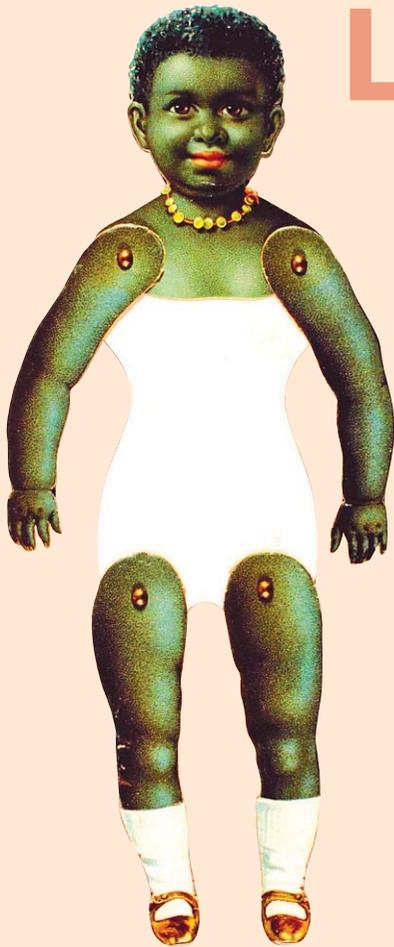


LIES and DOLLS

Soledad Santiago | The New Mexican



Paper doll by Littauer and Bauer, Germany, circa 1885; images by Steven M. Cummings, Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, where the exhibition *Two Hundred Years of Black Paper Dolls: The Collection of Arabella Grayson* premiered in November 2006

Early in her career, writer, performer, and photographer Arabella Grayson traveled the United States as a recruitment officer for her alma mater, Mills College in Oakland, Calif. In her spare time, she visited flea markets and garage sales looking for positive images of lives within the African diaspora. For roughly a decade she found nothing encouraging. But 11 years ago, a friend sent her a birthday card into which was tucked a Caribbean paper doll, complete with wardrobe. “I attached magnets to her, fastened her to the refrigerator, and changed her clothes when I would pass by,” Grayson recalled. “I wondered what other black dolls might be out there. That doll changed the trajectory of my life.”

Grayson spoke with *Pasatiempo* in the sun-drenched courtyard of the Santa Fe Art Institute, where she is an artist in residence. She grew up in a family committed to education. Her parents provided her with books that supplemented her school curriculum, in which her African ancestry was rarely reflected. “They wanted me to know that my ancestors came from great ancient civilizations. By the time I was in the fifth grade, I had read [Daniel Chu and Elliott P. Skinner’s 1965 book] *Glorious Age in Africa: The Story of Three Great African Empires* and discussed it with my father several times. It is a historical recounting of African commercial trade routes that long predated the slave trade,” she said. “I was well familiar with African American heroines like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth.”

However, when Grayson went looking for more little black dolls, she didn’t find depictions of real-life heroines. She discovered her first black paper doll at Barnes & Noble, in the book series *American Girls Collection*, published by the company that creates American Girl dolls. The book recounts stories about the individual dolls and the periods of American history they represent. In the collection, Grayson found “Addy.”

“Addy has a big bright smile,” Grayson said. “She is an escaped slave wearing a bright pink frock. She holds her caged pet bird, and her belongings are tied up in a kerchief as if she might be headed for a church picnic. I thought to myself, if I were a mother, how would I explain this image to my child?”

Until the 1950s, Grayson said, black dolls routinely portrayed slaves, maids, cooks, porters, and nannies. Grayson soon found what she describes as the first black paper doll made in the United States. Named Topsey, the doll is based on a character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Although the novel was hailed as an abolitionist text, it is riddled with stereotypes; the unkempt Topsey appears almost subhuman.



Left, “Topsey,” McLaughlin Brothers, New York, 1863; right, “Sally Hemings,” signed by artist Donald Hendricks, Legacy Designs, 2000

Grayson points out that it is painful to imagine that paper doll’s effect on young girls, black or white. “Even before children can speak, they understand the world through the images they encounter,” she said. “Toys and play set the stage for beliefs and attitudes.”

One of Grayson’s dolls depicts the slave Sally Hemings wearing an elegant interpretation of maid’s attire. At age 14, Hemings accompanied Thomas Jefferson to France as his daughters’ maid. Public speculation that Jefferson fathered Hemings’s children began during his lifetime and continues to be a matter of controversy.

In her quest for images of the past, Grayson has accumulated approximately 300 paper dolls. From mid-November 2006 through April 29, 2007, the Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia Community Museum displayed her collection in the exhibit, *Two Hundred Years of Black Paper Dolls: The Collection of Arabella Grayson*.

Grayson is finishing a book that places her collection in historical context. “These dolls, fragile as they are, provide an enduring link to the past, illustrating commonly held attitudes and perceptions children learn in their first years of life,” Grayson explained.

“From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, African Americans were depicted as caricatures of racial stereotypes. It wasn’t just the paper dolls but pervasive marketing tactics; the rotund Aunt Jemima was still a marketing image in the 1950s. In the case of African Americans, positive images were difficult to find until the 1960s when the civil rights and black power movements flourished.” ◀

Ahhh: a month of Sundays

Imagine having at least a month’s time to engage your muse without outside interruptions. That’s what the Santa Fe Art Institute offers artists and writers whose projects intrigue the institute’s selection committee. Every January and July, applications arrive from all over the world. Participants are given a private living space and the opportunity to interact with other artists in beautiful communal spaces, indoors and out.

“The residency program has grown so much in the last few years,” said program director Sheila Wilson. “There’s such a wonderful dialogue that happens between artists and writers. They inform each other’s practice.”

SFAI, which was founded in 1985, moved into a building designed by noted Mexican architect Riccardo Legorreta in 1999. After the events of Sept. 11, 2001, the institute began its Emergency Artists Relief Program and has since hosted 130 artists from New York City who were displaced when the World Trade Center collapsed. After Hurricane Katrina, the program hosted many artists from New Orleans. Of the 12 artists and writers now in residence, six are from New Orleans. “We offer the gift of time and space, and the artists and writers do what they want and need to do,” Wilson said. “On any given day, it might be writing — or it might be hiking.” — S.S.