
Marianne Kinkel, Associate Professor of Fine Arts at Washington State University, “…proposed that in reconstructing the career of the Races of Mankind figures, one could track, in a concrete way, representational and social dimensions of race formation at specific historical moments.” Kinkel tells the story of the ninety-one sculptures by American sculptor Malvina Hoffman for the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. She traces the behind-the-scenes, and sometimes very public, debate of the true meaning of these sculptures in depicting racial and ethnic types and the regions of the world they represented within the social discourses of the time. Kinkel traces Hoffman’s pursuit of this commission through the staff at the Field Museum from Stanley Field, president, and Henry Field, assistant curator, Physical Anthropology, to their myriad consultants from around the world, and through the influence of Hoffman’s powerful friends. Ideas of the depiction of race and ethnicity were not limited to anthropology but included promoters of eugenics, anthropometry and other schemes of determining race. Methods of installation and display were also called into question; which should be the choice: dioramas, wall installations, freestanding pieces? How should the sculptures relate to one another? What should labels say, what text would bring all these works together? What other didactic materials should be included and how? Certainly these issues are an ongoing debate and discourse that continues today.

Malvina Hoffman was a consummate lobbyist and promoter of her work, as Kinkel adeptly narrates. Hoffman’s shrewd marketing kept her art in the public eye, through exhibitions of statuettes of the sculptures in New York and Paris. Supported by Thomas J. Watson, president, IBM, Hoffman created a map entitled Races of the World and Where They Live, as part of a public service campaign. With publisher C. S. Hammond & Company, the map was re-worked to become the Map of Mankind, in part to try to avoid the political issues of race. Kinkel illuminates the life of the sculptures as a lightning rod for the debates of race and ethnicity from the 1930s through the 1960s.

Intended for the academic community, this is an eminently readable work, dense with footnotes, grouped after all the chapters. Except for the frontispiece, the numerous illustrations are in black and white, but it is hard, at times, to see the details referred to. The physical work is sturdy and well bound; the type, though small, is clear and readable. The fifteen-page bibliography and index are a must in this information-rich work.

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