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Races of Mankind: The Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman

Marianne Kinkel

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In 1930, Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History commissioned sculptor Malvina Hoffman to produce three-dimensional models of racial types for an anthropology display called the Races of Mankind. In this exceptional study, Marianne Kinkel measures the colossal impact of the ninety-one bronze and stone sculptures on perceptions of race in twentieth-century visual culture, tracing their exhibition from their 1933 debut and nearly four decades at the Field Museum to numerous reuses, repackagings, reproductions, and publications that reached across the world.

Employing a keen interdisciplinary approach, Kinkel taps archival sources and period publications to construct a cultural biography of the Races of Mankind sculptures. She examines how Hoffman's collaborations with curators and anthropologists transformed the commission from a traditional physical anthropology display to a fine art exhibit. She also tracks influential exhibitions of statuettes in New York and Paris and photographic reproductions in atlases, maps, and encyclopedias. The volume concludes with the dismantling of the exhibit at the Field Museum in the late 1960s and the redeployment of some of the sculptures in new educational settings.

Kinkel demonstrates how the Races of Mankind sculptures participated in various racial paradigms by asserting fixed racial types and racial hierarchies in the 1930s, promoting the notion of a Brotherhood of Man in the 1940s, and engaging Afrocentric discourses of identity in the 1970s. Despite the enormous role the sculptures played in representing race in American visual culture, their history has been largely unrecognized until now. The first sustained examination of this influential group of sculptures, Races of Mankind: The Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman examines how the veracity of race is continually renegotiated through collaborative processes involved in the production, display, and circulation of visual representations.

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