

Crucian Seamstresses Portray the Dignity of Workers as They Demonstrate Dignity in
Crafting Dolls
By Elizabeth Rezende

SVIH member Carmella A. Richards, known for her intense and long-standing interest in Crucian mahogany furniture making, has spent years searching the records to locate the names of the numerous joiners on St. Croix. Joiners were carpenters who crafted fine mahogany pieces, which they learned to create while they were apprentices under master craftsmen. Her Harlem apartment displays a few selected pieces bringing Cruzan culture within her rooms. In 2003, Richards gave a slide/lecture presentation on her preliminary work at an annual Society meeting and is currently working on a book, in which she is incorporating information that she gathered from documents in Danish repositories and in interviewing local craftsmen and their apprentices.

Now it emerges that she is a collector of different types of vintage - Virgin Islands dolls. Those shown here are nine inches high and were created and sold specifically here on St. Croix. There is no dichotomy in the two areas of her interests because at the heart of both furniture and doll- making is the tangible results of the dignity of work.

According to Richards, there are 14 nine-inch “characters,” each lovingly crafted by patient and skilled hands. The detailing of each character worker, holding the tools of his/her trade, is a marvel to behold.



Each figurine is made of stuffed cotton. The women are particularly distinctive in their starched cottons with either striped, checked or gingham fabrics. Their variously- designed collars show attention to detail as they are bound with fabric edge finishes such as multicolored braiding and complementary ric rac. This same detail on the collar is carried out to the edging of their skirts. The occupations of all figurines are easily distinguishable as they carry the tools of their trades. Both male and female laborers with machetes in their

hands transport the bound loads of sugar cane stalks on their heads. For women, head ties are mandatory in the hot Caribbean sun; floral, patterned, and printed materials are utilized.

The men are not to be out done. They each sport printed and checked tucked-in shirts. And although their trousers are patched at the knees, they are starched, indicating a attention to their attire. The corded string belts hold up the starched pants. When not carrying burlap or crocus bags of sugar and charcoal on their heads, the men are wearing straw hats.

For the woman of the photo below, beneath her straw hat she has her hair bound in a madras head tie. Madras was a distinctive red, yellow and green plaid cotton imported from India and brought to the Danish West Indies via European vessels.



In looking at the group of dolls, not only do they represent people who displayed a pride in their work and carried the products of the labor proudly, they readily demonstrate the pride the seamstresses took in creating these miniature artifacts.

Carmella Richards is calling upon those who knew of people who crafted these gems. She can be reached at rustoptwistgirl@yahoo.com