

Statues in Williamsburg are credited with boosting fertility

December 30 2008, By Nicole Paitsel

Tom and Tammy Mace hurried over to the two wooden statues in the front lobby of Williamsburg, Va.'s Ripley's Believe It or Not! museum one December Saturday.

They stood for a few minutes conferring with one another, grabbed some brochures and slowly reached out to touch them - first, the 5-foot-tall male with his long beard and sword, then the female and her baby, whose head is discolored from being rubbed by thousands of hopeful couples.

More than 2,000 women have credited their pregnancies to the African fertility statues since their first international tour in 1996, and for the first time in eight years, the statues are back on the road.

The Maces, who live at Fort Eustis, in Newport News, Va., have been trying to conceive for several years. They've gone through a series of fertility tests and treatments, none of which have worked so far.

Tammy, who is 35, said she learned about the statues from the "Ripley's Believe it or Not!" television show and asked Tom, 38, if they could travel to Florida where the statues are normally housed.

"We've tried everything else so why not this?" she said. "It's fate that we're close enough to use it."

Although the statues are Ripley's most popular exhibit, they weren't

purchased originally for museum display. The company acquired them in 1993 as office decorations for their headquarters in Orlando, Fla. Within 13 months, 13 employees became pregnant. When the news spread, women flocked to the headquarters hoping to capture some fertility magic for themselves. Since then, Ripley's has collected thousands of letters confirming statue-assisted births and has capitalized on the phenomenon by offering keepsake certificates and blankets to "Ripley babies."

According to the museum, both statues were carved from heavy ebony wood by Baule tribesmen on the Ivory Coast of Africa some time in the 1930s. Tribal legend says that the statues are to be placed on either side of a doorway leading into the bedroom. If a woman, or her spouse, touches either of the statues as they enter the room, the woman will conceive a child. In the Baule's predominantly agrarian society, the fertility statues were prized possessions, since children were necessary as helping hands.

The 70-pound statues are displayed side-by-side at the museum's front entrance with a guest book and TV screen in between them, which replays the "Ripley's" TV show that persuaded Tammy to visit the statues. The male, a king, holds a short sword and a mango - a common African sign for fertility. The woman, a queen, is holding an infant, and many tend to rub the baby's head to assure fertility.

By 3 p.m. on the first day of the exhibit, about 20 people had signed the guest book and touched the statues along with the Maces.

And those who didn't touch the statues eyed them carefully and kept their distance, just in case their fertility magic extended a few feet. A few even rushed past with their eyes down.

Randa Cook and her friend Shania Hobson of Fairmont, W. Va., decided

to come back to the statues once they had finished the museum tour. Cook, who was well into her seventh month of pregnancy, stood by as her friend reluctantly rubbed the baby's head.

"Jeremy (my husband) is going to kill me!" said Hobson. "We want to have kids, but I don't know if I want them this soon."

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What: African fertility statues exhibit

When: Through Jan. 1

Where: Ripley's Believe It or Not! museum, 1735 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Va.

Cost: It's free to see and touch the statues. Admission to the museum is \$11.99 for children ages 5-12 and \$14.99 for adults.

Info: 757-220-9220

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Citation: Statues in Williamsburg are credited with boosting fertility (2008, December 30)

retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-12-statues-williamsburg-credited-boosting-fertility.html>

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