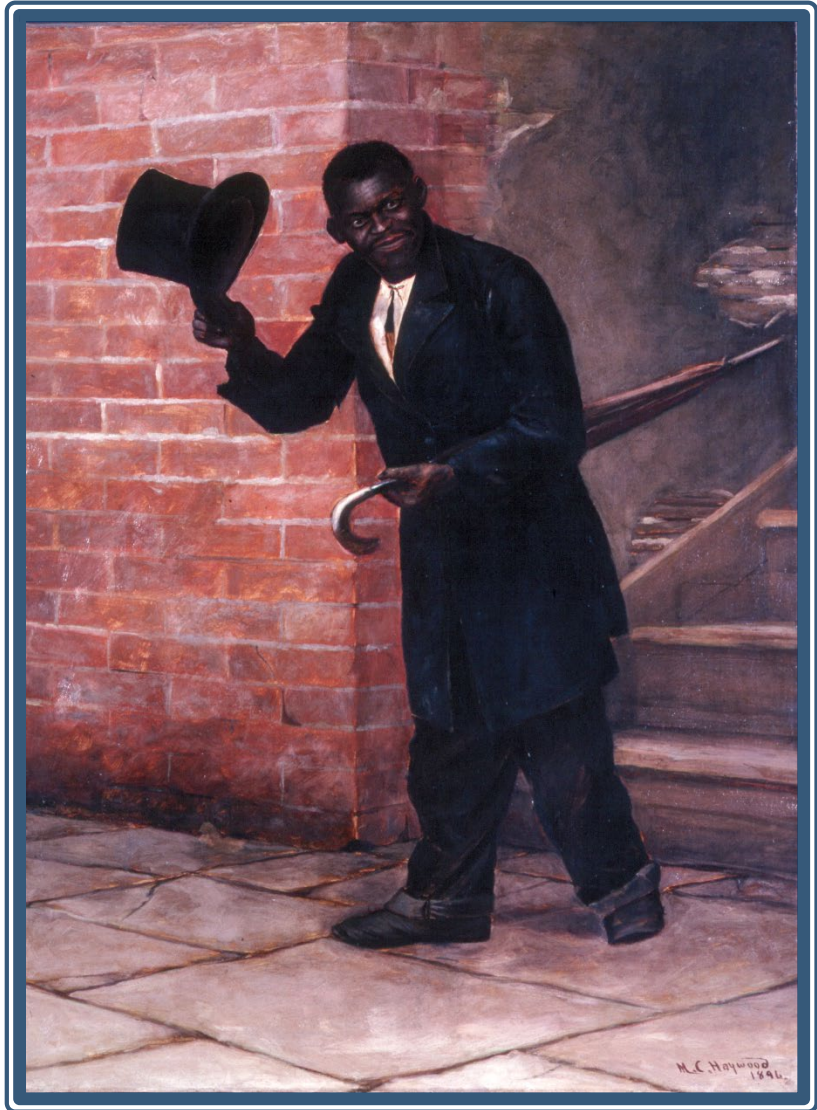


COMMUNITY CURATOR

A Project of the Kansas City Museum at Corinthian Hall

Portrait of “Doc” Brown, Cakewalker
Glenn North



Portrait of Joseph “Doc” Brown
By: M.C. Haywood
Kansas City Museum Catalog no.
33.1940.b.15
Date: 1896
Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 41 x 53 in.

F OR BLACK FOLKS,

history is a tricky thing. Far too often we are underrepresented, misrepresented, or selectively represented in ways that produce pain rather than joy, shame rather than pride. It is painful studying American history because when traveling back just a few decades to the turbulent times of the 1950s and 60s, we are immediately confronted with rampant police brutality, lynchings, and church bombings. Not far beyond that lies the horror of slavery. And it's hard not to feel shame when, historically, we see ourselves portrayed as eye-popping pickaninnies, mammies and minstrels. So, the first time I came across Millard C. Haywood's 1896 portrait of famed Kansas City cakewalker, Joseph "Doc" Brown – wearing a generous smile, with his back bent, gently waving his top hat as if to let white folks know he was a good Negro – the two emotions that came racing to the surface were, as you may have guessed, pain and shame. However, once I was able to redirect those emotions, which is a skill Black folks have finely honed, I came to the realization that Haywood's painting had an incredible story to tell.

Joseph "Doc" Brown, also known as Doctor William Henry Joseph Cutter Brown, was born circa 1835. He was a slave on the Meredith Miles Marmaduke estate at Arrow Rock, near Marshall, Missouri. Many years later, in 1868, he moved to Kansas City and began to develop a name for himself as a champion cakewalker. In an interview, one of his closest friends, Wilson Fitzpatrick, stated, "I knew him in Marshal when he carried papers there. He always had a crowd following him. I told him that town was too small for his talents and that he ought to go to Kansas City . . . "[He] was a 'nachel-bohn' cakewalker . . ." The *cakewalk* that Fitzpatrick spoke of originated as a dance contest for enslaved people in the antebellum South. In his book, *From Cakewalk to Concert Halls*, Thomas L. Morgan explains:

"White slave owners were fond of awarding cakes to the best slave dancers at special social gatherings. The slaves themselves, however, were developing their dancing into a parody of the mannerisms and fashions of the white southern social elite. Couples, dressed in their finest clothes, would lean back, and perform a high-stepping promenade." The parody that the cakewalk exhibited speaks to the importance of Black cultural expression from a historical perspective. In a time when Black people had no social, political, or economic control, music and dance were used as an effective way to express pain, to find relief in the midst of suffering, and to, if only in some small way, fight the power.

"Doc" Brown was able to elevate this novel style of dance into a highly competitive art form. By the time the 1890s rolled around, the cakewalks that Brown competed in were being written about regularly in *The Kansas City Times* and *The Kansas City Star*. This was at a time when most events occurring in the Black community were not considered newsworthy. Consequently, these reports offer some insights as to how talented "Doc" Brown must have been. With people reading headlines like "MR. BROWN SETS A FAST PACE AT THE CAKE WALK

AND WINS” and “DOC BROWN EASILY A WINNER IN THE THIRD REGIMENTS CONTEST,” it wasn’t long before “Doc” Brown was one of Kansas City’s most celebrated heroes. As his close friend Wilson Fitzpatrick expressed, “He sure made a hit here. Why, he had a whole wagon to himself in the Carnival parade in 1893, and he was a walkin’ and a-prancin’ all through that parade.” Not one to be humble, “Doc” said of himself, “I’ve been a walking foh cakes a long time . . . Nevah walked foh a cake in my life ef I didn’t git er prize.” He was so thoroughly dedicated to cakewalking that he would accept no position that involved hard labor. “Ah cain’t do it,” he was noted as saying. “Dis diabolical work stiffens up mah joints so’s Ah cain’t walk wid de propah suppleness.”

“Doc” Brown made such a profound impact on the citizens of Kansas City that in 1899, Charles L. Johnson, a local composer of national renown, wrote a song “Doc Brown’s Cakewalk” in his honor. Johnson said of Brown, “[He] is noted in Kansas City and vicinity for the many comical and unusual things he does and says but as ‘The Champion Cakewalker’ of the country is where he shines. He has met all comers in this line and has never failed to *“take the cake.”* “Doc Brown’s Cakewalk” was Johnson’s first published ragtime composition and the first of his tunes to attain local recognition. It gained popularity when the legendary band leader John Philip Sousa played the song while visiting Kansas City near the turn of the twentieth century. With the benefit of hindsight, we see that artists like “Doc” Brown and Charles L. Johnson paved the way for Kansas City to become one of the great centers for the evolution of jazz music in the 1930s and 40s.

As mentioned earlier, in 1896 “Doc” Brown was immortalized in a large (5’ x 6’) oil-on-canvas portrait by local artist, Millard C. Haywood. The painting was owned by the Kansas City Board of Education and was donated to the Kansas City Museum in the 1940s. In the years that followed, it nearly fell to ruin. Expressing a desire for the preservation of the painting and its history, local historian and teacher, Cynthia Litman, commented, “This is a city that collects volumes about its shapers – the Swopes, the Bentons, the Nelsons and the Pendergasts. But when it comes to Black people, ones like the (Doc) Brown . . . the past becomes muddled, chaffed, uncollected and sometimes lost.” Describing the painting as “a stoppage in time,” Litman also added, “It’s almost like something from a French impressionist. We can’t let such a beautiful piece of history slip away.” Fortunately, in 1985, the Kansas City Museum spent 3 months and \$4000 to restore the painting.

Reflecting on Cynthia Litman’s zeal to have the painting restored, I am forced to reconsider my original thoughts about the painting, and I am confronted with its quiet beauty. Perhaps rather than portraying the stereotypical docile Negro on canvas, Haywood was able to capture the essence of a consummate showman. It seems that although “Doc” Brown’s back is bent in the painting, it housed a spine as sturdy and erect as the red brick wall behind him. The confident smile and wave of his top hat lets me know that “Doc” Brown endured slavery, laughed in the face of injustice, possum trotted above racism, kangaroo hopped over poverty and cakewalked beyond the specter of minstrelsy into a class all his own. Yes, history is a tricky thing

for Black folks. It is often a source of pain and shame. But people like Doctor William Henry Joseph Cutter Brown provide those incredible occasions when history offers us joy and pride.

REFERENCES

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Glenn North joined the Kansas City Museum in 2021 as the Director of Inclusive Learning & Creative Impact and Poet-in-Residence. He received an MFA in Creative Writing from UMKC and is the author of *City of Song*, a collection of poems inspired by Kansas City's rich jazz tradition. Glenn is a Cave Canem fellow, a Callaloo creative writing fellow, and a recipient of the Charlotte Street Generative Performing Artist Award. Glenn is an adjunct English professor at Rockhurst University and is currently filling his appointment as the Poet Laureate of the 18th & Vine Historic Jazz District.



Why Black Folks Like to Dance
(A poem inspired by Portrait of Joseph “Doc” Brown by M.C. Haywood)

“For the art – the blues, the spirituals, the jazz,
the dance – was what we had in place of freedom.”
– Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

You study the darkness
of my body, desiring
to know the curve
& the line, whips scarred
my back but they never
broke my spine, you implement
strategies designed
to steal what’s inherently mine,
you want to move like me,
to groove like me,
to boogaloo like me
but your body can’t
move like mine
cause it never needed to...
I cakewalked out your slavery
& you couldn’t lynch my blues
yeah, you try to dance
like me but you stuck
with two left shoes.
My hips undulate with a passion
that shakes pinecones loose
my frame contorts in ways
that Sherlock could not deduce
with every oppressor I face
& throughout every abuse
my movements possess
a beauty that only struggle

could produce.
I keep it movin with a quickness
with a panther’s agility
got a lindyhop too fast
for the naked eye to see
I call my left leg Malcolm
And Martin is my right
I can march the streets
of Birmingham at noontime
& dance all Saturday night.
Never understood
how you could love my music,
my walk, my talk, my style
but hate me so intensely...
Why am I so reviled?
May not ever get the answers
on this side of eternity
but one thing is for certain
I’ma keep on doin me
I’ma dance like
there’s no tomorrow
And sing at the top
of my lungs
shakin my Big Black Groove Thang
until the final bell is rung.

– Glenn North

All images courtesy of Kansas City Museum Foundation and Union Station Kansas City.

The Community Curator was a program of the Kansas City Museum that invited historians and history educators from the Kansas City community to share their perspectives on artifacts they chose from the Museum collection. Community Curator lectures were presented with the actual artifact along with the observations of our Community Curator. This document has been updated since its original publication in 2012.