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Maria Stuart: Powerful images and 'Hateful Things'

Some of the pieces in the "Hateful Things" exhibit at the Howell Opera House are shocking, some are downright ugly, and some will send a shiver up your spine.

"Hateful Things" is the 39-piece traveling exhibit of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University.

What struck me was how many of the images - especially those used in advertising - likely seemed benign to white America in their original context.

Ads and collateral materials for Aunt Jemima pancake mix and Cream of Wheat, especially, caught my eye. These were staples of my childhood and I wondered how many times I looked at these images without realizing what they represent and how they portrayed black people to whites.

That's the insidious thing about it. Day after day for over a hundred years, Americans have been bombarded with images of blacks as ignorant, as criminals, as happy slaves, as primitive. I am no expert on how propaganda works, but it is clear these images dehumanized and degraded an entire race of people, and made possible and acceptable an American society that practiced segregation and racism.

I've always carried with me proudly that my father traveled to Washington, D.C., to be part of the great Civil Rights March in August 1963. I wish I could have been with him to hear the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

My dad remembers the day fondly.

"It was like a huge picnic," he told me once. "The feeling of it was peaceful, beautiful."

I juxtaposed his remembrances of the march that took place when I was 7 years old with the images that I saw in the "Hateful Things" exhibit.

I understand so much better the struggle.

Despite the Civil Rights Act being passed a year after the great march, the images of racism persist even to this day. Included in the exhibit are some contemporary items, including a current mask and a game based on Monopoly called "Ghettopoly."

Each piece on display has been transformed from original context to historical artifact, and that transformation does an amazing thing: It allows the piece to be viewed solely on its own merits in the harsh light of reality. Rather than looking upon the face of Aunt Jemima as the kindly woman who was part of many breakfast experiences of my childhood, I looked at the face of Aunt Jemima as a racial stereotype of the happy servant.

It's a little bit time, a little bit space and a whole lot of context.

Images are extremely powerful things - we all know that one picture is worth a thousand words - and it was simply amazing to see how subtly various images have been used throughout our lifetime to both encourage and perpetuate looking at blacks in hurtful, stereotypical ways.

At one point as we made our way through the exhibit, I poked my husband and gasped that the piece we were looking at was from a couple of years before his birth.

Sometimes, we look around the world and wonder how people can go to battle over religion, ethnicity, race. Sometimes, we lose track of time, thinking that the days of lynchings and black babies being portrayed as alligator bait on postcards were generations ago.

They weren't.

What "Hateful Things" teaches us is that we exist just a breath or two away from institutional racism, segregation and sanctioned racial violence. What "Hateful Things" gives us, though, is hope that by confronting and discussing the images of hate, we can use them to fashion a better future for us all.

The exhibit, located on the main floor of the Howell Opera House on the corner of West Grand River Avenue and Walnut Street in downtown Howell, runs through Sunday. Hours are 3-8 p.m. on weekdays and noon to 4 p.m. on the weekend. Admission is free; however, donations to the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council will be accepted.

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