



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3054

Frank Dumont (1848-1919)
Minstrelsy Scrapbook

1850-1902

7 boxes, 1.25 lin. feet

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Related Collections at Minstrel and Variety Scrapbook, c. 1880, HSP

HSP: Scrapbook Collection

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Abstract

Frank Dumont (1848-1919), born in New York to French immigrants, began performing in blackface minstrel troupes as a youngster. He moved to Philadelphia while a young man and in 1895 purchased a theater, where he produced minstrel shows exclusively. In 1911 he moved to a different theater, which became known as Dumont's theater, and managed a troupe called "Dumont's Minstrels." He was married twice; his first marriage ended in divorce and his second wife, Nellie (b. 1857) outlived him by twenty years. Frank Dumont worked until his death in 1919. He died in the box office of his theater.

Frank Dumont's scrapbook about the history of minstrelsy, created in 1902, contains more than fifty years of documentation about minstrelsy and its origins, including broadsides, programs, sheet music, photographs, articles, a few letters, and Dumont's handwritten notes.

Background note

Frank Dumont, the son of French immigrants Francis and Zoy Dumont, was born in New York in 1848. A performer, manager, writer, and composer, Dumont was an active participant in the minstrel culture of the late nineteenth century. He joined a minstrel troupe as a youngster, and by 1862, was a member of Christy's Minstrels. He left Christy's troupe later that year to be a part of Arlington and Donniker's Minstrels.

Around 1880, Dumont moved to Philadelphia with his parents. In 1895 he purchased the Eleventh Street Opera House (near Ranstead Street), which had been the home of minstrel shows for many years. In 1911 he sold the theater, purchased the nearby Dime Museum, located on the northwest corner of Ninth and Arch Streets, and changed the name to Dumont's Theater. The troupe he managed was known as "Dumont's Minstrels."

In addition to performing as a minstrel and managing a theater and a troupe, Dumont was also a prolific writer. He wrote perhaps hundreds of skits and plays and also authored a number of musical shows. His 1899 book, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*, was meant to educate his fellow performers about the finer points of minstrelsy. The *Guide* contained skits, jokes, and songs featuring stereotypical black characters, as

well as instructions on how to apply blackface properly. Dumont went on to publish a number of other instructive books of gags, jokes, and skits.

Dumont, born several years after minstrelsy became a popular form of entertainment, was also an avid student of minstrelsy's history. Blackface minstrelsy took root in America in the 1840s. Thomas Rice, Dan Emmett, and Edwin P. Christy are now recognized as three of the founders of blackface minstrelsy. These men began their careers by joining the circus and performing tunes in blackface. Rice usually performed alone, while Emmett and Christy formed minstrel troupes. All three had traveled in the American South at some point, and created material for their acts by observing, exaggerating, and exploiting southern slave songs and dances. Minstrel shows became an extremely popular form of mass entertainment, especially in urban areas. A typical show expressed political themes that had close ties to the Democratic Party: anti-temperance, territorial expansion, and a pro-South stance that justified slavery and depicted blacks as innately inferior to whites.

Before the Civil War the typical minstrel troupe consisted of four to six white men playing banjo, tambourine, bones, and fiddle or accordion. Minstrels usually came from middle-class urban families in the mid-Atlantic or Midwest. Donning flamboyant costumes, outlandish wigs and black makeup, often made from burnt cork, these clownish performers entertained audiences by singing, dancing, telling jokes, and performing skits. Some shows featured dapper men in blackface, representing northern blacks, as well as more disheveled and tattered men who personified common perceptions of southern slaves. Songs and dances often caricatured slave culture, and performers sang and spoke with exaggerated southern "slave" dialects. Minstrels usually depicted the stereotypical "happy ducky," completely satisfied with his subservient role and too foolish to deserve better. Minstrelsy contributed greatly to the popularization of characters like Zip Coon and Jim Crow and perpetuated the notion that blacks were lazy, thieving, simple-minded tricksters. Tunes like Stephen Foster's "The Old Folks at Home," portraying slaves "still longing for the old plantation," were typical of the minstrel programs. Many other songs that eventually became part of mainstream culture, like "Dixie," originated in minstrel shows.

Although Frank Dumont's career flourished in the post-war years, blackface minstrelsy was not as popular as it had once been. It seems, however, to have been prevalent in Philadelphia through the end of the nineteenth century. African-American minstrel troupes, which became increasingly more common, earned success and acclaim during Reconstruction. These troupes were often managed by whites. Dumont continued to perform in and manage minstrel shows featuring white performers until his 1919 death in the theater's box office. The theater burned down in 1929. Nellie Dumont (b. 1853), who became Frank's second wife after his first marriage ended in divorce, died in 1939.

Scope & content

In 1902 Frank Dumont created an enormous scrapbook (33"x 24"x 4") of 190 pages that documents the history of minstrelsy in America. In his scrapbook, Dumont sought to demonstrate "the undisputed fact that minstrelsy sprang from the circus." All of the

materials pasted into the scrapbook were meant to give support to that assertion. Dumont intended that his creation would have an audience; in his handwritten introduction he refers to “the reader.” Included in the scrapbook are hundreds of broadsides, advertisements for minstrel performances, sheet music, programs, and photographs of performers (both with and without blackface), many of whom are identified in captions.

The contents of the scrapbook do not appear to be in any particular order, although most items that specifically refer to the circus are near the beginning. Most of the pages are numbered at the top, however, a few other items or pages seem to have been added at a later date. In addition to the ephemera, Dumont provided many notes throughout the volume that emphasize the importance of certain items and help further his theory of minstrelsy’s origin. Whether Dumont’s claim was presented in order to refute other theories is not clear. Although Dumont’s influence on minstrelsy can be detected through the letters and articles included in the scrapbook, as well as the inclusion of his name on some of the broadsides, the scrapbook was created before Dumont began his own minstrel troupe in 1911.

Dumont’s compilation includes programs and advertisements for many popular minstrel troupes, including Christy’s Minstrels, Bryant’s Minstrels, Emerson’s Minstrels, Duprez and Benedict’s Minstrels, and Newcomb’s Minstrels. Most of these troupes performed in New York and Philadelphia, although there are a handful of broadsides for venues as far away as San Francisco. Unfortunately, although nearly all of the broadsides advertise the month and day of the performances, few provide the year. In several instances Dumont wrote the year below. Among the performers whose photographs are included are Dan Bryant and his brothers, Neil and Jerry; Frank Brower; Richard Hooley; and Billy Emerson.

There are many broadsides advertising Carncross Minstrels, also known as Carncross and Dixey’s Minstrels, who performed at Philadelphia’s Eleventh Street Opera House for many years. The venue was regularly billed as “The Family Resort.” Frank Dumont wrote skits and performed for this troupe, although many of the materials in the scrapbook pre-date his involvement. Among the many skits performed there over the years were “Holiday on the Plantation,” “I-O-Ante, or The Fairy Councilman,” “Colored Tourists in a Pullman Car,” “Little Fly-Coon,” “Black Bigamy, or Thrice Married,” and “Scenes at Wanamaker’s,” the last of which was written by Dumont.

Also included are several newspaper and magazine articles, including an 1889 article from *Harper’s* about minstrelsy, an article by Dumont entitled “The History of Minstrelsy,” which was published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1896, and a 1902 article published in the *Philadelphia Sunday Press* entitled “Why is a Minstrel Never a Matinee Idol,” also by Frank Dumont, identified as “the Famous Funmaker.”

The handful of letters mixed in with Dumont’s memorabilia includes an 1896 letter from Dan Emmett about the history of his troupe, the Virginia Minstrels. There is also a 1902 press release from M. Witmark & Sons, publishers, announcing that a rich selection of Dumont’s works were available for sale. Additionally, there are some short essays by

Dumont about various aspects of minstrelsy, including costumes (between pages 36 and 37), music (page 53), and the history of Christy and Wood's Minstrels (page 58). Among the more miscellaneous items included is George Christy's 1861 membership certificate for the "Minstrel Fund Association," a mutual beneficial society.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

Minstrel and Variety Scrapbook, c. 1880, HSP Scrapbook Collection

Bibliography

Bean, Annemarie, ed. *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

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_____. Helen's funny babies : an Ethiopian burlesque, in one scene. New York: De Witt, c1878.

_____. The lunatic : a negro sketch, in one scene / by Frank Dumont ; arranged by Charles White. Chicago: Dramatic Pub. Co., 1876.

_____. Too little vagrants, or, beware of tramps : a farce in one act. Chicago: Dramatic Pub. Co., 1897.

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Northern Illinois University Libraries' Beadle and Adams Dime Novel Digitization Project, http://www.niulib.niu.edu/badndp/dumont_frank.html (accessed 21 July 2004)

Rice, Edward LeRoy. *Monarchs of minstrelsy, from "Daddy" Rice to Date*. New York: Kenny Publishing Co., 1911.

Subjects

Advertising – Circus
Blackface entertainers – History
Circus – History
Circus performers – 19th century
Minstrel music
Minstrels – 19th century
Minstrels – 20th century
Minstrel shows – History
Playbills
Theater programs
Theaters – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Bryant, Dan, 1833-1875
Christy, George N., 1827-1868
Dumont, Frank, 1848-1919
Emmett, Daniel Decatur, 1815-1904
Hooley, Richard M., 1822-1893

Bryant's Minstrels
Carncross Minstrels
Carncross and Dixey's Minstrels
Christy Minstrels
Duprez & Benedict's Minstrels
Emerson's Minstrels
George Christy's Minstrels
Newcomb's Minstrels

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Provenance unknown.

Alternative format

None.

Preferred citation

Cite as: Frank Dumont Scrapbook (Collection 3054), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

This volume's condition before processing was extremely fragile. Due to the heaviness of the pages and the brittleness of the paper, the pages could not be turned. In order to preserve the contents of the scrapbook, the volume has been disbound. Each page is individually encapsulated in mylar, and the pages are housed in six boxes. The scrapbook's original boards are housed in a box at the end of the collection.

Processing made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this finding aid do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Box listing

Due to the scrapbook's extremely fragile condition, it has been disbound and each page has been encapsulated in mylar. Pages are contained in six boxes, with the scrapbook's original boards housed in a separate box at the end.

Pages	Box
Pages 1-18	1
Pages 19-42	2
Pages 43-66	3
Pages 67-108	4
Pages 109-140	5
Pages 141-190	6
Boards	7