

# E. w. clay's life in philadelphia series



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

During the 1830's, among the antislavery protest, freeborn blacks of Philadelphia represented the wealthiest and most educated group of African Americans in the country. They established their own schools, churches, and even a social order. Associated to the cultural and social economic status, African American clubwomen of Philadelphia were greatly ridiculed in racially prejudiced cartoons such as E. W. Clay's popular " Life in Philadelphia" series. E. W.

Clay was inspired to make these series by George and Robert Cruikshank who had published a " Life in London" series. His late 1820s feature series " Life in Philadelphia" fight with who African Americans could be in the social world; a world that relied on race and slavery as powerful signs of inequity. His response was brutally racist: in Philadelphia, those African Americans who took on the frills of urban life were strained and out of place. Clay's analysis came in the form of fourteen engraved plates, a series that was one part observation, one part artistry, and one part imagination.

Clay's series presented American spectators a cruel portrayal of black figures that offered an exaggeration in overdressed clothing and proportions, awkward poses, and thus failed to measure up to the demands of freedom and citizenship. In Clay's cartoons, not only was their style being ridicule but their language as well. In his 1828 " Is Miss Dina at home? " cartoon he mocks the person by declaring that an African American with a business card is simply a laughable concept. Blackness, as illustrated by Clay, provided his free black subjects mistaken aspirants, were always controlled by incomparable distinction.

Clay's varieties of drawings were inspired by the way some of the African American women had started to carry themselves out. They added a touch of certain things, that perhaps were not permissible by their society, and it made them give the impression trying to be different. They might have imitated their middle-class etiquette and their ways of life, but they always overreached, or as one of Clay's characters put it, "aspire too much". This series of cartoons were an observation that everything they did was taken as a joke.

Clay was not the only American caricaturist active during the Jacksonian era, but he was the first American artist to specialize in political caricature. His work was pointed towards African Americans; therefore in the south it was pointless for southern whites to purchase these images. The south already had slavery and was establishing social perimeters. Nevertheless, many people still bought his cartoons. The early success of Clay's images is example to his ability to tap into the nations fears and appeal with the dilemma on slavery and in abolition.

His "Life in Philadelphia" etchings mocked the fancy dresses, their manners, and dialects of Philadelphians, white and black. Today these images are often used as basic examples of discrimination against blacks. However, an inspection shows humorous, theatrical pictorial satire, grounded in Philadelphia culture just before the rise of the Abolition Movement. Clay's work shows that he reserved that right to comment on events and personalities regardless of political affiliation as well as the right to change his mind on issues. Although Clay's point of view varies from topic to topic, he did not always follow a party line in his caricatures.