

## Some museums acquire items to accurately illustrate history

Private collectors may not have such honorable motives

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DuMouchelles, the Detroit auction house, has a firm policy: "We would never handle such material," partner Joan Walker said about the Ku Klux Klan-related items previously planned to be sold today by Howell's Ole' Gray Nash Auction Gallery. "I really have no idea about their historical legitimacy."

The auction was canceled Saturday by David Feintuch, owner of the Cobblestone Events Center in Mason, who said Klan fliers were being distributed in the community to coincide with the auction and that he didn't want his facility to serve as a "springboard" for recruitment by the group.

But while DuMouchelles - which several years ago offered and then withdrew two pieces of Nazi memorabilia from an auction - questions the historic and social value of such items, museum professionals have definite ideas about Klan and other kinds of racist memorabilia.

The museums' thinking echoes that of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil-rights law firm based in Montgomery, Ala., known internationally for legal victories against white supremacists.

"I think many of these items absolutely are museum-worthy," said Mark Potok, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, which monitors hate groups and tracks extremist activity. "These artifacts are things that remind us of a past we are obliged not to forget."

James Steward, director of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, agrees. "I think we do ourselves a collective disservice of real magnitude if we only speak to the more ennobling moments in human history," he said. "However unpleasant many elements of the past may be, we're better served by naming them, recognizing them, attempting to understand them and, optimally of course, learning from them so as to make less likely the future perpetration of horrors against human beings."

The danger of auctions such as the one that had been planned for today, Steward said, is that inflammatory items may wind up in questionable, private collections. "Unless the individual is purchasing for the purpose of donating to a public institution that can seek to contextualize these objects, such private collecting practices can simply perpetuate the hatred that underlay the objects in the first place," Steward said.

Since the U-M museum is a fine arts museum, there's little chance that Klan or other historic, racist materials would be shown there. But history museums in Michigan tell a different story. They not only collect such materials but have used or will use them instructively in exhibits.

"Use items of intolerance to teach tolerance" is the credo of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids. Its permanent collection of about 2,000 objects, initiated by professor of sociology and curator David Pilgrim, comprises printed materials and everyday items such as games, puzzles, postcards, ashtrays, matchboxes and vinyl recordings. The holdings demonstrate how racist ideas and images have infected American life.

Among the museum's Klan holdings is a robe obtained in cooperation with the Livingston County Diversity Council from January's controversial auction of Klan items in Howell. "Because it's a woman's robe it makes a very powerful statement," said museum director and professor of sociology John Thorp. "Most people think of the Klan in terms of the men, but it isn't just a male organization. It's a family structured kind of thing."

The museum occupies a small classroom and can be visited by appointment only. But a \$2.2 million fund-raising campaign, under way, will change that. According to Thorp, a revamped, 2,000-square-foot facility, accessible to the public during visiting hours, may be completed by fall 2006.

Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History also has Klan and racist materials in its permanent collection. "These are not items we actively collect," said president and CEO Christy S. Coleman.

"Several years ago the items were donated, and occasionally we've used them in exhibits." Most recently, some items were incorporated into the grisly traveling exhibit "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America."

"So there is historical significance to these pieces," she said. However, like Steward, Coleman has concerns about collectors' personal motives. "Somebody might purchase a piece to showcase the terror it represents," she said. "Or somebody could buy it to support the ideologies of the group that produced it."

According to Coleman, many African Americans have assembled collections of racist memorabilia like the one that appears at Ferris State. "It was quite the thing to do, in a bizarre twist, back in the late 1980s and early '90s," she said. The Charles H. Wright Museum plans its own exhibit of such memorabilia in 2006 or '07.

While Grand Rapids' Public Museum has an extensive collection of racist memorabilia, only part of the collection was consciously acquired as such. That was in the late 1980s, in the form of a gift of Klan-related items from Ionia County, including banners, printed matter and robes. The bulk of the Klan/racist collection, said director Tim Chester, comprises materials discovered in the museum's permanent holdings - materials lately re-examined and understood in a racist light.

"Their primary purpose is in research collections," Chester said. However, some materials may be used in planned exhibits including "Newcomers," scheduled in 2006 or '07. "It's a look at immigration to the western part of the state," Chester explained about the planned show. "On one level it's celebratory and on another level compensatory."

What that means is that "Newcomers" will explore the not-always-amicable relations among immigrant groups, focusing on issues of ethnicity and race. "We have an obligation to collect

things that illuminate the past, and they cannot always be celebratory," Chester said. "The past is not always attractive."

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