

# Skin Deep: Racism and Reconciliation in America

## Emotional Folsom Exhibit Chronicles Black Image Through Time

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The history of America is filled with the stories of the many peoples who came to these shores. Some came willingly. Others, unwillingly. The stories tell of joys and sorrows, struggles and achievements. Often, these stories aren't revealed to the public at large until the ethnic group from which they come has "arrived" as a leadership entity. It can take generations. Sometimes, such openness comes slowly to America—but it does come.

A unique exhibit at the Folsom History Museum documents the history of the African American people through nearly 200 years of memorabilia and collectibles. Entitled "The Evolution of the Black Image," the educational exhibit showcases items that depict both positive and negative images of African Americans that were used in marketing and promotional materials.

Covering topics beginning with slavery and ending with the election of President Barack Obama, the exhibit is thought provoking and powerful for visitors. Items on

display range from slave items to old sheet music, cookbooks to packaging for grocery items, children's toys and books to the worlds of sports and entertainment and more.

According to the exhibit's advisory plaque, the museum's objective is "to help the public increase its understanding of how mainstream culture once accepted and even embraced derogatory images of blacks and to see how, over time, more realistic and celebratory depictions have emerged."

### History in Context

For much of their history, African Americans have had to endure a culture saturated with distorted caricatures of thick-lipped faces on cereal boxes; toothless, sloppily-dressed figures on sheet music; and half-naked children on postcards. Many items in this collection were manufactured by companies eager to capitalize on the racism that has long permeated our society, exploiting distorted representations of blacks.

Because of the controversial nature of some items on display, the exhibit comes



Visitors to the Folsom History Museum view the many historical items on display that illustrate both fair and unfair representations of blacks. "The Evolution of the Black Image" runs through March 8. (Sacramento Union Photo/Tom Paniagua)

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with a caveat that greets visitors at the entrance: "Warning: There may be words or images in this collection that will disturb visitors."

Response to the items on display has been varied and emotionally deep. Some leave the exhibit looking thoughtful. Others are deeply shaken.

"These slave shackles at the beginning of the exhibit caused one African American man to break down sobbing," said Linda Sword-Johnson, a volunteer who works at the museum. "He and his wife went through the exhibit, thanked us and promised to return with their children."

Half the population of the United States is below the median age of 36. They never marched with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Selma. For those born in 1973, that event in the nation's history happened eight years earlier, in 1965. To them, many images are surprising. Those born prior to 1973 are also surprised by their responses

to the displays.

"Tears are about to come to my eyes," said Genevieve, an African American visitor from San Diego who declined to share her last name. "The things here are things I've never seen before, but I heard about them from my parents and grandparents."

"I'm sorry, but I need to go outside for air," said Carolyn Dupray, an African American visitor from Manteca, originally from New Orleans. "I didn't expect to be so affected emotionally. This is a wonderful, magnificent exhibit. This should be in a much bigger venue, such as Los Angeles or Washington, D.C."

"This is very emotional for her," Dupray's husband, Michael, said. He is white. "This is something that is painful for most people to admit to, but this is something that needs to be faced."

### Behind the Exhibit

"A lot of the response that people have

depends on where you come from, your personal experience,” said Esther Roman, an African American cultural preservationist who collects and documents the full range of images that have been associated with people of African descent. All of the items on display are from her personal collection. “This is really a snapshot of the history of a people.”

“The purpose of the exhibit is to show how far African Americans have come in this country,” Roman added. “The stories I’m hearing from visitors are very interesting.”

Roman began collecting black memorabilia some 20 years ago.

“I like old things. I didn’t realize that I was a collector, I was just picking up things that I liked,” she said. “This whole thing is strictly by happenstance. I was given a little wooden six-inch ruler that said ‘G.A. Morgan, Colored Hair Refining Co.’ That is the piece that started it all. I wondered who this Mr. Morgan was. It turns out, he had quite a history. He had his own com-

pany. He started in hair products and was an early inventor who developed safety hoods. Because he was black, he had to hire a white man to promote the product. He also patented one of the early traffic stop lights.”

From that beginning, Roman began combing antique stores and garage sales for black memorabilia. As her collection grew, so did her reputation as a collector. In the early 1980s, an antique dealer friend who also taught at West Valley Community College in Saratoga asked her if she would bring some of her collection and give lectures to the students.

“At first, I was hesitant to do so, because these items weren’t out in the open,” Roman said. “You had to ask the dealers for them, and they would usually go to a back room and bring them out. It was understandable. They didn’t want their businesses to be labeled as racist, nor did they wish to offend their customers with, say, a Mammy cookie jar in the front window. I had to give it a lot of thought, but I

eventually did start giving lectures on these things. That’s when I realized how much I had gathered together.”

Roman will give a lecture to visitors at the Folsom History Museum on the background and history of black memorabilia on Saturday, Feb. 21 at 4 p.m.

“There is so much black history that simply wasn’t taught,” she said. “More and more of our history is coming to light now. And look at the changes in America today. A lot of people – including me – never thought they’d live to see a black president. Look how far we’ve come.”



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— ESTHER ROMAN

Museum Director Karen Mehring is very pleased to offer the exhibit.

“For the past couple of years, I was hoping the museum would be able to offer an African American Exhibit during Black History Month,” Mehring said. “When we heard about Esther and her collection we were excited. Ironically, it was perfect timing with the election of America’s first African American president.”

Roman believes exhibits such as this one are an opportunity to set the record straight.

“The Evolution of the Black Image” runs through March 8. The Folsom History Museum is located at 823 Sutter Street in Historic Folsom. The museum is conveniently close to Regional Transit’s Light Rail—one block, in fact. Free parking is available at the Folsom Station Parking Garage a block away. Museum hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$2 for youth and free for children under age 12. For more information, call (916) 985-2707 or visit [www.folsomhistorymuseum.org](http://www.folsomhistorymuseum.org).

DOLLAR\$ AND SENSE

## Opportunity in a Bear Market

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Young investors saving for retirement may be able to wait this recession out. However, most folks in retirement cannot. They need to get through this recession and on to the next bull market. So what do you do if your investments are down, and you still need income to make things work?

### Budget Down on Expenses

The obvious one is to budget down on expenses. Unlike the federal and state governments, common sense tells us that things won’t work out if we spend more money than we bring in. The reality is cuts must be made in order to buy time. Currently, markets are fallow, not much is growing; however, history tells us they will produce again. Thus, we must stay in the race.

### “Get Paid While You Wait”

Opportunity may exist in dividend paying stocks and corporate and high yield bonds. Real estate overleveraging, fear and poor corporate earnings have driven the market averages down to 2003 levels. The good news is that lower stock prices have driven dividend yields higher. For example, if a public company’s stock was priced at \$75 per share in January 2008, a \$2 dividend would yield 2.6 percent. However, if

the stock is currently trading at \$50 per share the yield is now four percent. That is a 53 percent increase.

Investment grade corporate bonds were oversold in October due to the credit and banking scare. This creates opportunity. There may still exist a premium for the added risk in these bonds. Again, the yields are higher now because the price for these bonds has not yet returned to normal levels.

High yield bonds (also called junk bonds) may be attractive for two reasons. As stated, the yields are higher because the price of these bonds has been driven down. There also exists the possibility that these bonds may rise in price due to a rise in demand for risk capital. Junk bonds are used to raise risk capital.

Please remember opportunity exists in every market condition. Be sure to check with a financial advisor to see if these and other opportunities are right for your situation.

*This article is not intended to provide specific investment or tax advice for any individual. Consult your financial advisor, your tax advisor or me if you have any questions. James J. Scherer, owner of Scherer Wealth Management, is, also, a financial advisor with – and securities offered through – LPL Financial, Member FINRA/SIPC (CA Insurance License 0C20370). He can be reached at (916) 797-1188 or email at [james.scherer.SacUnion@ipl.com](mailto:james.scherer.SacUnion@ipl.com).*

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