

BLACK HISTORY MONTH - PAPER DOLLS, OTHER LESSONS AT CROCKER

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It was a sight to warm a teacher's heart on a school holiday: A room full of big dads hunched over little tables, helping their kids color, cut and glue ... paper dolls.

Defying the stereotype that paper dolls are just for little girls, plenty of boys and fathers joined the doll-making session Monday, as part of the Crocker Art Museum's Black History Month celebration.

"That's the timeless appeal of paper dolls," said Arabella Grayson, a longtime Sacramento collector of vintage and contemporary black paper dolls, dating to the 1800s. "It's a way to ignite (kids') imaginations, to get away from all the electronic gadgets and gizmos."

Yet another vivid reminder that museums aren't just about art on the walls, the Crocker treated visitors Monday to vivid options for the eyes and ears. Visitors could step onto a 1950s city bus like the one in which Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat in the "colored section" for a white passenger when the bus was full. Or watch preteen hip-hop dancers from Sacramento's Phoenix Park community center. Or hear South African "freedom songs" by the Vukani Mawethu Choir, an Oakland singing group.

They also could view the Sacramento museum's upstairs collection of African art and works of recent African American artists such as Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden. Or shop in the lobby's crafts market where artisans were selling "Sista Girl" clothing, copper jewelry, batik handbags and hand-painted fabric dolls.

The free event, sponsored by Target stores, drew about 1,500 visitors.

Victoria Yates, 22 and a recent UC Davis communications graduate, came with two girlfriends to "learn about my history and my heritage."

Having studied in Ghana, she wanted to see reminders of her African experiences.

That was the festival's point, said Crocker education director Stacey Shelnut-Hendrick, who called it "an exploration of African experiences around the world."

The paper doll-making, held in the Crocker's art studios, was a popular attraction for young families.

Each child was given a packet containing a dotted, cut-out doll and dress silhouette, copied from an 1870s paper doll book. Encouraged by Grayson to "make them your own," the kids did just that, scribbling, gluing and coloring their own likenesses or their favorite characters.

And forget about girl-only stereotypes: fathers and sons were at almost every table. With a little parental guidance, the boys altered the dress silhouette, trimming the skirt and turning it into pants or jeans. Then they got to work, coloring with pencils. Some drew themselves as Batman; others were scientists or cartoon characters.

Presiding over the paper creativity was Grayson, a copy writer and former I. Magnin store model who's been collecting and writing about black paper dolls for more than 20 years. Her collection of more than 300 paper dolls encompasses politics, history, literature and the arts, from movie star Eartha Kitt to golf star Tiger Woods to President Barack Obama and his family.

Not all black paper doll images are so family-friendly. Not included in the Crocker displays were pieces from Grayson's collection that portray the ugly side of paper doll publishing: derogatory black dolls with "bulging eyes and big lips." Or dolls that show controversial blacks, such as 1970s Ugandan dictator Idi Amin or South African rights activist Winnie Mandela with her "accessories" -- a hand grenade and AK-47 assault rifle.

To Grayson, they're examples of playthings being subverted to highlight adults' political causes.

But those issues weren't what drew families, many of whom had never been to the Crocker before.

"We decided, 'Let's do something intriguing, something where they can learn,' " said Lorine Haile, a Sacramento mother of four. "It was something different than going to Chuck E. Cheese's on a holiday."

Haile was with her husband, Tamru, who emigrated from Ethiopia 10 years ago.

Using colored pencils, she helped 3-year-old T.J. color his character in blue jeans, surrounded by fireworks. Older sister Selam, 6, colored her favorite TV cartoon character, while Israel, 4, created a "Jack and the Beanstalk" character.

Xavier Williams brought his two young sons. Williams, a football coach at Ponderosa High School in Shingle Springs, said he and his wife take their kids to African, Asian and Latino cultural events to help them learn a basic life lesson: "It doesn't matter what color you are. It's what's inside that matters."

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• **Caption:** Lorine Haile, above, is moved to laughter by the paper doll made by son T.J. She brought her four kids to Monday's event and helped T.J. make his paper doll a male version. At left, Dawtrell Williams happily stands behind daughter Tatianna, 4, as she shows results of her doll-making effort. Renee C. Byer rbyer@sacbee.com Three-year-old Audrey Cook of Davis admires a paper doll in the hand of workshop leader and paper doll collector Arabella Grayson on Monday at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. About 1,500 parents and children took part in Crocker events Monday that were part of Black History Month. Theresa Ferguson, 7, readies her new paper doll and her own smile before her aunt Kasey Ferguson snaps her photograph. Renee C. Byer rbyer@sacbee.com A boy examines a board of ideas for the dolls' clothing during Monday's workshop. There were several such exhibits depicting various designs, but many of the young participants came up with their own looks for their little paper people. Arabella Grayson of Sacramento, a longtime collector of vintage and contemporary black paper dolls, leads the workshop Monday.

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