



Black Dolls: Unique African American Dolls, 1850-1930 From the Collection of Deborah Neff

Margo Jefferson, Faith Ringgold, Lyle Rexer

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This book presents over 100 unique handmade African American dolls made between 1850 and 1930 from the collection of Deborah Neff, a Connecticut-based collector and champion of vernacular art. It is believed that African Americans created these dolls for the children in their lives, including members of their own families and respective communities as well as white children in their charge. Acquired over the last 25 years, this renowned collection is considered to be one of the finest of its kind ever to be assembled. The dolls portray faithful yet stylized representations of young and old African Americans?playful boys and girls, well-dressed gentlemen, elegant young ladies, and distinguished older men and women. Made with scraps of cloth, ribbon and lace, or old socks, and stuffed with wool or cotton, these unusual dolls are charming and full of emotional spirit. Their faces are embroidered, stitched and painted to express a variety of emotions, each representing a fascinating story of culture and identity in American history. The book also features an assortment of rare vintage photographs from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, showing both black and white children holding, posing or playing with their dolls. After five years of combing the archives of museums, historical societies and private collections, the research done for this volume uncovered fascinating vernacular photographs of African American children holding white dolls and Caucasian children holding black dolls?but there was not a single image of an African American person holding a black doll. This complex combination of text and imagery has helped transform this book into a commentary about social mobility and racial identity conveyed through the untold story of these dolls. In an essay, renowned artist Faith Ringgold addresses the inherent prejudices of this work as well as her personal connection with the medium. Also included are essays by Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Margo Jefferson and writer Lyle Rexer.

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