

Race and the Design of American Life: African Americans in Twentieth-Century Commercial Art

Images of African Americans have adorned a wide variety of consumer goods throughout the twentieth century, from Aunt Jemima's pancakes to the Air Jordan basketball shoe. But these images did more than sell things: they put questions of race and racism in the heart of the American dream. Drawing from collections of food packaging, advertisements, children's books, album covers, and other household goods, this exhibit traces the vexed history of African Americans in commercial art—as images and as makers of their own image—and their vital role in shaping the rise and establishment of our modern consumer society.

Industries, entrepreneurs, and commercial artists capitalized on and gave powerful form to widely-held racist attitudes among white Americans throughout the twentieth century. Gradually, however, African Americans used commercial art as an instrument to claim a place in American society—from the nadir of Jim Crow racial segregation to the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. As a marketing tool, an aesthetic practice, and a language of visual communication, graphic design was a tangible and often intimate form that wove the politics of race into the fabric of everyday life.

Racial imagery has shaped the meaning and practice of American consumerism in a multitude of ways: as brands for mass produced industrial goods; as consumables for the decoration of American bodies and homes; as faces for the commercialization of African American culture; and as declarations of African American claims for consumer rights and identity. By exploring these modes, this exhibit traces a broad historical arc in which the graphic design of race—in no small part due to the work of African American designers and consumers—changed from hateful racist caricature to models of black aspiration. Yet it also highlights the tensions between race and consumerism that bear upon our present day. The otherwise ordinary stuff here illuminates the complex and often ambiguous ways that racial imagery continues to be associated with our dreams of the “good life.”

Chris Dingwall
PhD. Candidate
Department of History

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I. Of Black Books and the Souls of Black Folk

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in Chicago in 1903, African American author, scholar, and activist W. E. B. Du Bois delivered both a critique of American capitalism and a purposefully designed consumer product. When asked by his editor to choose a cover for the book, Du Bois responded decisively, “I greatly prefer the black—it suits the title best.” With an expansive field of black cloth textured with gilt titling and beveled frame, the cover “suited” black souls with all the austere elegance of classical bookbinding. In this copy, the original owner enclosed a postcard of the author in his favored poise as an educated Victorian gentleman, exhibiting a faith in the graphic materials of the consumer marketplace to project the race to the heights of modern American civilization.

The book thus serves as a touchstone for the questions facing African Americans in commercial art in the twentieth century. As a text, Du Bois defended the inalienable human soul of black folk against the commercial exploitation that rendered black bodies and black culture into things for sale. As an object of design, however, the book reflected Du Bois’s own savvy attitude toward the powers of the consumer marketplace to stake a claim for African Americans in the nation’s culture.

II. Of Race and the Meaning of Progress

In the blackface minstrel shows that dominated the theaters of New York, Boston, and other industrializing cities of antebellum North, white actors impersonated plantation slaves by wearing black face paint and imitating “real” plantation dances and songs. Here the white working class audience indulged their desire and animosity toward the African American “other”: a sympathetic but hapless slave whose pre-industrial traditions were longed for by the newly industrial wage worker; and a bestial rival whose potential freedom would challenge white male privilege in the workplace and in the home. The blackface mask capitalized on longings for “authentic” African American culture while satisfying feelings of white supremacy—all toward the profit of the white performers.

After the Civil War, industrial entrepreneurs appropriated this dynamic as a formula for their own commercial success. While alleviating the anxieties of the new industrial age, manufacturers used the meanings contained in the blackface image to advertise their novel mass-produced goods. Blackface became a brand, a ubiquitous presence in the visual environment of an emerging consumer society.

A. The Blackface Industry

Sales generated from minstrel show paraphernalia like joke books and amateur blackface kits provided supplemental income to the massive “mammoth” minstrel companies that toured the United States after the Civil War. They also transformed the blackface mask from a disguise worn by performers to an image made by machines. The evolution of jokebooks from the 1850s to the 1920s shows publishers investing more money and care in the physical appearance of the book—and updating the blackface brand to the sleek silhouette of modernist commercial design.

B. Ethiopian Drama

Ethiopian Dramas were creations of the pulp publishing industry rather than minstrel troupes. Though they were often finely designed, the minstrel decorations in these plays were lithographed templates that equated the blackface caricature with the image of African Americans in a new mass medium of commercial print.

C. Blackface Machinery

The target of several Ethiopian Dramas was modern technology, especially Thomas Edison's phonograph. Here the farce lays in juxtaposing the backwards "darky" with the mechanical novelty, often revealed to be a fake. Industrial manufacturers used these images as foils to sell mass produced things like sewing machines and chemical dyes.

D. B. Heller & Co.

Founded in 1893, food additives manufacturer B. Heller & Co. wanted to imbue their artificial foodstuffs with the aura of natural authenticity. They turned to Zanzibar. Though inspired by "anthropological" photographs from the then-British protectorate (now part of modern-day Tanzania), Heller's Zanzibar brand exploited the same dynamic as similar racial iconography in blackface design. While the African figures linked the Zanzibar brand to an exotic and natural origin, it also set in relief the picture of the pristine modern factory that also appeared on the backside of every Heller & Co. product. The image of race helped Heller & Co. have it both ways, selling their goods as products of nature and the latest advance in chemical manufacturing.

E. The Black Figure and Industrial Design

By the 1930s, the racial caricatures from the minstrel show had become an essential stereotype for modern industrial design: figures that lent machine-made products an aura of natural authenticity while denigrating African Americans as a people left behind by modern progress. They were also highly malleable. In these showcases for Chicago designers—by which they advertised themselves to potential clients—the blackface figure is rendered in the sleek lines and heroic poses of art deco; it could sell potentially anything.

F. Aunt Jemima and the Printing Press

Originally a famous character from the nineteenth-century minstrel show, "Aunt Jemima" was refashioned by a small milling company into a brand to sell their ready-made pancake mix. It was an instant success, endowing the mass-produced foodstuff with a mythic origin in a Southern plantation household. When Quaker Oats took over the brand in 1926, they hired the Chicago-based printer R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company to execute their ad campaign. By the 1940s, however, Donnelley began to face public criticism from Chicago's African American community—not only as a purveyor of racist caricature, but as an industrial employer. While Donnelley continued to design Aunt Jemima for Quaker Oats, they hired African American laborers as strike breakers, thus confronting vocal protest from the black community as voiced in its newspaper, the Chicago Defender.

III. Of the Training of White Americans

When consumers brought racist and racialized goods into their home they endowed them with meaning that lasted well after the moment of sale. On the most basic level, these

objects—ranging from doorstops to expensive gift books—taught Americans about the rules of racial hierarchy in the age of Jim Crow segregation laws: “naturally” servile, though prone to laziness and stupidity, African Americans were inferior and available to be treated as objects by elevated, refined, and modern white people. These racial objects also crystallized the desires and anxieties of white people as the mass consumer economy penetrated more and more into the middle class home. As they navigated the promises and perils of consumer abundance, white consumers in no small part secured a sense of stature and identity through mass-produced blackness.

A. Childhood

Children (and their parents) at the turn of the twentieth century were enticed into a new fantasy world of mass-produced playthings sold in mail order catalogs and spectacular department store displays. Of the colorfully illustrated and elaborately designed “gift books” that flooded this market, ones about African Americans were exceedingly popular and became staples of American childhood. In the illustrations and cover designs for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Uncle Remus*, and *Little Black Sambo*, children were addressed as “white” and welcomed into narratives that played on their sympathy, and their fear, of racial others.

1. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

When it was published in 1852 to address the mounting political crisis over slavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist melodrama *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a best-seller and an object of controversy. Its intense commercialization in games, toys, and especially elegantly illustrated gift books did not abate until well after the turn of the century. Focusing especially on the saintly white girl Eva and her relationship with the kindly slave Tom and the antic slave-girl Topsy, illustrated *Uncle Tom* books fashioned an innocent whiteness in relation to blackness at turns servile, martyred, and grotesque.

2. *Uncle Remus*

White Southerner Joel Chandler Harris framed his immensely popular animal tales of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Tar Baby as slave folklore passed down by a former slave to his beloved former master’s son. Children found in *Uncle Remus* not only a world that was a model of white innocence and black subordination, but also one that sanitized the history of slavery into an idyllic pastoral and safe arena for white fun—a nostalgic fantasy rendered by at least two generations of modern designers, from pioneering cartoonists E. Boyd Smith and E. W. Kemble to Walt Disney’s animation studio.

3. *Little Black Sambo*

British author Helen Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* was an American best-seller from the time of its first publication at the turn of the century, and remained a popular book in children’s libraries well after World War II. Though ostensibly set in the “jungle” of a far-flung British colony, *Little Black Sambo* was immediately recognizable to Americans as an allegory of race and consumption. Turning a gang of

threatening tigers into a whirl of butter, which he would later gobble down with an impossible amount of pancakes, Sambo was driven by a compulsive impulse to consume—desires white children could both identify with and displace onto the “primitive” black boy. Publishers in the 1940s and 1950s attempted to preserve the story of consumerism while diminishing its racist charge.

B. Adulthood

Racialized decorations and household goods were defined by their obvious functions to stand in for the traditional labor of black service workers: illuminate the white home, clean the white body, and burnish the class status of the white homeowner. Yet, their often sophisticated design and markings of use suggest that these goods held significance not only as a substitute for an actual black servant but also as material focus for racial desire and animus—an intimate thing for cleaning floors and teeth, a sophisticated thing for social performance, and a durable thing for hanging, lighting, holding, and kicking.

IV. Of the Sorrow Songs and the Politics of Culture

White Americans’ appetite for blackness created limited and often demeaning roles for African Americans in the new culture industries—but also a measure of renown and power. This tension was managed by corporations large and small that began to experiment with new designs of blackness to capitalize on white desires for “real” African American culture, especially in ragtime, blues, and jazz music. As this music was commodified and mass produced to reach larger and larger audiences, African American musicians, entrepreneurs, and designers cultivated power within the system to redefine the terms by which black culture would be sold. They hazarded the color line to profit from white appetites for black music—while creatively establishing new institutions and a new set of racial iconography to sell the race and themselves.

A. High Class Design and Low Down Rags

To capitalize on popular demand for black music while reaffirming traditional cultural and racial hierarchies, commercial sheet music publishers covered their product with designs of race both elaborate and conventional. At the turn of the century, a vogue for ragtime allowed white music listeners to indulge in syncopated rhythms and sensuous dancing—cultivating an experience both “authentic” and “modern”—it also threatened to dissolve the boundaries between elite and popular style, and white and black cultural spaces. Publishers varied their approach, as smaller firms experimented with more “realistic” drawings while larger firms balanced urban sophistication with odious caricature.

Two African American sheet music firms capitalized on the vogue for ragtime. But despite their activist goals, the Gotham Attucks Company and the Pace Handy Music Company faced race prejudice in the industry and by music buyers who desired black music but were loath to buy from black-owned business. While these companies were founded to promote African American artists such as Bert Williams and Will Cook, they

also catered to white tastes by selling the work of white vaudevillians such as Al Bernard—and selling their wares in typical blackface caricature.

B. Jazz and Abstraction

By the 1950s, jazz had accrued a cultural prestige as an American avant-garde art form and as an authentically African American cultural tradition—a unique aura cultivated and monetized by white and black music producers, critics, performers, and designers. For a cadre of young, white commercial artists, the market for avant-garde jazz allowed them to experiment in modernist photography and design by abstracting the work of the musicians into dramatic portraits and stylish silhouettes. The boldest designs—such as the ones made by Paul Bacon for Riverside Records, or by Reid K. Miles (and an early-career Andy Warhol) for Blue Note’s 1500 series of “cool” hard bop—rejected much of the tangled history of racist caricature of black culture, and instead developed a dramatic iconography of musical heroism.

Formed in Chicago by Bob Koester in 1959, Delmark Records published music by performers of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in Chicago and the legendary Art Ensemble of Chicago. The AACM/AEC collective was dedicated to using jazz as a form of avant-garde musical expression and as a vehicle for the cultural education and organization of Chicago's African American community. Designs by Polish immigrant and illustrator Zbigniew Jastrzebski gave imaginative visual shape to the music's spiritual meaning and atonal compositions.

C. Delmark Records

Delmark also commissioned at least three designs by Sylvia Abernathy—a rare woman in an industry run by men—and, with her husband Billy, among the few African American album cover designers in this period. The Abernathys framed the figure of the black musician in spare, assertive borders that suggested a more aggressive if not political meaning to the music—though Sylvia's design for Sun Ra's *Sun Song* showed her deft use of abstraction to distill Sun Ra's music in a bright, playful symbol. As they paved new ground for racial iconography on the album cover, the Abernathys also hearkened back to Henry Pace's simple but powerfully symbolic silhouette for his short-lived, black-owned Black Swan record label.

E. Jazz Magazines

Jazz gained widespread cultural legitimacy when white critics began to recognize it as an art form—and advertisers began to sell it as a urban chic. While aficionados such as Chicago’s Phil Featheringill lovingly documented the local jazz scene in his small-run *Jazz Quarterly*, complete with stylish silhouette drawings of African American musicians, major monthlies such as *Esquire* and *Metronome* sold jazz—and the African American musician—as a consumable sign of style and “cool.”

F. Print Blocks

African American musicians sold their music with their image, their photographs manipulated, reversed, and stamped to meet the contours of a record cover or print ad.

While this process turned African American musicians into isolated and consumable figures of “blackness,” the same images could also become vehicles for meaningful cultural exchanges. Cartoonist R. Crumb’s hand-painted drawings of early jazz and blues performers, for instance, became promotional trading cards for Yazoo Record’s reissues in the 1980s. Crumb’s designs celebrated jazz musicians as fellow “outsider” cultural workers—albeit as individual “heroes” detached from African American communities and cultural tradition.

V. Of the Kingdom of Commerce

By mid-century African Americans had become increasingly visible to corporate America as consumers. At first catered to by mostly black businesses and white novelty firms—hawking hair-straightening and skin-whitening ointments—African Americans recognized themselves as a market force that had money to spend, tastes to indulge, style to express, and rights to claim. Emboldened by Depression-era labor organization and the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans protested unequal treatment in the marketplace through store boycotts and sit-ins, linking the struggle for freedom to their power as consumers.

Mid-century Chicago was at the heart of this revolution. Comprising not only one of the nation’s largest “Negro markets,” Chicago also boasted a cohort of design professionals who experimented in aesthetic style and business models that were meant to push back against the legacy of blackface caricature and to make claims on the rights and wealth of the teeming postwar consumer economy. As they became crucial brokers between the black community and corporate America, African American designers were tasked not only with selling goods to the valuable “Negro market,” but also with selling the race to white-run corporations.

A. Charles Dawson

Early in his career, Charles Dawson made his living designing “plenty of advertising featuring pleasing Negro types, my specialty.” Born on a Georgia plantation in 1889 and trained at the Tuskegee Institute and the Art Institute of Chicago, Dawson was a specialist in producing images of the race for community uplift and commercial consumption. At first he made his “pleasing” designs for Valmor and Overton, Chicago cosmetics manufacturers (the latter black-owned), that courted a black market for hair straighteners and skin lighteners.

Dawson also dedicated his talents to developing a new civic iconography for African Americans. In his poster for *O Sing a Mighty Song*—a pageant of black music staged for the Century of Progress exposition in 1934—and in his diorama of black history for the American Negro Exposition in 1940, Dawson expanded his “pleasing Negro types” into a grander historical vision in which African heritage and modern progress co-existed in the same frame.

B. *Ebony: The Emancipation Proclamation*. Vol. 18, No. 11

Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1963

Regenstein Library, General Collections

In a special issue commemorating the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, *Ebony's* pages were brimming with multiple approaches to the place of African Americans in consumer society: poetry and critical essays about black economic and family life, the political iconography of the Civil Rights Movement, and the commercial imagery of fulfilled and successful black consumers. Founded by African American entrepreneur John H. Johnson in 1945, *Ebony* was meant from the start to provide a rising African American middle class with feature-length journalism and high-quality images that reflected their lives and ambitions—complete with glossy color advertising that sold the material trappings of the “good life” directly to the black consumer. While suggesting an affinity with the consumer ideology of beauty, pleasure, and wealth, this *Ebony* special issue also reflected long-standing and more radical associations between black protest and consumer rights.

C. Eugene Winslow

A member of the famed Tuskegee airmen and a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Illinois Institute of Technology, Eugene Winslow (1919-2001) crafted his career as a commercial artist to promote the ideal of racial integration—in image and in business. Though embittered at his experience as the sole African American at the IMPAC design firm, Winslow remained committed to graphic design as a tool to realize African Americans' civic membership in the United States.

Combining the eagle with the broken chain of bondage, Winslow's seal for Chicago's emancipation centennial exposition linked the modern African American figure to the emblems of the nation during the era of the Civil Rights Movement. Winslow continued to develop this iconography of African American patriotism as a designer and entrepreneur, publishing educational texts about African American history for black readers out of his Afro-American Publishing Company.

D. Laini and Fundi (Sylvia and Billy Abernathy)

After designing albums for Delmark, Sylvia and Billy Abernathy collaborated with Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka (born LeRoi Jones) in designing and illustrating *In Our Terribleness*. Africanizing their names to Laini and Fundi, they joined many other young African American artists who were radicalized by the dire economic conditions in black urban communities; in their design work they turned to styles projected an assertive, autonomous racial identity. While Baraka's poetry addressed the psychic violence wrought by racist caricature on black consciousness, the Abernathys' black and white photography and graphic design documented a sense of fracture while championing the beauty of modern blackness.

E. Emmett McBain

A graduate of the Illinois Institute of Technology, Emmett McBain (1935-2012) exemplified both the expanded horizons for African Americans in the commercial arts and the limits of advertising as a form of racial politics. Working for black-owned design firm Vince Cullers and Associates, and for major white-owned firms such as J. Walter Thompson and Associates, McBain teamed with fellow African American designer Tom Burrell to form Burrell McBain Incorporated. There he designed

campaigns for major corporations looking to appeal to the “black market,” and developed imagery that associated things like fast food and cigarettes with models of African American family life and male sociability.

McBain made his most striking designs outside of the advertising industry. Leaving Burrell McBain in 1974 to pursue career as artist, McBain continued to offer his services as a designer to non-commercial projects, from a journal of African diaspora thought to a local organization supporting the re-integration of former inmates into Chicago’s southside community.

VI. After-Thought

These present-day advertisements—Michael Jordan silhouetted in transcendent flight, Barack Obama outlined in the style of populist street art and early black beauty products, Chief Keef detached from his own image—exemplify the questions that continue to animate the graphic design of race. As celebrities and as logos—as subjects and objects of design—they command a presence in the nation’s consumer society, while relying on the symbolic power of blackness that sells not only goods but abstract ideas of flight, hope, and wealth.

Today’s global economy and digital media disseminate images of African Americans that can sell nearly anything to anyone, and have enlarged opportunities for black purchasing power, professional advancement, and creative expression in the American consumer society. Yet, the connection between success in the culture industry and durable change in political and economic life has often been fraught. Can a market translate into community? Do advertisers deliver an authentic black culture—or a consumable black style? How can the cultural value attached to blackness be translated into profit for African American people?

These questions not only follow from the history of African Americans in commercial art but also speak to the centrality of race in how we understand—and how we will shape—the unsettled future design of American life.