



Episode 7, 2012: Our Colored Heroes

Tukufu Zuberi: I've been a History Detective for ten years. I've been answering your questions. You bring the object, I bring the answer. Now, it's time for the History Detectives to work for me.

I just got into collecting. Elyse, Wes, they told me that I should do it.

So I begin buying vintage posters featuring heroic Africans and African Americans. Each of my posters has a unique story.

This one, "Our Colored Heroes". What drew me to this particular poster was just the shocking imagery.

It's a World War I poster, printed in Chicago in 1918.

I have my own ideas about why this poster was made. I haven't had time to pursue it myself. But *History Detectives*, I want you to tell me why it was made and who made it?

Elyse Luray: So, where is this artifact?

Tukufu: It's over at the Penn Museum.

Elyse: Ok.

Tukufu: Let's go check it out.

Tukufu: So, my posters are going to be on exhibition here...

Elyse: Wow.

Tukufu: ... in April 2013.

Tukufu: I've collected posters regarding African and African-Americans in battle.

Elyse: Wow, nice.

Tukufu: So, this is the collection that your recommendation produced.

Elyse: You've – Really, you've been doing a good job. How many do you have, Tukufu?

Tukufu: I have 40.

Elyse: That's the first one you ever bought?

Tukufu: That's the first one I ever bought. I bought it on a shoot.

Elyse: On a shoot, I remember you telling me that.

Tukufu: Yes, yes, yes. Let's look at the one we're looking at.

Elyse: Ok. It's very pretty, right? I mean, it looks like a painting, almost.

Tukufu: But it's an odd painting. I mean, you have black men stabbing white men, stepping on white men. This is in 1918, and race relations in America in 1918 are not nice. Nobody is saying heroic things about African-Americans. "Our Colored Heroes"... This, to me, is obviously a recruitment poster.

Elyse: You know I'm not really so sure it's a recruitment poster.

Tukufu: What do you think it is?

Elyse: I mean, it doesn't really say, "Enlist," it doesn't say to me, "Come join up."

Elyse: Well, I'll tell you what's weird for me. I don't know if you remember, I did a story on the - what's called the Red Hand Flag...

Tukufu: I do remember that story.

Elyse: Okay. So, that was about African-Americans fighting in World War I. And during the time, white men did not want to fight side-by-side with African-Americans. So, those African-American soldiers were sent to France to fight under the French. So, this is weird to me that in our own country, they would actually make a poster, or a print, of an African-American, calling him a hero.

Tukufu: You do have a quote on there from a general, General Pershing. He was the general in charge of the America Expeditionary Forces.

Elyse: So it says, "Honored as heroes," and it says "Henry Johnson" and "Needham Roberts".

Elyse: Obviously you've looked into this. So, what do we know so far?

Tukufu: Well, we know that these two gentlemen did exist, and that they did receive this very important honor from the French, which is the Cross of War.

Elyse: And so, this truly was a battle?

Tukufu: This truly happened.

Elyse: So, it says, Renesch, Chicago. I'm assuming you looked into that printing company?

Tukufu: Couldn't find anything.

Although various other Renesch prints exist online, there's no detailed information about the company.

Elyse: What specifically, and no one's ever asked you this question before. You always ask everybody else this question, right?

Tukufu: I know, I know.

Elyse: So, what am I going to say?

Tukufu: What specifically do I want you to find out?

Elyse: Exactly!

Tukufu: Was this a recruitment poster? And who made it and why?

Elyse: Maybe we could split this up, I'm thinking.

Tukufu: Why don't I find out why this poster was made, and you know, what it was supposed to be used for, and you take care of the who made it?

Elyse: Sounds like a plan to me!

Tukufu: If this is a military recruitment poster, it might be mentioned in government archives. So, I asked the office to pull any records for Johnson, Roberts, and this battle, and they made a discovery. Another history detective is already on the trail: New York Senator Charles Schumer.

He's been preparing a dossier for the award of the Medal of Honor to our guy Henry Johnson.

And, he's seen our poster before...

Senator Schumer: In our submission to Department of Defense U.S Army, we included this poster.

Tukufu: Now, do you know if this poster was used for recruitment?

Senator Schumer: I don't.

Tukufu: But the senator does have proof the U.S. Government featured Johnson to promote enlistment over 20 years later.

Senator Schumer: This is a recruitment poster that they used, and they have Henry Johnson in it. It says, "Sergeant Henry Johnson, American Hero World War I. An inspiration to our fighting men today." The army used Johnson, and his heroism, as a way to recruit black soldiers in World War II.

Tukufu: You've been involved in this battle to give him his due recognition for quite some time.

Senator Schumer: Yes. It's always good to undo errors of the past.

Tukufu: Schumer explains how Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts were members of the 369th infantry regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters. They were the first Americans of any race to be awarded the Croix de Guerre, one of the highest French military honors, but at the time, received no medals from their own country.

Senator Schumer: The great tragedy in American history is slavery and then Jim Crow and the discrimination that existed in the Armed Forces until after World War II.

When Woodrow Wilson announced war against Germany, stating, "The world must be safe for democracy," the message resonated with many African Americans. They saw the war effort as an opportunity to also advance civil rights on the segregated home front.

Senator Schumer: For Johnson, who faced discrimination back home and who wasn't allowed to fight alongside white soldiers, and yet here he is, risking his life. What does that say about a man?

Tukufu: Can you paint the picture for me of exactly what happened on that night, May 15th, 1918?

Senator: It was a dark night and there was a well-prepared group of over 20 German soldiers. They surprised the Americans, and Johnson and Needham were sort of in a forward position. Needham was wounded. Johnson singlehandedly, with one knife, he pierced the helmet of an enemy soldier and the knife went through his head and knocked him down. He got rid of a few more with the butt of his rifle. And he was like a whirlwind of complete bravery. While this was happening, he was shot at and maintained lots of different injuries, but didn't stop until the Germans were retreated and he got Needham back to the lines. Henry Johnson's actions deserve the Medal of Honor. Let me tell you, if he were white he would've gotten it.

Tukufu: Why?

Senator Schumer: All of the standards of bravery, valor, saving the lives of others and risking your life.

Tukufu: He says the communiqué from General Pershing, cited on the poster, is crucial evidence for the military who are currently reexamining the case.

Senator: They require a chain of command depiction of the valor. Now here we have General Pershing, he's the top of the chain of command, he was head of all the armed forces.

Tukufu: Did the government make this poster?

Schumer: This is clearly a recruitment poster, whether the poster we're looking at here is... you're going to have to find that out, professor.

Brandeis Associate Professor Chad Williams is familiar with the government's campaign to rally support for the war. He's meeting me at Penn Museum.

Tukufu: This is the poster, "Our Colored Heroes".

Chad Williams: This is a very, albeit dramatic, but an artistic representation of African American military service, um, on the western front. It would have looked much different. The landscape would have been completely devastated by years of war. There would have been no trees. Much different. What happened that night was much more gruesome than this picture would ever dare to depict.

Tukufu: Chad says that somewhat false depiction is not unusual. Official U.S. Government recruiting posters frequently presented a rosy or self-serving image of the war. Many Americans didn't want to get involved in a European conflict, so the job of winning hearts and minds was given to the Committee on Public Information or CPI.

Chad: Former journalist George Creel was in charge of it, and it was the propaganda wing of the federal government, designed to promote the war effort and this sense of 100% Americanism.

Tukufu: Initially, the CPI was ambivalent about targeting African Americans.

Chad: At the earliest stages of the war, the War Department made a decision that they were going to restrict the opportunity for African Americans.

Tukufu: After first allowing volunteers, the government later restricted enlistment to a draft. Over 1 million African Americans responded, and around 370,000 men were inducted into the army.

Chad: The American military wanted to use African Americans strictly as non-combatants, envisioned them as being laborers in uniforms.

Tukufu: An image like this would have directly contradicted the government's Jim Crow stance on blacks in the military.

Chad: There's no indication, at least on the picture, that the government produced it. But on the other hand, it is consistent with a growing sense of racial pride, racial consciousness, racial militancy that is taking place amongst African American's during the years of the war. I think whoever did produce this poster was trying to engender a sense of racial pride.

Tukufu: It's time to hand this investigation off to Elyse.

How you doing?

She's looking into who made this poster – hopefully her “who” can shed light on my “why.”

Elyse: I'm headed to the Society of Illustrators to meet with Vera Grant. She's an expert on visual iconography.

So I guess my first question to you is, who is this printing company? E.G. ...

Vera Grant: Renesch.

Elyse: Renesch. In Chicago.

Vera: Right. This printing company we know that it was only around for about five years. All right? We know that Renesch himself was of German heritage.

Elyse: Oh, really?

Vera: Really.

Elyse: That's ironic. Do you know who the artist is?

Vera: It's hard to tell who the artist was. Printers employed a variety of artists to come in and do their artwork for them. Whether the artist was African American or not, that we don't know.

Elyse: So it's not a government issued recruitment poster?

Vera: The, uh, Office of Government Printing at that time was doing their own printing. They weren't collaborating with printers until World War II.

All of these posters were printed by Renesch. We have a couple of examples here. He's marketing them to the white communities, immigrant communities, and the black communities.

Elyse: So, they're selling almost the exact same poster to the whites and the African Americans.

The Renesch Company understood that many African Americans were filled with pride at the symbolism of black soldiers fighting for their country, and at the exploits of Johnson and Roberts that night in France. But I still don't know what our poster was made for, until Vera shows me one more thing.

Elyse: What do you think this poster is?

Tukufu: Well I'm still thinking this is definitely a recruitment poster, it just smacks of it.

Elyse: I tell Tukufu that the poster was not made for the U.S. Government.

Tukufu: And so what would you call this poster then?

Elyse: Look at this.

Vera: This is an advertisement for our poster here: "Our Colored Heroes." It lists this poster along with a few others marketed to the African American community.

Elyse: So, it's pure profit.

Vera: This is a profit-making venture.

Tukufu: [laughs] How much did it sell for back then?

Elyse: 25 cents.

Tukufu: 25 cents! Totally interesting. A white German in America 1918 doing this poster. I thought you were going to give me more information about why this was an, a recruitment poster and I was right and everybody else was wrong. But that's not the case.

Elyse: Nope. I have another surprise for you.

Tukufu: Oh, really?

Elyse: The office discovered that despite the lack of recognition Johnson received while alive, as a veteran he was qualified to be interred at Arlington National Cemetery.

So, tomorrow someone is going to meet you there.

Tara Johnson: I am Tara Johnson. I am the granddaughter of Henry Johnson. And this is my son DeMarqus.

Tukufu: And I see you're following in his footsteps?

DeMarqus Townsend: Yes. I served in the Marine Corps for eight years

Tara: We are a family that loves our country. My father was a Tuskegee Airman. My cousin served in Vietnam. And I have a nephew that's retiring from the armed services this year.

Tukufu: Talk to me about the life of Henry Johnson when he returned from the war.

Tara: He got a parade. He didn't get any medals from this country. No other recognition. No benefits. He couldn't take care of himself or his family. He died very sad and destitute with injuries that he couldn't live with.

Tukufu: He dies relatively young.

Tara: Yes, he does.

Tukufu: All right so what is this? What is this you have here? Now, this is the one that the French gave him?

DeMarqus: Yes, sir. The Croix de Guerre. We have here the Purple Heart.

Tukufu: And this Purple Heart—when did he get this?

Tara: Clinton had to give it to him.

Tukufu: Clinton had to give it to him. So, there's - there's an effort to rectify the past.

Tara: Right.

Tukufu: What would it mean to you for Henry Johnson to receive the Medal of Honor?

DeMarqus: I – I cannot explain or add words to the heartfelt emotions I would probably have. He wasn't a glory seeker. He had one mission, and that was to bring Needham Roberts, his buddy, his fellow soldier, back. That's why it's so important that he gets his due.