CURIOSITIES: Learning from Dolls

In 2004, Debra Britt and her sisters, Felicia Walker and Tamara Mattison, began to collect and make dolls, doll clothes, and accessories. By 2012, the serious hobby had overrun their homes and “our husbands were, like, you got to get this stuff out of here,” Walker says. So they rented a storefront space in downtown Mansfield, Massachusetts, where they lived, and transformed it into the National Black Doll Museum of History and Culture.

The nonprofit now features about 2,000 of their figures, Britt says, roughly a quarter of their still-growing collection. Their mission is to “nurture self-esteem,” especially among children, and to preserve the legacy of black dolls. The toys also pointedly reflect aspects of the centuries-long African-American experience. One room is packed with 780 African-style rag dolls (most crafted by the sisters), to recreate the inhumane conditions of a slave ship. “The Ugly Truth” display represents demeaning characterizations of black people: Buckwheat, Little Black Sambo, Aunt Jemima, and golliwogs, among them.

Yet there are also hundreds of more contemporary figures symbolizing triumphs, artistry, and power: pint-sized Obamas; comic-book superheroes, including Black Panther; plenty of athletes, like Michael Jordan and Serena and Venus Williams; scientists, legal scholars, businesspeople, and other color-barrier-breakers.

“If we can’t find a doll, we make it,” Walker notes: those collaged “Stand-Ins” include boxing hall of famer Jack Johnson, Thurgood Marshall, and Angela Davis. “Record-Makers” highlights musical artists, from Josephine Baker and Louis Armstrong to Tupac Shakur and Beyoncé—and the sisters’ father, a teacher whose record store was an offshoot of his own 5,000-album reserve. “My other siblings are collectors, too,” Walker adds of the family habit. “I say ‘collecting’ is just a fancy word for hoarding.”

Debra Britt (below) in the glamorous “Fashion Doll” room; “Ugly Truth” figures (above); and musicians, including D.M.C.

Both parents were also members of the Black Panthers, and patrolled their Dorchester neighborhood. Pride in black culture was paramount; the kids played with any black-focused toys and games available; commercial black dolls were, and still can be, hard to find. One display explains how their grandmother, a maid, disassembled white dolls, “then dyed them all brown, and put them back together for us,” reports Walker. “Everyone wants to see something that represents them,” Britt has concluded. “It immortalizes you.”

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antique 1780s wallpaper (originally ordered by Robert Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence) depicting the rice and porcelain industries of China. There’s also a Jacobean-style dining room with a wood-beamed and white-plaster ceiling and heavy oak furnishings that feels like an old English pub. “Yet he wasn’t a stickler for pure authenticity,” Van Koevering says. “The ‘Pine Kitchen,’ one of the later rooms, is Sleeper’s romanticized view of a Colonial-era kitchen.” It has a wide brick hearth hung with antique cast-iron pots and utensils, but he had a local furniture-maker create the simple wooden chairs, which are “a little different from what the Colonials would have had, and a little more comfortable. So he would break the rules sometimes.”

He also freely repurposed historic materials: Beauport’s central hall is lined with pine paneling (rescued from the dilapidated eighteenth-century William Cogswell estate in nearby Essex), from the hall one can also see the bulk of one wall filled with a graceful double-wide, leaded-glass door, obtained from a home in Connecticut, that Sleeper altered to hold his perfectly arranged 130-piece collection of amber-glass objects. He cleverly installed a skylight in the pantry behind the door “so that the amber is always naturally back-lit,” Van Koevering notes. Nothing was collected in the name of investment. “He deliberately selected only objects that personally appealed to him, in as much as he didn’t have the deep pockets of other collectors in Boston at that time,” she says. “And he had this fabulous ability to showcase things.”

Sleeper’s light-filled “Golden Step” room, holding a bank of diamond-panelled windows overlooking Gloucester Harbor, is a nod to New England’s maritime history. Woodwork, the trestle tables and chairs, and a cabinet painted a sea-foam green set off majolica and Wedgwood dishware. Prow ornaments of bare-chested merman hang on the wall amid models of a China trading vessel and whaling and fishing ships.

Adjacent is the “Octagon Room.” Aubergine walls dramatize Sleeper’s amethyst and ruby-red glassware and red antique