

MINSTRELSY



Minstrelsy

Introduction

Minstrel shows, also called minstrelsy, were a type of theatrical performance, in which actors played figures based on racial stereotypes. They were very popular in the United States from the early 19th to the early 20th century. Blackface, where white actors darkened their skin to enact racist stereotypes, was one form of minstrel shows popular among white audiences.

In this activity, you will examine three early 20th century photos of a theater group known as the Morris Brothers Comedy Shows (later named Morris and Ragland Show). The Morris Brothers was a theater and musical group that performed in Arkansas in the early 20th century. Their program included minstrel shows and specifically blackface. We do not know much about them but from the three photos used in this exercise, we can learn a lot about the nature of their performance and about their audience.

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Morris Brothers Musical Comedy Company members pose outside of house. From left to right: Jim Morris, Laura Walker Morris, Perry Morris, Cahal Morris, and an unidentified Morris brother, ca. 1912 (Morris Family Photograph Collection)

Questions:

1. Describe the Morris family as shown in this picture.
2. Examine the banners behind the family. What were they used for? What can we learn about the shows that the group performed from the banners?
3. Why do you think the group is called “Morris *Brothers* Musical Comedy Company” when at least one member is not a Morris brother (which member)?

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Laura Leona Walker Morris and Perry Henry Morris act in a minstrel show, ca. 1912 (Morris Family Photograph Collection)

Questions:

1. Examine and describe the two individuals in the picture.
 - Who are they?
 - What are they wearing?
 - What are they doing?
 - What objects are they using?
2. How is the black character presented in this photo? Is the white character presented in the same way?
3. What kind of show are these two actors performing?

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Perry Henry Morris and unidentified performer, ca. 1912 (Morris Family Photograph Collection)

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Based on your analysis of all the three photos of the Morris Brothers, answer the following questions:

1. Who do you think was the target audience of this comedy group?
2. What do you think was the purpose of blackface minstrelsy?
3. Although these photos show us how white Americans spent their leisure time in the early 20th century, they also tell us something very important about the African American experience at the time. What can we learn about the experience of African Americans in the South in the early 20th century from these photos?
4. Based on what you have learned about blackface minstrelsy, why would it be inappropriate and offensive for a white person to darken their skin and pretend that they are a person of color?
5. How does what you have learned about blackface minstrelsy connect to what you learned previously about the African American experience?