



The African American Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey

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- Ralph E. Hunter, Sr., Museum Founder

ANOTHER SUMMER NIGHT FALLS INDISCRIMINATELY OVER SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY, indolent and half-crazed with the soft buzzing of humid desolation. Night falls over the pines squealing from their sands. Night falls over highways, over the ocean and over a lonely stretch of rural road in Atlantic County where Ralph E. Hunter Sr. stands, uninterrupted and alone, inside the inconspicuous museum he created over three years ago from nothing but that which he now studies like a token of the divine.

It’s a diminutive token, no larger than a deck of playing cards, but one Hunter cannot deny his gaze, even though he has stared through the glass at its weathered edges and still-bright colors enough times to know all the patterns and pallets by heart. But this is what he sometimes does with his nights. Since he first founded the African American Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey in 2003, Hunter has paced

these humble halls more times than he can ever hope to recall—over and over his heels shuffling carpet, over and over his love untamable.

This is where it all began, he thinks, never looking away from the glass. This is the white-hot sun of this little universe of mine.

But one would never know it to see it, that this pocket-sized edition of a “Little Black Sambo” children’s book holds the enviable classification of genesis to Hunter’s endearing, delightfully assorted world.

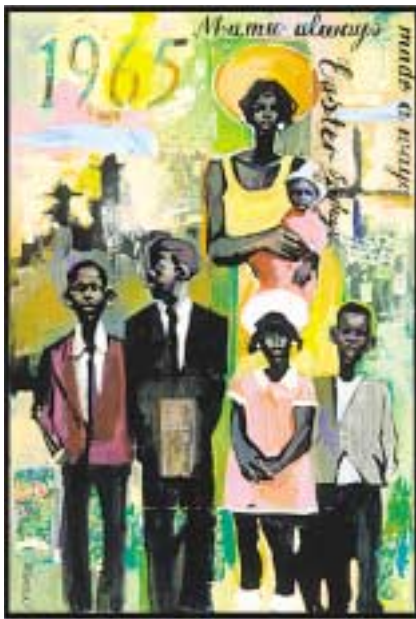
But he is a collector the way some are priests or doctors or poets; and he knows it. So often times it’s the incongruous, the otherwise discarded, the quiet that reserve the holiest designations here.

“I’m a steward, like in a church,” he says one late-June afternoon while escorting me through his museum off Jackson Road in the Newtonville section of Buena Vista Township. We pass a stately bust of Frederick Douglas, two authentic cast-iron Joco statues (one replete with lantern), illustrations from local middle school students, and an

enormous display recalling the unveiling of the Hattie McDaniel U.S. postage stamp, which took place here in January. "I stewed this museum project and these exhibits we have by taking what God gives me to create an exhibit."

A few minutes later, resting now in a decades-old brown, cracked-leather barber-shop stool, Hunter's inviting eyes pause on the "Little Black Sambo" book, just one of several he displays proudly in a large exhibit room that contains African American memorabilia, artifacts, advertisements, artwork and time-capsule trinkets galore. But these were not always the objects of Hunter's longing. No. It wasn't always so specific.

Long before Buena Vista Township officials first donated 10 modest trailers for the formation of this museum, and long before the township's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center came forward with a place for this project in its Jackson Road headquarters, Hunter was an all-around antique collector.



Then, 35 years ago, the now-68-year-old gentleman decided he wanted to "collect something else." So he stopped into an antique shop in North Carolina and asked the woman behind the counter if she "had anything black."

"And she said, 'Well, I don't want to offend you but I have just one thing and it's in the back. But I don't want to bring it out if it's going to offend you.' I said, 'Ma'am, I have cash money and you cannot offend me,'" says Hunter, rising now from the stool spiritedly. He walks over to the glass case.

"And so she brought out that book."

He points to the smiling black child behind the glass, his finger intimating something hallowed in its subtle shudder.

"But I bought it to get it off the market," he exclaims. "Because my recollection of 'Little Black Sambo' was not good. I thought they were making fun of an African American boy and it was a terrible thing."

Hunter—who walks with a proud gait and exudes both the uncanny appearance and stately (if not slightly less polished) temperament of Morgan Freeman—was just five years old and a student at an integrated public school in West Philadelphia when he was first read the story of a little black boy and his adventures with the tigers of India.

"And I just thought it was terrible because the other kids in my school would laugh when they would talk about Little Black Sambo and then they would look right at me. So I used to get pissed off at them and I said to myself, 'Man, one day, if I ever find one of those books I'm going to buy every last one in the world and get them off the market,'" he says, smiling with an ironic glint. "But then I bought the book and I read it and I found it to be the second best book I had ever read—the first, of course, being [Harriet Beecher Stowe's] Uncle Tom's Cabin."

And so the collection began—and grew. Many years after he first purchased that book, Hunter found his home overwhelmed by cast-iron blackface banks, books, sports memorabilia, old issues of the magazines *Jet*, *Ebony* and *Negro Digest* as well as countless other artifacts and paintings. All combined for a gathering of over 3,000 pieces.

"Folks used to come to my house and say, 'This place looks like a museum.' And that's where the idea came from," he says. "I had this quest for collecting just for me. Then, all of a sudden, something came over me and I thought, 'How dare you collect all of this just for yourself? You could share all of this.'"

Which is all he does now. In fact, as we walk through some more of the museum, Hunter takes me to the largest of his exhibit rooms and explains that he is about to share one of his dearest collections with the public tomorrow: an exhibit that fabulously displays an assortment of over 500 *Negro Digest*, *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines dating as far back as 1942. Some were donated to the museum, but most are Hunter's.

And he loves it, walking all around the room while pointing out the myriad black



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celebrities and icons gracing the various covers. Most of the time he's on a first name basis, like these are old friends of his. "There's Tina...and Ike! Oh yeah, here's your girl," he says, stopping in front of an issue with Barbara Jordan—the first African American woman from a southern state to serve in the House of Representatives—on the cover.

"I love it when everyone goes home and I can just stay here all by myself," he says, rocking on the balls of his feet the way a well-behaved child might with the thought of spending an unencumbered, solitary weekend at Disney World. "Every night I go through another box of something. These are my toys. They're my toys. I don't really have any money but I have all these toys."

There is something captivatingly paradoxical about this ever-growing collection of so-called toys; an impossible gorge of contradictions this museum bridges with an effortless, giddy grace. But the irony is not in the museum's attempt to show both the best and worst sides of African American history, but instead in Hunter's seemingly unconditional fondness for both diametrically opposed peaks of the beguiling pendulum that has come to mark the chilling absurdity of the march through time blacks have had to make in this country.

For example, the artifact room (the same one with the "Little Black Sambo" book) contains several print advertisements from the earlier decades of the 20th Century that use unsettlingly derogatory stereotypes and imagery. One ad in particular illustrates a young black boy (enormous, bright-red lips; eyes bugged-out and whiter than snow) dressed in ragged overalls eating a watermelon, smiling. A caption below reads, "You can hab de rine."

Not five feet away is an actual event program from the now-legendary 1963 civil rights march on Washington, D.C. The paradox delights Hunter, who almost doesn't even know the meaning of the word bitter.

"A lot of my friends still think it's offensive because they haven't grown. But I love this stuff! I can't wait to find it, man," he rejoices with a smile. "Me, myself, I love telling the story of where we were. We wouldn't be to the point where we are today if we didn't have this history to tell our kids, tell them exactly what took place—and not in a negative way.

"It's not about, 'Oh, you guys did us

bad.' That's not the story. The story is that these were products and they were on the market and our grandkids have never even seen them. I want to make sure our great grandkids have this stuff around. We go both ways at this museum. We tell the story."

Throughout the rest of this month (August), Hunter's museum will tell a part of that story not only through the magazine exhibit but also by featuring the work of Charly "Carlos" Palmer, a Southern-based mixed-media painter who sublimely documents the African American struggle and triumph through paintings both vibrant in color and ominous in theme—not unlike the museum itself. As Hunter walks along the walls on which Palmer's work hangs, he cannot help but stop at almost every one, begging me to look closely at the juxtapositions the artist has woven so poignantly into his work.

"Look at the piece! Look at the piece," he beckons.

I do and I see it. In the foreground of one particularly rich illustration bursting with dripping (weeping?) colors stands an obviously well-to-do black couple, dressed for church or perhaps a formal Sunday afternoon party. Subtly woven into the background, however, are barely-visible photographs of black plantation workers, perhaps slaves. The message is clear.

"I think he is conveying a message from the sixties but not by always painting people getting hosed down and things of that nature. He's showing that not everything was all bad. There was a bourgeois group of people and he doesn't always have to show his people in ragged clothes. I mean, look how well she's dressed," he says. "I think his intention was to shock the world, to show that there was a beautiful side but we also have to show our youth where it came from."

Here Hunter places both of his hands on opposite sides of the frame and leans in until his nose is only about five or six inches from the glass.

"I look at a piece of art for hours upon hours," he says, lost in a reverie he knows by heart. "I can stand here for an hour and my staff will look at me and say, 'Oh, there he goes again, trying to find something that's not there.' But ya know what? I see a whole bunch of stuff most people will never see." ■

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