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Servance Dancers

by Paulette Richards

In the depths of the Great Depression, George Servance was entranced with the antics of a dancing doll he saw at a five-and-dime store. The thirteen-year-old, who had never owned any toys, asked his father to buy it, but a dollar was more than the family could afford. Instead George's father said, "You can make it." So with an apple crate, a butcher knife and two large matchsticks, young George set to work and made his first dancing doll. For the rest of his life, George Servance continued making his own versions of this toy.

Limberjack or jig dolls are a very old form of puppet. In Medieval Europe, buskers used them to accompany musical performances and attract audiences. Folk artists in colonial America carved them. With the rise of the minstrel show in the mid-nineteenth century, the most popular limberjack characters became minstrel caricatures of African American dancers. Some of these figures were mass-produced as "Dancing Dan" dolls. As late as the 1950s, a battery-powered Dancing Dan was a popular toy produced by Bell Products Company. Due to their association with minstrelsy, jig dolls fell out of fashion in the 1960s, but George Servance reclaimed the limberjack as a joyful representation of African American experience.

Servance was a self-taught artist who honed his woodworking skills in the famous furniture factories of Thomasville, North Carolina. He used scraps of wood salvaged from the factories for his own carved figures. Thus, the heads of his black figures were made of fine mahogany; he used poplar for white figures. Servance carved the bodies of all his figures from soft pine with sharp sartorial details on the front side, while sturdy poplar backs supported the dowel that suspended the figure as it danced. The legs were all made of mahogany to add weight that made them sprightly dancers. Small details like bow ties were made from popsicle sticks. Servance saw divine spirit in the different types of wood he carved, and would always praise God for his talent before starting to work.

Some of the figures had flat heads, while some had round heads with skillfully carved features. Servance's wife Donnis painted many of the faces. All were painstakingly finished with many coats of paint. The care with which Servance crafted his figures affirmed the value of African American figurative art, even though his figures came from a folk art tradition that had long demeaned African Americans.



Photo by Paulette Richards.



Photo by Paulette Richards.

He also dressed all his “entertainer” characters in tuxedos, a strategy that African American performers like the elegant tap dancers Cholly Atkins and Honi Coles employed in the 1930s to project an image of refinement, in contrast to the minstrel caricatures that pervaded popular culture of the time.



Photo by Paulette Richards.

Other Servance characters included a military cadet, a preacher, a doctor, a clown, a farmer, and a soul brother from the “black is beautiful” era. Servance did not confine himself to creating black figures, however. He also created white figures and some anthropomorphic figures including a cat, a pig, and a bulldog, as well as donkey and elephant characters he created for elections.

Servance most often performed his puppets to bluegrass or country music, but they could dance to any upbeat tune, including jazz. When performing, he would dress like the puppet he was working. Some of the figures had props, such as canes or pipes. In addition to performing his puppets to attract customers, Servance also presented workshops in schools to show children how they were made.

In 1993, Servance received a North Carolina Folk Heritage Award from the North Carolina Arts Council. He passed away in March 2008 at the age of 86. Servance had lived for many years with one lung because he had lost the other to cancer. But he said that “My life has been extended because of these dolls.”

To see the Servance Dancers in motion, visit these sites:

Baker Dancing Doll <https://youtu.be/8IRfEPtB5vs>

Cat Dancing Doll <https://youtu.be/0bz-UR2ier0>

Pig Dancing Doll <https://youtu.be/TkVEtkqGh5k>

Farmer Dancing Doll <https://youtu.be/8VfW3n8ppeM>

The Entertainer Dancing Doll <https://youtu.be/gfrZvTZDDys>

Farmer Dancing Doll 2 <https://youtu.be/ZFMQ1asG9H4>

Parts of Servance Dancing Dolls <https://youtu.be/xWEuOnvdGvs>

Works Cited

Agud, Ana. “George Servance, Jr. sat on his stool and the only thing that moved was the hand that made his handmade wooden doll dance and the foot that kept time with the music.” *The Dispatch*, December 10, 2001.

Hinson, Glenn. “The Lord Gave Me the Gift of Carving”: The Artistry of George and Donnis Servance. *North Carolina Folklore Journal* 40.2, Summer/Fall 1993.