

Press Release...

June 24, 2008

Contact: Troy Burton
Executive Director
Office: 410-225-3130 Office
Fax: 410-225-3139 Fax

The Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center Exploring The Construction of Race in American Society

Mammies, Watermelon and Coons: Popular and Provoking Exhibition Extended Through Summer

BALTIMORE – While today’s political rhetoric strives to reevaluate the truth behind the historical images and practices of blacks and women from the perspective of a superpower in a contemporary global multicultural society, The Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center explores the construction and emancipation of a race in America in an exhibition titled Mammy’s, Watermelon and Coons. The exhibition, which is free and open to the public, and, one of the Center’s most popular to date, is an extended feature at the Eubie Blake Cultural Center at 847 North Howard Street in Baltimore through Saturday, August 30, 2008.

American film director Spike Lee in 2000 released a controversial film titled Bamboozled, which depicted minstrel shows with black actors in blackface and parodied a cast of stereotypical characters ranging from mammies to picaninies and virtually every other vile portrayal of blacks ever exhibited in the guise of accepted American entertainment. Mammy’s, Watermelon and Coons investigates the collective stereotypes of black images that reinforce some of the shortcuts to character and cultural assassination that are crucial elements propitiated by mass media in a multicultural society.

Much of the contemporary media images of the “mammy” have evolved over time. Traditionally, the 20th century birthed Aunt Jemima as the prototype of blacks in American society. A domestic by profession, Aunt Jemima was usually a full-figured woman dressed in an apron with a red and white chignon (kerchief - a headpiece worn by women during the period of slavery as a device to demean individuals).

Other servants were characteristically typecast as con artists and deadbeats. Many scholars suggest that these stereotypes were necessary for the representation and legitimation of a racial order built on racism and white supremacy. While the ideal and most pervasive caricature manifested as trademarks, marketing and promotional images for a brand of pancakes called Aunt Jemima, other caretakers took on the male persona of Old Uncle Tom or Uncle Remus. Still other prominent depictions included “Mandy the maid,” “Preacher Brown and Deacon Jones,” “Rastus and Sambo” and “the ol’ mammy.”

The images and stereotypes were an integral part of American culture. They were so ubiquitous and customary that few people, black or white, challenge how denigrating they were to black Americans, particularly women.

Many of the artifacts assembled in Mammy’s, Watermelon and Coons are original and replica pieces from the 19th through 21st centuries and represent formulaic and exaggerated images used by generations of Americans instilling prejudice to castigate an entire race and culture as inferior and undesirable beings. Still, much of the now highly prized and collected memorabilia was intentionally manufactured to promulgate injustice toward the basic tenets of American democracy. Many Americans fail to realize that the experiences of people from the African Diaspora residing in this society differ from the majority of American’s lived experience because intolerance and discrimination in some form has profoundly affected almost all citizens of African ancestry.

###

For more than three decades, the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center has sought to bring creative expression and urban consciousness to Baltimore through visual and performing arts education and development opportunities for children, youth and adults in our community.