

## **Debatable -- Should Black Americana pieces be bought and sold?**

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It's a part of American history - a part that is blatantly racist, demeaning and ugly.

Despite that, and in some cases because of that, racist collectibles, known as "Black Americana," have become sought after and high-priced items.

Should people be able to buy and sell them, essentially making money off a painful past of degradation? Or should they be destroyed, so that future generations might never see tangible proof of life before the civil rights movement? Charlesetta Thompson, 64, of Milwaukee has been collecting Black Americana for 40 years. She has Aunt Jemima cookie jars and salt and pepper shakers, a "Nigger Hair Tobacco" can, an old box of Gold Dust laundry soap, dolls, sheet music and several other pieces of memorabilia that depict blacks in derogatory stereotypes.

"I think it's a part of history," Thompson said. "All of history doesn't look nice. All stories need to be carried along."

A black woman raised in

northern Louisiana in the 1940s, Thompson said the pieces also remind her of her childhood.

"When people come to my house, they say I have a museum," she said. "They say it's like going backwards."

She has much of her collection on display in her home, especially in her kitchen. She is often asked why she would want such awful, racist memorabilia.

"To me it's for history purposes," Thompson said. "Just like we tell about slavery, the Civil War. None of those stories are pretty. A lot of it shapes the way we are today.

"It tells the story of how we got where we are today. I want (my home) to speak to my heritage, who I am."

Many pieces from her collection have been used in a traveling exhibit called "Reflections and Recollections of the Past," which she takes to galleries, museums and schools.

"It's a part of who I am and what I do, so it's a part of my home too," Thompson said.

David Pilgrim, the curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., would call Thompson both an educator collector and a nostalgic collector.

Yet, while he recognizes many different people collect racist memorabilia for many different reasons, Pilgrim doesn't like the idea of money being made through the buying and selling of collectibles.

"I wouldn't be for banning racist items," he said. "I actually would prefer to see people educated enough not to purchase the items."

The Jim Crow Museum displays a collection of thousands of degrading and racist items from ashtrays to dolls to advertisements. But none of it is for sale. In fact, much of it was donated by Pilgrim, who bought it to get it off the market.

Most troubling to Pilgrim, he said, is when dealers use the thinly veiled excuse that they are only selling the items in an attempt to educate people about history.

"I don't like them hiding behind it," he said. "You can't lose sight that a lot of this is about making money."

"Racism was often used to sell pieces, and it is still being used to make money."

Pilgrim said that this is America, and dealers of anti-black memorabilia have a right to sell these racist items on the market.

"But I also have the right to educate people about the consequences of what they do," he said.

The surge in interest in what Pilgrim calls anti-black collectibles has also made way for a reproduction market and a market for new racist items, he said.

"Most people can't afford the original stuff," he said. "New racist things are being created all the time. People take labels off old soup cans and put the racist labels onto mouse pads or T-shirts. That's fairly common."

And racist memorabilia and reproductions are not just products, but also propaganda, Pilgrim said.