

Is Codognato's blackamoor jewelry at SF exhibit racist?

By [Carolyn Zinko](#) | December 12, 2017 | Updated: December 22, 2017 2:54pm

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Photo: Courtesy Of Codognato

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Are these culturally sensitive times the right time to show a blackamoor brooch in an art show? Macabre jewelry from the Italian house of Codognato is featured in the exhibition "Memento Mori," at the Serge Sorokko Gallery, 361 Sutter St., San Francisco, opening Dec. 14, 2017 through January 2018.

There's plenty to be delighted by — or squeamish about — in the Codognato exhibition at the Serge Sorokko Gallery in San Francisco. Along with the skull rings, skeleton earrings and a snake bracelet on display in "Memento Mori: Jewels by Codognato," a rare showing outside the Italian jewelry house's headquarters in Venice, are several other items poised to raise eyebrows: Three blackamoor brooches.

Blackamoors are exoticized figures of African men in subservient positions, dressed in turbans and jewels. They're a Venetian tradition and are considered collectibles in the art world. But luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana was branded racist by some consumers for its Spring 2013 collection featuring prints with dark-skinned, slave-like women and blackamoor figurine earrings.

And Princess Michael of Kent recently caused a stir and [drew outcry for being racist](#) by wearing a blackamoor pin to the Queen's Christmas lunch, a holiday event that Prince Harry's fiancée, Meghan Markle, attended. Markle is biracial.

Can these culturally sensitive times withstand the idea of a pin that depicts an African male in a bejeweled turban?

Sorokko thinks so. He says Codognato jewelry is of a quality on par with works by Fabergé, Bulgari, Cartier and JAR, which have all mounted exhibitions in museums. He specializes in contemporary art and has shown works by Donald Sultan, Sol LeWitt and Damien Hirst, among others.

"When you are dealing with a work of art, different rules apply," Sorokko says. "It's art; I'm not a jewelry store." (As is the case with other exhibitions, the Codognato pieces are for sale for 75,000 euros each, or roughly \$90,000.)

Codognato (pronounced coe-don-YAH-toe) dates to 1866; its designs are intended to be reminders of life and death. The Sorokkos are collectors of the macabre jewelry, as is Bay Area philanthropist Maria Manetti Shrem and modern-day celebrities such as pop star Elton John, model Kate Moss, actress Nicole Kidman and Princess Firyal of Jordan.

The late Vogue editor Diana Vreeland was known to collect blackamoor jewelry, notes Martin Chapman, a curator at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, who remembers that several of her blackamoor pins were shown in the "Cartier and America" exhibition here in 2009.

But even today, Denise Bradley Tyson, former director of the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, collects blackamoor jewelry, partly for cultural reasons. "Every time I wear one," she says, "they always evoke a response and provide me with an opportunity to educate about the history of the Moors."

Whether others could safely wear blackamoor jewelry without criticism (or being labeled a racist) is open to question.

"It's something that you may or may not want to wear, because of the sensitivities involved," Sorokko says. "I fully relate to the feelings it evokes. That alone does not make the object, taken out of context, unacceptable. If its real art, it transcends political correctness. It doesn't mean you can't own it. Many people may disagree with me. That's how I feel."

"Memento Mori — Jewels by Codognato," opens with a private, invitation-only party Dec. 13, and is open to the public from Dec. 14 through January, 2018 by appointment only; 361 Sutter St., San Francisco; www.sorokko.com; (415) 421-7770.

This story has been updated since it was first published.

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