

ART & DESIGN

‘Races  
of  
Mankind’  
Sculptures,  
Long  
Exiled,  
Return  
to  
Display  
at  
Chicago’s  
Field

# Museum

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER JAN. 20, 2016

CHICAGO — For decades, the bronzes created by the artist Malvina Hoffman for the Field Museum’s “Races of Mankind” exhibit have had a ghostly afterlife at the institution. Hailed at their unveiling in 1933 as “the finest racial portraiture the world has yet seen” and viewed by millions of visitors, the sculptures were banished to storage in 1969, embarrassing relics of discredited ideas about human difference.

Some were later scattered through the museum, like the Australian aboriginal man who stood guard for a time outside a McDonald’s on the ground floor, minus his original boomerang and spear. But to curators they remained strangely compelling, if troubling, objects.

“When I first came here, I sort of fell in love with them,” Alaka Wali, an anthropologist at the museum, recalled recently. “But there was always debate about what the museum should do with them. They were problematic objects.”

Now the Field Museum has put 50 of the 104 sculptures back on display as part of “Looking at Ourselves: Rethinking the Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman,” an exhibition exploring both Hoffman’s artistry and the vexed history of the dubious scientific ideas that her talent was enlisted to serve. At the time of the bronzes’ creation, many anthropologists believed that the world’s people could be divided into distinct racial types, whose visible differences in skin tone, hair texture and bone structure explained differences in behavior.

It’s an idea, the show makes clear through wall texts and video touch-screen displays, that scientists have abandoned, though hardly one that has entirely gone away.

“It’s not as if just because scientists say race is not a biological fact, that it doesn’t continue to have an impact,” Ms. Wali, who curated the exhibition, said during a tour of the gallery. She stopped near a section discussing the legacy of scientific racism, which includes photographs of Black Lives Matter protests.

“Scientists can now show that human genetic variation doesn’t correspond to

racial types,” she said. “But people don’t always listen to scientists.”

The new exhibition, which runs through the end of the year, was financed in part by Pamela K. Hull, a granddaughter of Stanley Field, the museum’s president from 1909 to 1964, who paid for the restoration of the bronzes.

It was Field who, in 1929, voted with the museum’s board to commission a group of artists to depict the world’s varied “racial types in a dignified manner.” Instead, the whole job went to Hoffman, a New York sculptor who had studied with Rodin, in what *The New York Times* called “probably the largest commission ever granted any sculptor,” male or female.

Hoffman traveled the world looking for models with her husband, Samuel Grimson, who took thousands of photographs and made film clips of potential subjects. Hoffman, who once studied anatomy by dissecting cadavers alongside medical students, approached the project with a meticulous realism, using different patinas to subtly suggest skin tones.

The “Races” exhibit, which opened in 1933, included both simple busts and elaborate life-size pieces showing people shooting arrows, climbing trees or posing with spears. In the center stood “Unity of Man,” showing noble figures representing what were believed to be the world’s three main racial groups shouldering the globe equally. But its overall thrust — driven home by diagrams showing different nose types and the like — was unmistakable: The world’s peoples could be arranged in a hierarchy, from the primitive to the most civilized.

About 10 million visitors viewed the exhibit over the next three decades, according to the museum, and a show of miniature reproductions traveled the country. But by the 1960s, the scientific theories behind the show had fallen into disrepute. In 1969, the exhibit was dismantled. The Field also halted publication of a “Map of Mankind” based on the exhibit, after receiving a letter from the poet Amiri Baraka (born LeRoi Jones), who denounced it as “white racist pseudo anthropology.”

Science has shown today that “we share a common ancestry and the

differences among people are not as great as they seem,” according to the website for “Race: Are We So Different?” — a traveling exhibition created by the American Anthropological Association.

At the Field, the few permanent exhibits that address human variation focus on cultural differences, like a wall of shoes from around the world that Ms. Wali curated in 1997.

Hoffman, who died in 1966, was herself skeptical about the biological notions of race she was hired to illustrate. “I will leave the much-disputed subject of what is meant by the word ‘Aryan’ to be fought out between expert anthropologists and Mr. Hitler,” she wrote in “Heads & Tales,” her 1936 memoir about the commission.

While a short video in the exhibition shows her measuring a Malaysian sitter’s head with calipers, the show emphasizes her differences with scholars like the British anthropologist Sir Arthur Keith, a leading exponent of the idea of racial typologies (and the model for Hoffman’s bust exemplifying the craggy Scot).

“These people are individuals,” not types, Hoffman said of the project in 1961.

To recover that individuality, Ms. Wali and colleagues did extensive research into the real people behind Hoffman’s sculptures, roughly half of whom have been identified by name.

The Hawaiian man shown on a surfboard was Sargent Kahanamoku, a member of a well-known Hawaiian family (and brother of the famous surfer Duke Kahanamoku). The model for a bust of a “man from eastern China” was Dr. Hu Shih, the diplomat and scholar who helped establish the modern Chinese script.

“One of our docents who is Chinese-American walked in and recognized him immediately,” Ms. Wali said.

The exhibition also corrects some muddled ethnic identifications, like the group labeled “Balinese cockfight,” despite the fact that one of the models was a man from Madura, another Indonesian island, whom Hoffman met in a Parisian restaurant where he worked as a waiter.

Then there’s the impressively muscled figure standing alone in a corner,

looking like he got lost on the way to an exhibition of neo-Classical nudes. It was originally labeled “Nordic type,” even though the model was Tony Sansone, a celebrated Italian-American body builder from New York.

“We just call him Brooklyn man,” Janet Hong, the exhibition’s project manager, said with a laugh.

Taken together, the parade of faces could be seen as a retro equivalent to Crown Fountain in nearby Millennium Park, which mesmerizes visitors with its shifting video close-ups of some 1,000 contemporary Chicagoans of all ages, races and ethnicities, projected on two 50-foot-tall glass towers.

The exhibition “really shows the incredible diversity of human beauty,” said Jen Feasal, an industrial electrician from Lansing, Mich., who had come to the museum specifically to see the new show. She was particularly moved, she added, by the bust of Ota Benga, a Congolese man who was displayed for a time in the Bronx Zoo under the label “African Pygmy”; he committed suicide in 1916.

Asked how she felt about people who might skip the darker stories told by the wall texts and just get lost in the fascinating faces, Ms. Wali said it was understandable. She turned to a bust of Nobosodrou, a Mangbetu woman from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“I could just look at her all day,” Ms. Wali said. “She’s just so beautiful.”

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