



Black Dolls The Deborah Neff Collection

la maison rouge

exhibition
February, 23 -
May, 20 2018

Press kit

Black Dolls
The Deborah Neff Collection
exhibition : February, 23 - May, 20 2018
opening: Thursday 22 February, 6 pm- 9 pm

Curator:
Nora Philippe
Scientific counselor:
Deborah Willis

"Black Dolls" will be the first time the Neff Collection is shown outside the United States. Comprising an outstanding ensemble of several hundred handmade African-American dolls and a set of photographs from the 1840s to the 1940s, this collection is of interest not only for the diversity and remarkable beauty of the dolls themselves, but also as an insight into the history of America's Black population and of perceptions of childhood in America. In fact, these dolls could serve a variety of purposes, and some are quite enigmatic in this respect.

For nearly a century, between 1840 and 1940, African-American women designed and made ragdolls for their own children, or the children they looked after. Over a period of twenty-five years, Deborah Neff, a lawyer living in Connecticut, assembled the most extensive and rigorously selected collection of ragdolls anywhere. Where most people dismissed such objects as domestic artifacts of no great interest, Neff patiently tracked down these artifacts whose beauty, formal diversity and originality – in short, whose artistic value – is so immediately obvious to us today. This collection is complemented by an ensemble of photographs and daguerreotypes capturing the reality of childhood – White and Black

– at the time. These images speak to us about the children's complex relation to their Black dolls.

For the first time outside of North America, La maison rouge is presenting the Neff Collection. In fact, the first public exhibition of these works anywhere was at the Mingei International Museum, San Diego, in 2015. For French and European visitors, the show will no doubt be a real aesthetic and historical revelation, and an emotional experience. It offers an extraordinarily moving insight into the imagination, everyday lives and skills of generations of African-American women whose "artistic handicrafts" only began to be documented and preserved a few decades ago. A milestone in this process was the exhibition of quilts by the women of Gee's Bend¹. This curatorial event gave the work of women slaves and their descendants, a place in the global artistic landscape.

A powerful illustration of outsider and self-taught art, the Neff Collection affirms the immense talent of these unnamed women artists in an art world still dominated by European fine arts. This exhibition will show the remarkable variety of the forms invented and techniques and materials used in this veritable art form made with the modest materials of textiles, coconut fiber and leather. Some of these dolls are extremely realistic, right down to their gold vest buttons or lace petticoats in the latest fashion. Others are stunning in their radical abstraction. Some have the size and weight of sculpture and seem to be something other than simple toys– more like ritual or funerary objects that call to mind the circulation and

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¹ At the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 2003



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transformation of religious practices from Africa. Others can fit in the palm of a hand – like this black sock turned into a skew-whiff doll by a young girl just learning to sew – and bear the obvious marks of use. They have been carressed, played with, and belong within the immemorial history of dolls.

In response to the new questions raised by these objects, the exhibition and its associated events will address not only the history of art and textiles but also religion, anthropology, the history of Black communities in the U.S. and the connection with African doll-making, or, more generally, hybrid ritual practices. This will be an opportunity to stimulate and disseminate pioneering cross-disciplinary work ranging from the human sciences to conservation. To take one example, the materials used to stuff the dolls – from cotton to strips of newspaper – are fascinating clues to the origins and places where the dolls were made, which themselves shed light on the painful paths of emancipation followed by American Blacks from the South to the North (the dolls can be found from Alabama to Maine).

While it will probably never be possible to identify the women who made these dolls, the exhibition can convey the sociological and political contexts from which they emerged. House servants, seamstresses, embroiderers, designers, nannies – these women were mothers and grandmothers who, out of love and in a spirit of resistance, wanted to give their black children their own likenesses as Black children – likenesses to love and cherish, despite the violence of slavery and segregation. In a white supremacist world where only one color was deemed beautiful, children, even black children, preferred White dolls, and those Black dolls that were made in the United States were for many years based on the European models, modifying only the skin color, or otherwise had features and clothing based on overtly racist stereotypes. After the 1930s, Black American manufactories responded to the market and began offering young Black girls dolls that really looked as they themselves did, and that they could take pride in

identifying with. At the same time, the tradition of these home-crafted dolls began to die out.

Each doll in the Neff Collection is handmade and unique. This of course adds to their value. They are survivors of a time when Black Americans were slaves, or were struggling for their rights against a regime of ferocious institutional racism. They are also the very contemporary heroes of a period in which segregation still prevails in Western countries, albeit in other forms.

We may add that these dolls were more than just vehicles for “Black Pride”: some of them were created for the white children cared for by their makers. In fact, while the photographic portraits that bear witness to this fact show the mutual affection between the White child and Black nanny via the transitional mirror of the doll, they were also made to serve the anti-abolitionist case: many employees sought to justify slavery on the basis of this “love” between nanny and child, a love of which these dolls were taken as proof.

The daguerreotypes, tintypes and vintage prints showing children, both Black and White, playing with dolls, sometimes in clearly defined scenarios (bed time, funeral, meal, journey, punishment) and in a variety of settings, explore these complex and important questions, and can be related to more contemporary theories about toys and play. They give an idea of the roles played by these dolls in the hands of their young owners: they were doubles, idols and, as the children grew older, victims of punishment, or servants. These dolls are powerful scripted objects, and throughout the exhibition the scripts behind them are deciphered by archive documents (private diaries of young girls, children's or women's magazines, sound archives).

However, it would be a mistake to think that these games always followed the dominant patterns. In making their original, unique dolls, African-American women were also encouraging their owners to write new scripts and new paradigms. Could these “Black dolls” therefore be seen as miniature Trojan horses in



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the baskets of White children, a form of subversion, like the cake-walk dance, a satire of the White master that the White master loved? Some of them suggest as much, like the “topsy-turvy” ones with a Black head at one end and a White one at the other, sometimes separated by a skirt). These disturbing objects evoke a binary world where the two races were bound to oppose each other. What children's games, we may wonder, did these dolls act out?

The hundred dolls brought together in this exhibition are works of art and works of resistance. A people gone missing, a people returning, fixing us with their intent eyes of beads or thread. *Black Dolls are Beautiful.*

Exhibitions

2015: Mingei International Museum, San Diego (CA), USA

2017: Figge Art Museum, Davenport (IA), USA

Publication

Black Dolls, by Frank Maresca, Radius Books, 2015
(authors: Margo Jefferson, Faith Ringgold, Lyle Rexer)

Biographies

Debbie Neff

Debbie Neff is a lawyer, who lives and works in the New York State. She has been collecting dolls and related vintage photographs for twenty years, while she managed the Louis-Dreyfus Foundation and art Collection, famous for its selection of outsider art.

Deborah Willis

University Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. A recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, she has notably published *Envisioning Emancipation*. Other notable projects include *The Black Female Body A Photographic History*, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers – 1840 to the Present*, *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present* and (with Barbara Krauthamer) *Envisioning Emancipation*.

Nora Philippe

A Graduate in Art History at Ecole Normale Supérieure, she has directed and produced more than ten documentary films on art, cultural and social topics, both for cinema and television. She has published *Inventer la peinture grecque antique* and *Cher Pôle emploi* and teaches at Ecole des Arts-Décoratifs. Now also based in New York City, she curates film series for American universities and museums.



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**Catalogue
of the exhibition**

The catalogue is co-published by éditions Fage and La maison rouge with contributions by Robin Bernstein, Hélène Joubert, Nellie Mae Rowe, Madelyn Shaw, Deborah Willis, Patricia Williams and a conversation between Deborah Neff and Nora Philippe.

224 pages, 16 x 22 cm, French/English, 2018
price : around 25 €

**events related
to the exhibition**

> films, talks

- A special film series on the theme of "Cinema and Dolls" at the Centre Pompidou
curated by : Jonathan Pouthier and Nora Philippe
March, 7, 14 and 21 2018

- "Femmes noires, écrans français"
at Columbia Reid Hall,
curated by : Maboula Soumahoro and Nora Philippe
April, 4 and May, 9 2018

> Symposium at the Musée du Quai Branly

- "Culture matérielle, représentations et résistances
africaines-américaines (1840-1940)",

Scientific committee :

- Nora Philippe, curator of the exhibition
- Paula Aisemberg, head of La maison Rouge
- Frédéric Keck, head of the academic department,
musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac

with contributions of Thierry Dufrêne, Elsa Dorlin,
Hélène Joubert, Marie Gautheron, Madelyn Shaw,
Pascale Marthine Tayou, Patricia Williams and
Deborah Willis

February, 27 2018

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> every Thursdays at 7 pm

> every Wednesdays at 2.30 pm

the little family visit

> every Saturdays and Sundays at 4 pm

Free with the entrance ticket

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#expoBlackDolls

cover :

Author Unknown, *Lady in Beaded Gown*, United States, circa 1895
Mixed fabrics, leather, glass, paper. Photo : Ellen McDermott



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Author Unknown, *Minimal Topsy-Turvy*, United States, circa 1920-30
Cotton. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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Author Unknown. *Woman in Paisley Coat Dress*, United States, Circa 1st quarter 20th century
Cotton. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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Author Unknown, *Sock Doll with red shirt*, United States, Circa 1920-1930
Mixed fabrics, mother of pearl. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City (detail)



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Author Unknown, *Lady with Gingham Dress and Bandana*, United States, Circa 1st quarter 20th century
Cotton. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City (detail)



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Artist Unknown, *Well-Dressed Couple with Painted Faces*, United States, circa 1890-1910
Mixed fabrics, leather. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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Artist Unknown, *Man with Large Hands*, United States, circa 1920
Cotton, straw, string. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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Author Unknown, *Lady with red boots*, United States, Circa last quarter 19th century
Mixed fabrics, glass. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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Photographer Unknown, *Cabinet Card*, Carrington family album, Norwich, Connecticut, United States, circa 1910-20. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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Photographer Unknown, *Ninth-plate daguerreotype*, United States, circa 1855 – 65.

Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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Photographer Unknown, *Cabinet Card*, Burnham Studio, Norway, Maine, United States, circa 1870 – 85. Photo : Ellen McDermott, New York City



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la maison rouge

La maison rouge, a private non-profit foundation, opened in June 2004 in Paris to promote contemporary creation through three temporary exhibitions a year. Solo or group shows, some are staged by independent curators. While La maison rouge was never intended to house the collection of its founder, Antoine de Galbert, an active figure on the French art scene, his personality and outlook as a collector are evident throughout. Since its very first exhibition, *Behind Closed Doors: The Private Life of Collections* (2004), La maison rouge has continued to show private collections and consider the issues and questions surrounding them.

Antoine de Galbert

Born in 1955 and a graduate in political science, Antoine de Galbert worked in corporate management before opening a contemporary art gallery in Grenoble for some ten years. Concurrently, he purchased the first works in a collection that was to take on growing importance in his life. In 2003, he chose to create a foundation as a means of both anchoring his commitment to contemporary creation.

building

La maison rouge occupies a renovated factory on a site covering 2,500 sq m in the Bastille district, opposite the Arsenal marina. Some 1,300 sq m are reserved for the galleries which encircle the "red house" from which the foundation takes its name. This concept of a house reflects the foundation's vocation to be a pleasant and welcoming space where visitors can take in an exhibition, attend lectures, browse in the bookshop or enjoy a drink.

The reception area was designed by Jean-Michel Alberola (b. 1953, Paris).



les amis de la maison rouge

Les amis de la maison rouge helps and supports Antoine de Galbert's project. It puts forward ideas and takes part in debates on the private collection, suggests activities to tie in with the foundation's exhibitions, and contributes to making La maison rouge more widely known in France and internationally.

As a friend of la maison rouge, you will:

- Be first to see exhibitions at La maison rouge
- Meet exhibiting artists, the curators and the team at La maison rouge
- Be invited to preview lunches
- Meet and network with other art enthusiasts
- Attend talks by and debate with experts and collectors
- Contribute ideas and suggest themes for lectures and exchanges as part of the «carte blanche to collectors»
- Suggest artists to create a work for the patio and take part in an annual vote to choose that artist
- Visit the most vibrant centers for contemporary art from Moscow to Dubai, Barcelona, Brussels, Toulouse...
- Discover exclusive venues, private collections and artists' studios
- Enjoy special access to collector's editions by artists exhibiting at La maison rouge
- Support a collection of books, edited by Patricia Falguières, with texts published for the first time in French addressing themes of museography, the exhibition, and the work of certain artists
- Become the benefactor of a book in the collection and have your name associated with it
- Be first to enroll for lectures, performances and events relating to the exhibitions
- Be part of a European network of partner artistes



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institutions

- Belong to a unique enterprise in one of the most dynamic venues in Paris
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**Bookstorming
bookshop**

Located next to La maison rouge at 10 bis, Boulevard de la Bastille, the bookshop is run by Bookstorming, a specialist in contemporary art books. Its selection of titles is regularly updated to reflect the exhibitions at La maison rouge. It also stocks artists' DVDs and videos, and a wide selection of out-of-print and artists' books, in addition to books on the latest developments in contemporary art.

Opening times

Wednesday to Sunday
12pm to 7pm



**Rose Bakery culture
at maison rouge**

Rose Bakery ^{culture} joined la maison rouge in 2010. Rose Bakery and la maison rouge are embarking on a specific project, led by interior designer-scenographer Emilie Bonaventure. Three times a year, visitors to la maison rouge will discover a "pop-up" café, designed by be-attitude. A first for a cultural venue. Each season, the prototypes, special creations, limited editions, flea-market finds and other salvaged objects will make up an eye-catching decor which may or may not echo the foundation's exhibitions.

Émilie Bonaventure

Interior designer, scenographer, artistic director, specialist in French ceramics of the 1950s and creator, Emilie Bonaventure set up Be-Attitude in 2005. She believes art and luxury must interact on a daily basis, imagining crossovers between the two in all fields.

Rose et Jean-Charles Carrarini

After swapping London for Paris, in 2002 the Franco-British couple opened Rose Bakery on Rue des Martyrs, followed by a second spot in London's Dover Street Market in 2005. They have turned French mealtimes upside down and welcome customers for breakfast, brunch, lunch and early dinner.

Rose Bakery ^{culture}

Wednesday to Sunday

11am to 7pm

rosebakeryculture@lamaisonrouge.org

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Visitor information

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Getting here

Metro: Quai de la Rapée (line 5)
or Bastille (lines 1, 5, 8)
RER : Gare de Lyon
Bus : 20, 29, 91

Vélib' :

station n° 12 003, opposite 98 quai de la Rapée
station n° 12 001, 48 bd de la Bastille
station n° 4 006, opposite 1 bd Boudon

Access

The galleries are accessible to the disabled and mobility impaired visitors

Opening days and times

Wednesday to Sunday from 11am to 7pm
Late nights Thursday until 9pm
January 1st and May 1st

Admission

Full price: € 10

Concessions: € 7 (13-18, students, full-time artists, over 65s)

Free for under 13s, job-seekers, companions to disabled visitors, members of ICOM and Amis de la maison rouge

Annual pass: full price € 28

Annual pass: concessions € 19

Free and unlimited access to the exhibitions

Free access or reduced rates to related events.



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