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Speculative classification: Tracing a disputed portrait between the archives of Malvina Hoffman and Sergey Merkurov

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In my recent curatorial work, archives play a central role in (re)presenting geopolitical and national identities and at the same time, demonstrating the fluidity and contestations of these constructs¹. I experience archives as conflicted sites and my interest, therefore, has been in exploring their inherent anomalies and impressions and in building contemporary narratives out of their historical slippages and indexical absences. In other words, my work attends to what the archives, either willfully or unconsciously, have misrepresented or have failed to address in their content and descriptions.

This paper presents a case study that tries to illustrate how porous the bond is between two different epistemological regimes: the emphasis that is placed on visibility in terms of the art historical collections, and the act of labeling by the archive. In order to show this, I will touch upon collections representing two sculptors, Malvina Hoffman (1885–1966) and Sergey Merkurov (1881–1952) who both passed through the studio of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). I came to this case study through my findings in the archival collection of American sculptor Malvina Hoffman. Housed at the Getty Research Institute (GRI),² this archive is well-researched due to her body of work produced in the early 1930s for the Hall of the *Races of Mankind* exhibition³ (1933) at The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.⁴ The Museum, under the

¹ This text was initially written as part of the 2017 Getty Consortium Seminar “Art and Anthropology: The Agency of Objects,” led by Professor Susan Dackerman. A version was presented at the 2018 Kenneth Karmiole Symposium “[dis]memory, [mis]representation & [re]figuring the archival lens: A Symposium on Visual Archives & Forms of Representation,” organized by Gracen Brilmyer, Professor Anne Gilliland, and María Montenegro (UCLA Department of Information Studies).

² The official name of the archive is “Malvina Hoffman papers, 1897–1984” (Hoffman et al., 1897). The actual three-dimensional works are located at The Field Museum of Natural History, also known as The Field Museum, Chicago.

³ This text only reflects on an aspect of this complex commission for the sake of the constructing my arguments about archives. To further explore its context, scientific, aesthetic, and conceptual implications, see prominent contributions by authors and scholars Kim (2006), Kinkel (2011), and Teslow (2014). In addition, since 2016, the Field Museum in Chicago has exhibited fifty of Hoffman’s sculptures under the exhibition titled *Looking at Ourselves: Rethinking the Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman* (Field Museum, 2019).

⁴ The key museum staff members involved were the museum’s president Stanley Field, the chief curator of anthropology Berthold Laufer, and Henry Field, a junior curator. This initiative had numerous experts

directorship of president Stainley Field and curator, anthropologist Berthold Laufer, commissioned her to model and sculpt “racial types . . . while travelling around the world” (Hoffman, 1936, p. 3). This research-based commission is both complex and controversial in its concept, context and afterlife.⁵ It developed as a racial exhibit from the type of inquiries associated with the new physical anthropological display, that would be didactic, scientifically accurate and target larger publics. In this regard, the project focused on classical art (sculpture) which would give “the races of mankind a plastic representation” through (Keith, 1933, p. 7). As Henry Field, the junior curator, writes:

It was felt that a display of skulls, charts, casts and photographs, extensive and accurate as they might be, would nevertheless fail to make a clear and lasting impression on the mind of the varying forms and characters which distinguish one race from another. A new and a more satisfactory solution to the problem was sought—and a great artist was called upon. (1933, p. 146)

My interest in the *Races of Mankind* project concerns its archives, in which the museological and anthropological are joined through the emphasis on art. The digitization of such projects allows slippages to become evident. In this case, the slippage is the assigning of an incorrect or at least misleading keyword or ‘tag’ of a portrait in Hoffman’s archives at the Special Collections of the GRI (which is not a misspelling or a mistagging issue by an archivist). Intended as part of the *Races of Mankind*, in the archive the portrait is titled “Armenian Jew.”⁶ That initial title, as well as the current archival description and the lineage invoked through the title, have all been left open and in dispute. As such, the

involved, including physical anthropologist, Sir Arthur Keith as an adviser (see Peabody, 2013). In the leaflet, Laufer (1933) writes that the project developed in the course of eighteen years: “Plans for a hall to present to the public the biological problems of mankind were formulated in the Department of Anthropology under my direction as far back as 1915” (p. 3).

⁵ The work began in 1930 and completed by 1933. The exhibition opened in June 6, 1933 with the enormous success. It was planned to coincide with the world’s fair in Chicago (1933-34), *A Century of Progress International Exposition* (Peabody, 2013, p.120).

⁶ The date is unknown; it is presumed ca. early 1930s. The research files of the processing history indicate that the initial copper plate was named like that from the beginning. The research files are available at GRI upon request.

unresolved status of this portrait emerges as an anomaly in Hoffman's archive that tests the limits of her logic of physiognomy and (racial) facial character. My research shows that due to this mistag, the portrait is associated with another set of mislabels and, significantly, it has a direct reference to a *completely* different work of Hoffman. At the intersections of mistags, mislabels and different visual depictions, I want to invite another reading, in which one of Hoffman's "Armenian Jew" depictions has a provocative physiognomic resemblance with Armenian-Greek⁷ sculptor Sergey Merkurov's first death mask of Mkrtich Khrimian, the Catholicos of All Armenian Apostolic Church (plaster cast, 1907).⁸ During the Soviet era, Merkurov became famous for his monumental sculptures of Joseph Stalin, yet his practice of casting death masks of prominent 1917 Bolsheviks, Soviet intellectuals and officials was somehow counter to "Stalin's views."⁹ Today the major part of his collection is located in his house (now museum) in Gyumri, Armenia.

Interestingly, Hoffman and Merkurov's works split Rodin's drive for Realism into two opposing regimes—American (democratic) and Soviet (communist), yet they

⁷ He is usually discussed as a Soviet sculptor-monumentalist. Sources in Armenian indicate that, despite being registered as a Greek (e.g., Mkhoyan, 2018), he was of Armenian descent rather than Greek.

⁸ Mkrtich Khrimian was the Catholicos of All Armenian Apostolic Church from 1893 to 1907. He was a prominent teacher and spiritual leader for Armenians, who played an role in sensing as well as warning the international countries and associations about Armenian massacres in the Ottoman Empire (this is prior to the 1915 Armenian Genocide). He was proclaimed "Hayrik" (Father)," by Armenians and he is usually referred as Khrimian Hayrik. Alternative spellings of his name and surname are Mugurditch Chrimian or Mgrdich Khrimyan.

⁹ During his lifetime, Sergey Merkurov was honored by many Soviet titles; he also held bureaucratic positions including he was the director of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow from 1944 to 1949. However, discussing his works, it is important to note several factors. Certain of Merkurov's writings shed light on his approach to death, mysticism, and life. His texts provide insights on revolutionary monumental art in the early years of the Soviet Union and they reference dialogues with Vladimir Lenin. His collection of death masks was initiated like a personal project of casting the death masks of intellectuals and prominent figures, such as Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Lenin or Sergey Eisenstein. Later, in the 1940s and 1950s, it turned into an official commission-based practice, including from The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. For example, there is a death mask of Andrey Zhdanov, Stalin's chief postwar ideologue and perpetrator of the Great Terror (1936–38.) Various texts and references explain that Merkurov would cast the officials, as a way to maintain a "good relationship" with Stalin.

share distinctive similarities. Both sculptors intended their works to be collected within what can be conceived of as an archive; both insisted on the necessity of sculptural materiality; and both worked with modes of reproduction such as photography and/or plaster casting. Both also understood visuality through the genre of portraiture as conjoining artistic and scientific aims. In the case of Hoffman, these factors merge within the ethnographic preoccupations of 1930s artistic and scientific institutions and connect Realism to categories of geno-, pheno-, or ethnotypes. She searches for a universal “racial type” through an anthropologically legitimized representation of humankind. In the case of Merkurov, a particular form of portraiture—death masks—stood as a simultaneously commemorative, “iconic” and “accurate” record of those individuals who were witnesses to the 1917 October Revolution. While my focus is on the “Armenian Jew” and its porosity between tag-label-visual, this paper also examines the artistic and legitimizing frameworks by overlaying the purportedly rigid representational boundaries demarcating the “universal” and the “iconic” connected to these realist-inspired portrait systems. It is necessary to do so in order to argue that porosity is also a fluidity of visual experience in the archives, particularly when projected on race as “a fixed category.” This position is possible to illustrate now that both collections are located within the archival apparatus, where the notion of porosity can be critically reflected in the type of archival slippage “Armenian Jew” represents.

Construction of Contemporary Archives

Before discussing “Armenian Jew,” I want to reflect upon the basic logic of classification systems in major archives such as the Getty, as this sets up the framework for my arguments. Through categorizing, classifying and digitizing, the classic archival process gradually disassembles and reassembles the materials for “arrangement, description, and cataloguing” (Greene & Meissner, 2005, p. 208).¹⁰ This suggests a process of normalization through corrective procedures. For example, an archivist receiving parcels and boxes containing an unordered stack of documents, correspondence or

¹⁰ While these processes still dominate, it should be acknowledged that there has been considerable critique in recent years of these descriptive practices that is beyond the scope of this paper to address.

photographs begins with the organization of the materials from the division. Initially, the aim is to regulate “inventory (as a description of the documents in the order in which they are kept) and the catalogue ([...] a selective description of documents according to certain themes including subjects and place names)” (Duchain, 1992, p. 20). As such, processing an archive can be considered in some ways analogous to the dismemberment of a collective body of diverse materials into description, tags, and finding aids. In this scenario, there are two conditions at stake for a user or researcher. Firstly, it is a perplexing task to get the full impression of the body of the archive, including its processing history. Secondly, even if processing an archive produces standards, vocabularies, or generalized tags to aid the researcher, at the same time, it paradoxically complicates the discovery and sometimes contextualization of the specificities of the materials. Thus, each archival item becomes normalized—even those that are an anomaly in the set.¹¹

One contemporary discussion about extending archival apparatuses suggests that archives should also be approached as visual repositories, where materials are addressed in terms of their visuality, such as through Ian Grosvenor’s (2007) proposed notion of the “second gaze.”¹² The latter “moves beyond appearances” (p. 622) and looks for inconsistencies in the materials rather than solely for the given authenticity, unity, or simply facts. The notion of inconsistencies can also be linked to Michel Foucault’s scholarship on biopolitics and the archeology of knowledge, particularly to his reflections on anomalies and classifications (1970/1994). As Paul Rabinow (1984) starts his edited volume of *The Foucault Reader*:

An essential component of technologies of normalization is the key role they play in the systematic creation, classification, and control of ‘anomalies’ in the social body. Their *raison d’être* (emphasis in original) comes from two claims of their promoters: first, that certain technologies serve to isolate anomalies; and second, that one can then normalize anomalies through corrective or therapeutic

¹¹ This unintentional effect can be exacerbated when holdings of an archive are digitized.

¹² The author primarily reflects on the photographic record or the use of images in cultural history and diversity discourse. He also refers to a series of scholarly works (e.g. Allan Sekula) that raised questions about the problematic bond between archives and visual field.

procedures, determined by other related technologies. (p. 21)¹³

What is interesting in the case of the *Races of Mankind* as a “universal” type portrait-sculpture database is that, once in the archives, two Western categorization systems are overlaid: namely, the Hoffman’s own cataloguing of “races,” and the archival practices of the Getty Research Institute. In reading the former through the latter, mismatches can be registered, that in turn lead to further inquiry, as with the case study of “Armenian Jew.”

Commission from the Field Museum: *The Races of Mankind*

In the early 1930s, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago undertook an ambitious global project. In a museum, it attempted to solve the issue of “a true and effective” representation of “a vast assortment of diverse individuals” of the human family (Keith, 1933, p. 7). The nature of the institutional commission was to be understood as one body of work—an exhibition embodying a world database expressed by a *unified* set of sculptural depictions of *individuals* (Peabody, 2013, pp. 121–122). Peabody continues:

. . .the Field developed a concept for a new exhibition—a Hall of the Races of Mankind that would gather and showcase the physical traits associated with race as they were manifest in different populations by way of the aesthetically pleasing and durable medium of bronze sculpt. (p. 119)

The commission for this project went to Rodin’s former student, realist and figurative sculptor Malvina Hoffman.¹⁴ She

¹³ He continues that the work of Foucault demonstrates how, under the conditions of bio-power, “the technologies of discipline and confession” aim at but never succeed in eliminating “anomaly” (the delinquent, the pervert; Rabinow, 1984, p. 21).

¹⁴ The museum’s massive commission (with the planned sum of \$109,000 to \$125,000 and with the expenditure of \$150,000; Kinkel, 2011, p. 76) surprisingly took place at the outset of the Great Depression (Taylor, 2016). The exhibition leaflet lists the following names of financial supporters and contributors—Chauncey Keep (\$50,000), Mr. Marshall Field, Mrs. Stanley Field and Mrs. Charles H. Schweppe (Laufer, 1933, p. 3). In relation to the Great Depression, there is another layer in this institutional commission associated with the construction of gendered roles. Art historian Linda Kim (2014) explains that the Depression was a failure of patriarchal labor in the American industrialized society. For the time

traveled worldwide to conduct her fieldwork¹⁵ where “native races are at their purest” (Keith, 1933, p. 7; Teslow, 1998, p. 47). In 1933, the final body of work resulted in “nearly one hundred portrait busts, individual life-size sculptures, and figural group” (Peabody, 2013, p. 120) that opened as an exhibition at the Field Museum titled the *Races of Mankind*.¹⁶ The 1933 leaflet provided the exhibition plan with the list of the sculptures of “races” according to geography and groups, for example, Africa (e.g., “Bushman family, Kalahari Desert, South Africa”), Europe (e.g., “Mediterranean, French type”), Asia (“Vedda, Ceylon, Age 28...”), America (“Blackfoot Indian...”), Oceania and Australia (“Hawaiian riding on a surf-board, Polynesia...”) *The Races of Mankind*, 1933).

As mentioned, the Field Museum wanted such figurative-based representations because of their association with the classical, “timeless” permanence ascribed to bronze or marble sculptures. It was felt that by having only one artist execute the whole project, the resulting figures could convey a collective, shared character. The hard, polished surface seemed to stand firmly for visual resolution of any contentious issues related to merging different forms of observations and impulses that might be at work. Such observations and impulses might include, importantly, a *subjective* focus on human nature rendered through aesthetic principles by an artist, and an *objective* focus on an organic and political matter (the body) as deduced by the kinds of measurements

period, the commission uniquely renewed the social and professional status of Hoffman as a White upper-class woman sculptor. The fact that a woman could imagine pursuing a career, could travel to the colonized lands with her husband Samuel Grimson, who was the expedition photographer and took various films—“all [these] required Hoffman to find ways to conform her femininity to heterosexual and patriarchal norms” (Kim, 2014, p. 105).

¹⁵ The Field Museum sent Hoffman for the research trip without an accompanying anthropologist (Kinkel, 2011, p. 69). During her fieldwork, Hoffman used various ethnographic and anthropological techniques, such as photo-documentation, anthropometric measurement, or video recordings. The photos of her travels and models would serve to report and get an approval from the Field Museum. For example, see Field (1931, April 24).

¹⁶ The Field Museum’s (n.d.) website informs 104 sculptures, which comprised of 27 life-size, 27 busts, and 50 heads. Marianne Kinkel (2011) reports the sculptor created “nearly all of the ninety-one sculptures”(p. 1). Kinkel also points out that in 1934 a room was added in order to produce “the more scientifically oriented room filled with charts and samples” and break the sculptures’ “interpretive ambiguity” (p. 19).

and data sets used to provide scientific support for racial theories that were being advanced in the 1930s.¹⁷

In the scope of the commission, two faces of Western institutional, hegemonic inscriptive practices overlap. The first is associated with anthropology as a disciplinary field, which in the 1930s was a young science that had its own limitations (Laufer, 1933, p. 4). Specifically, anthropology promoted ideas that have subsequently fallen into disrepute or have been rejected outright. Although, at that time, this field had produced racial classifications based on the skin color, the chief anthropology curator Berthold Laufer claimed that it did not pass “beyond the stage of common experience” and “a solid technique for the study of skin color and its nomenclature has not yet been developed” (p. 4). In this regard, the variations of colors were “almost infinite and no one is either strictly white or yellow or black or red” (p. 4). However, Laufer also viewed “race as breed” (p. 6) or “an exclusively biological concept” (Teslow, 2014, p. 88), stating, for example, that “as a biological type our Negroes belong to the African or ‘black’ race and will always remain within this division . . .” (Laufer, 1933, p. 4). The second face is that of museological practice and the politics of display. The Field Museum acknowledged how “the white man’s expansion” jeopardized the “primitive tribes,” (p. 6) which also inferred the disappearance of cultural traditions (i.e., “race” is also linked to behavioral types). Thus, these two practices came together with a humanistic urgency through an ideological exhibition where “many a vanishing race will continue to live only in the statues and busts displayed. . . .” (p. 6).

Prior to the commission, Hoffman’s talents were already acknowledged in terms of having been a student of Rodin. They were also evident in certain work such as “Pavlova Dancing the Gavotte” (bronze statue, 1915) that represents the “aesthetic purity” and expressiveness of the legendary Anna Pavlova’s dance. Hoffman had already travelled alone to North Africa and the Field Museum recognized she could handle their goal of introducing a travel-based commission to depict “plastic representation of races” (Keith, 1933, p. 7). She was selected as “a great sculptor who lavishes her art in

¹⁷ Please refer to the dissertation work of Lind Kim (2006) for the study of the prevailing racial theories and figures linked with the *Races of Mankind*. Moreover, the exhibition leaflet also provides a bibliography, including the names of anthropologists and racial theorists such as William Zebina Ripley, Alfred Kroeber, Aleš Hrdlička, Franz Boas, or an institution (British Museum), just to name a few.

the service of anthropology” able effectively to catch “the essential traits of race” (pp. 7-8). Hoffman, for her part, saw the commission as a challenge to discover new vistas in foreign lands, to imagine the unknown and the mysterious, and to collect evidence, referring to herself as a “head-hunter” or a “globe-traveler” (Hoffman, 1936, p. 251).¹⁸ In terms of the *Races of Mankind* exhibition-project, Hoffman as artist proposed another set of inscriptions derived from the Western art historical canon. Firstly, she retained the traditional sculptural materials of bronze and marble (sometimes referred as stone), which inevitably ended up reinscribing Western scientific racial definitions through her use of bronze for black, patina for brown and marble for white (Field, 1931). Secondly, even though Hoffman acknowledged the grand art historical problem of portraiture, namely that “no human beings are ever alike” (Hoffman, 1936, p. 13) she sculpted her subjects in an artistic subjective reading of a moment when “one represented something *characteristic of his race, and of no other*” (emphasis in original) (Hoffman, 1936, p. 12). Taken together therefore, these inscriptions produce a problematic lack of differentiation between “scientific” ethnotypes, cultural clichés and visual stereotypes.

I turn next to consider one commission for the “racial category of ‘Armenoid’” from *The Races of Mankind* exhibition-project. In the archives it appears to have been assigned multiple and disputed titles: “Armenian,” “Armenian Male: Armenia,” “Armenoid Race,” “Rabbi: Djerba from Africa,” and “Armenian Jew.” These various titles are emblematic for the slippages in the archival categorization, and more so with the addition of the connected visual records and the act of labelling. My reading of this particular entry in the archive allows to explore and question the commission’s prevailing frameworks of artistic (Malvina Hoffman) and institutional legitimization (The Field Museum, 2019).

¹⁸ In her book *Heads and Tales*, Hoffman claims to have understood the crisis of humanity and thought about the notion of race during war in the Balkans—a perception, which some authors state (Nygard, 2016) is depicted in the central sculptural group of the *Races of Mankind* called *Unity of Man* (or *Unity of Mankind*), a monument representing three main races—yellow, black, and white).

Searching for the “Armenian” Tag

During the Getty Consortium Seminar “Art and Anthropology: The Agency of Objects”¹⁹ and upon learning that Malvina Hoffman’s archives and research materials, including those of *The Races of Mankind*, were at the Getty Research Institute, I became interested in seeing how she achieved one single definition of “an Armenian.” In the context of her work in the early 1930s, the definition of Armenian identity was already forcibly ruptured and taking different trajectories: The Armenian Genocide had been committed in Western Armenia by the Ottoman Empire, and in the world, there was already a sense of an Armenian Diaspora. Moreover, the Red/Soviet army had invaded Eastern Armenia, thereby instituting a new ideology and identity.

A cursory search for “Armenian” in the finding aid of Hoffman’s archives returns an additional tag, “Armenian Jew,” attached to a copper plate archived in box 131 (Hoffman, n.d.).²⁰ What visually caught my attention was the style of the portrait inscribed on the plate. The style had less in common with her work created from human life models, and more with the portrait reliefs seen in the British Museum in the exposition rooms of *Assyrian Lions Hunt (Assyria (Room 10), 645-705 BC)*. Contradicting this title, *American Sculptors Series 5* book (Hoffman, 1948) devoted to Hoffman’s oeuvre, shows the image of the same head but labeled “*Rabbi, Island of Djerba, Africa, applewood, 1927*” (p. 22). The location and date refer to Hoffman’s trip to North Africa prior to the Field Museum commission. The formal attributes stylistically ascribed to the representations of “Armenian Jew” at the Special Collections of the Getty Research Institute have now somehow been extended also to a rabbi in Africa. Similarly confusingly, in the album “Hall of Man, Volume II” that lists the exhibition exponents, a photograph is labelled, “95.

¹⁹ “Malvina Hoffman papers, 1897-1984” was introduced to the group of the Getty Consortium Seminar by Professor Dackerman in 2017.

²⁰ The order of this box content is the following: Plate 1: “Senegalese Heroic Head (Hall of Man)”; Plate 2: “Boldini”; Plate 3: “Samoa Male (Hall of Man)”; Plate 4: “Hamite (Hall of Man)”; Plate 5: “M. Hoffman with Kiki in Paris Garden”; Plate 6: “Male Javanese Dancer (Hall of Man)”; Plate 7: “Bali Woman”; Plate 8-9: “Corner Design Woodcut for Grand Central Gallery Catalogue,” 1929; Plate 10-13: “Bacchanale Frieze”; Plate 14: “Tam-Tam - African Drummer (Hall of Man)”; Plate 15: “Shilluk Warrior”; Plate 16: “Armenian Jew.”

Armenian Male: Armenia (Bust). Not in Field Museum group," but it shows a *completely* new portrait and labelled only as "Armenian" ("Hall of Man, Volume II," circa 1933). Furthermore, this same portrait in profile is printed in the 2011 book, *Races of Mankind: The Sculptures of Malvina Hoffman* by Marianne Kinkel (2011, p. 77) but titled as "Armenian Jew."



Figure 1. Malvina Hoffman, *Armenian-Jew* (copper plate), Malvina Hoffman papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (850042). Photograph by Marianna Hovhannisyan. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 2. Malvina Hoffman, "Rabbi, island of Djerba, Africa," applewood, 1927. Source: Hoffman, M. (1948). Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.



Figure 3. Malvina Hoffman, 95. *Armenian Male: Armenia (Bust)*, Malvina Hoffman papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (850042). Photography by Marianna Hovhannisyan. Reproduced with permission.

Having accidentally raised a perplexing set of clues from these visual and labeling entanglements, I move on to a fact-based reading. One of the Field Museum's initial contracted commissions to consider the "Armenoid" racial category (Kinkel, 2011, p. 77). At the end of the nineteenth century, "Armenoid race" was more considered within the anthropological history of Asia Minor [it includes Western Armenia] to be the second most important racial type after the Mediterranean or Iranian type and a subtype of Caucasian race, which "covers nearly every physical type and family of language of the Eur-Asian content..." plus Semitic (Ripley, 1899, pp. 443-444).²¹ The late 1930s further refined this perspective by clarifying "types" such as Armenians, Assyrians, Syrians or Jews, in relation to the geography of Anatolia, Transcaucasia, Iran, and Mesopotamia (Coon, 1939). Hoffman's diary from her world trips in 1930-31 lists all of the "racial types" that were initially commissioned and their main descriptions. In it, she observes: "Asia Minor will never yield to any real order: it is such a polyglot of Semite and Semitic mixture that the 'Semite Type' is to be discerned in almost every group you encounter" (*Hall of Man data*, n.d.). As a side note worth exploring further: the understanding of "Armenoid" that was under examination by Adolf Hitler's racial theorist Hans F. K. Günther was defined as a "Near Eastern Race" (Ihrig, 2016, p. 305). It was on the basis of such observations that he asserted that Jews were not Aryan, but instead were descended from non-European, secondary races, i.e., of "Armenoid" type, thereby "equating Jews, Greeks and Armenians" (p. 306). In the leaflet, the Field Museum clearly and openly refuted the 1930s definition of "Aryan" as a race (Laufer, 1933, pp. 5-6) and yet it chose to use the "racial" and problematic subcategory "Armenoid" to include in the display.

Author Marianne Kinkel (2011) provides a detailed account of Hoffman's work. She tells the story of how, even after the opening of the exhibition, the chief curator of anthropology (Berthold Laufer) was unable to classify some of the works in terms of their appearances, as well as of Hoffman's failure to produce complete geographic provenances (Kinkel, 2011, p. 76). Such confusion was also

²¹ I am not an expert in Western racial theories and my intention with these references is to establish certain definitions informing the time period, while acknowledging that the idea of such racial theories is refuted as well as outdated. References to the work of Ripley also appear in the bibliographic notes in the *Races of Mankind* leaflet and/or in the Hoffman's papers.

conditioned by the fact that Hoffman submitted some samples as “substitutes for the types called in the original contract,” which she believed to be the original type (p. 76). “Armenian Jew” emerges from such a situation, when Hoffman “believed [it] represented a typical Armenian Jew” (p. 77) for the commissioned “Armenoid” category.²² Unintentionally, this substitution led to several slippages in an already dubious system of categorization within the commission. According to Kinkel, the planned “Armenoid” was initially problematic as a museological issue. It concerned where to display it, which as a Near Eastern/Caucasian/Asian Minor type, (my phrasing) belonged neither to Europe nor to Asia (Kinkel, 2011, p. 77). Slippage is also evident in the scientific realm and research. In the first plan of the Field Museum’s commissioned list of the racial types, dated 1930, a bust is listed as “Armeonoid-Armenian” [sic.] under the heading of Europe, while in the second plan of 1931, a bust is listed as “Armenoid male” under Asia (*Hall of Man data*, n.d.).

Kinkel continues that upon receiving Hoffman’s new name, the Field Museum’s curatorial/anthropological and directorial bodies disputed her act of reducing the initially listed race of “Armenoid” to “Armenian Jew.” I would add that interestingly, such racial labeling did not follow the intention of the commission’s worldview—one sculpture, one “racial ethnotype.” Kinkel writes that Laufer also argued that the Chicago-based Armenian and Jewish communities would criticize the Field Museum, as the portrait “is hardly the representative of all Jews and Armenian Jews might protest and insist on adding other Jewish types” (Kinkel, 2011, p. 77). Thus, there would be no longer an inclusion and unity of ethnotype but instead it would introduce an exclusion. The Museum’s directorial bodies proposed labeling the portrait only as “Armenian,” only if it scientifically represented a typical Armenian (Kinkel, 2011, p. 78). Kinkel (2011, p. 78) continues: “Hoffman was purported to have replied, ‘Even if you call him just an ‘Armenian’, even if you call him a Presbyterian, his face still proves his family name is Shylock.’”²³ Judging by this statement, Hoffman’s ideal of pure facial character—now connected to her use of a derogatory term for “Jew”—collapses any supporting arguments of artist’s

²² Kinkel (2011, pp. 76–81) provides a detailed account about the disagreements between Hoffman and the museum bodies, as well as other examples having such slippages.

²³ The original source is Hoffman, M. (1934, January 6).

neutrality, impartiality, and an objective scientific, anthropological gaze onto “race” relations. The Field Museum went on to display the portrait but by 1937, the portrait was permanently removed from the museum display (Kinkel, 2011, p. 78). The portrait remained unlisted in the Museum’s official registry, only emerging quietly in a Christie’s (2005) auction under the title “Armenian Jew” (it can be viewed [here](#)).

My search for an “Armenian” tag exposes the fallacies inherent to the Field Museum’s claims for a neutral, scientific worldview and to Hoffman’s role as an artist and observer. The commission requires Hoffman to take “empirical scientific observation” and data to capture racial, individual expression. But it also requires to work with the classical genres of figurative arts, as portrait, bust, or full figure. The premise sets up a flawed logic: this form of portraiture format serves to recognize *singularity* of the individual—as *person and personality*—yet, contradictorily, the commission also demands to focus on a scientific representation of category, as if only the expression of a “racial *type*.” In addition, the sculptures appear bound to their materials signifying classical art (i.e., bronze and patinas). This kind of art calls up notions of *universal* values, mythos, or “timeless” permanence, especially in Western museum contexts. Therefore, in the early 1930s, such an approach could not recognize, let alone translate, the complex fluidity of subjectivities, cultures, and geographies.²⁴

Realism and Auguste Rodin’s Atelier

At this point, I want to elaborate upon an essential discussion regarding a period of Realism in the arts that is connected to Auguste Rodin’s atelier. Rodin’s implementation of Realism aligns to the concept of a beauty in “truth”: a beauty expressed through body, aesthetic spirit, and ideals of correct anatomical proportions. His Realism also importantly

²⁴ These slippages are the result of an uneven interaction between the classificatory types of geno-, pheno- and ethno-, which a significant body of work refutes. In the 1980s, professor and plant scientist Alain Corcos (1984, pp. 1–9) argues that, historically, the misunderstanding about “race” emerges from the conviction “that humanity can be *classified* into groups using identifiable physical characteristics,” (emphasis in original) i.e., phenotype, and “these characteristics are transmitted through blood,” i.e., genotype, and both “are inherited together,” meaning ethnotype and cultural traits, i.e., social interactions, communities, historical nexus, etc.

applied modern manufacturing methods to the sculptural work. For instance, after his death, Rodin left to France not only his entire estate, but also “all of the rights of its reproduction, that is, the right to make bronze editions from the estate’s plasters” (Krauss, 1986, p. 151). Today, therefore, there are multiple *The Thinkers* produced during and after his death. Art historian Rosalind E. Krauss examines another layer about Rodin and Realism. The core of his work was not bronze sculptures, but rather his plasters or casts that manifest the “ethos of mechanical reproduction” (p. 153). Art historian and curator Catherine Lampert (1986) provides examples of multiple life-sized limbs, torsos, heads, and legs reproduced by Rodin. She elaborates on his relationship to Realism and reproduction of the hands, for example, as the “constitution of the Romantic treatment of fragments as self-sufficient units” (Lampert, 1986, p. 231).

One of the rarely cited series of Rodin’s works²⁵ helps us to understand the profound connotations between racial depictions, gender, choice of material, and Realism in arts. Rodin worked with Japanese actress Hisa Ōta, known as Hanako, who danced during the Colonial Exhibition in Marseilles in 1906, where he saw her for the first time. Her dance was described by the 1914 *London Sunday Times* as “the power of the primitive” that sets the viewer thinking (Pronko, 1989, p. 210). Between 1907/8 to 1911, Rodin produced around 50 busts, heads, and masks of Hanako (Lampert, 1986, p. 232):

I have made a study of the Japanese actress, Hanako. She has not a particle of fat Therefore she has an anatomy totally different from that of Europeans, but is exceedingly beautiful in its unique strength Beauty is character and expression. The human body is, above all, the mirror of the soul, from which the greatest beauty comes. . . . (Gsell, 1911, p. 152)

Rodin’s obsession with Hanako reflects on what art historical discourse has made clear today--that there is a racial fetishism component to the Western appreciation of the so-called “primitive beauty.” Because the quest of a sculptor for the accuracy of body proportions and its reproducibility are based on the worldview of “an anatomy totally different from

²⁵ I want to thank Professor Norman Bryson for the reference to Hanako.

that of Europeans," it exposes a hegemonic inscription based on racially filtered measurements.²⁶

Auguste Rodin's Atelier and Two Sculptors

As already discussed, Rodin's Realism resulted in two different approaches being espoused by his students. One is exemplified by Hoffman's oeuvre, which depicts "universal" types, based upon by the accumulation of scientific data and measurements, as "truth." The other can be exemplified by the work of the Armenian-Greek sculptor, Sergey Merkurov, which offers an interesting counterpoint to that of Hoffman.

Merkurov began studying in Zurich in 1902 with Swiss sculptor Adolf Mayer.²⁷ There he also met Vladimir I. Lenin for the first time and got inspired by his ideas. In 1905, Merkurov (1953) went to Paris in order to visit museums and explore Medieval and Classical arts, including those exhibited at the Louvre Museum (pp. 23-28). His self-education brought him to Rodin's studio in 1906-07. Unlike Hoffman, he did not develop a long-term relationship with Rodin. Nevertheless, his meetings with Rodin, and visits to his studio, as well as his own study of Rodin's works, tremendously influenced his practice (Merkurov, 2011, p. 10). In 1907, Merkurov returned to Eastern Armenia, which was then a part of the Russian Empire. The reason for his return was a commission from the Etchmiadzin [main] Cathedral in Armenia to cast a death mask of Mkrtich Khrimian, the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Merkurov is one of the few sculptors who succeeded in the worlds of both pre- and post-October Revolution. Perhaps, this explains his two contradictory practices during the Soviet era: casting death masks²⁸ to commemorate Soviet post-1917

²⁶ One of the reviewers of this essay proposed that such a reading of Rodin should also imply that the fetishization of a woman's body is generated from his gendered and sexualized perception. In other words, this is a relationship between "a great" man-artist and a low-class and/or middle-class woman-model. See a critical reflection on this topic by Higonet (1993).

²⁷ In 1901 Sergey Merkurov graduated from Tiflis Real School, then he entered the Kiev Polytechnical Institute, from where he was expelled for participating in workers' rallies. Then he graduated from the Zurich University Philosophy Faculty. From 1903 to 1905 he studied at Munich Academy of Arts. See Merkurov and Merkurov (1986, p. 48).

²⁸ Thinking about representation, Revolution, and death masks, it is worth mentioning that they historically converge at the events of the

intellectuals, bureaucrats, and revolutionaries; and becoming the main sculptor of Socialist-Realist monuments to Joseph Stalin, Lenin and other Soviet officials. This contradiction is evident in his understanding of Socialist Realist sculptures where “the individual disappears, in order to become a type” (Merkurov, 1953, p. 39), but the death mask is “a historical document of an extreme importance” (Merkurov et al., 1986). For example, he states that “I must preserve and pass on to the centuries the features/traits of Ilyich [Lenin] on his deathbed.”



Figure 4. S. Merkurov’s death mask collection, S. Merkurov Museum, Gyumri, Armenia, 2016. Copyright by Sergey Merkurov’s House Museum, 2016. Reproduced with permission.

Unlike Hoffman’s scientific registrar of types, Merkurov’s death mask portraits can be considered as a project symbolizing his identification with other comrades (including Lenin and avantgarde poet Vladimir Mayakovsky²⁹). It is a

French Revolution. Wax sculptor Anna Maria “Marie” Tussaud was commissioned to create death masks of the guillotined aristocrats from the former monarchy, including King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. See further reflections about cruelty, display, and materiality of wax by Bryson (2000).

²⁹ Please refer to the article of Leah Dickerman (2001) who presents the 1920s context in the Soviet Union, when Lenin’s death mask

body of work—a commemorative archive—constituting revolutionary people in the Soviet times. At the same time, the October Revolution opened up new vistas for monumental sculptors such as Merkurov to create a new style of propaganda expressing the revolutionary ideas of the time. Later, in the context of Stalin’s repression and control, this monumentality would reproduce the figure of the cult (Merkurov & Merkurov, 1986, p. 48). In this regard, Merkurov articulates his choice of basalt and granite in monumental sculptures as being the classical materials of ancient cultures, such as in Assyrian and Egyptian art. According to Merkurov, those materials allowed him to create a general character: “they do not give me the possibility to get to the details” (Merkurov, 2011, p. 41). This is an interesting observation. He sculpted Stalin in granite or basalt as this served the Stalinist aesthetic, which required only fixed heroic features to be depicted. However, in the case of his death masks, it is the 1:1 analog measurement of matter itself by means of the plaster cast—which preserves the particular sense of individuals, as it allows for their transformation into “icons.” Here, it is worth returning to Hoffman, who has a different position about the relationship between material and representation. In reference to the *Races of Mankind*, Marianne Kinkel (2011) explains Hoffman’s decision to first model heads, figures, and busts in clay and then cast them in bronze:

Life casting as a mechanical means [produces] resemblance, and clay modeling [is] . . . a way for the sculptor to create a likeness that represents the inner essence of an individual [This] enables her sculptures to be perceived simultaneously as individual portraits and as representatives of race. (p. 2)

Searching for “Armenian”: Resemblance

Sergey Merkurov and Malvina Hoffman represent two different artistic approaches to the genre of portraiture in which Rodin’s understanding of Realism merges with an empirical reality. As this discussion illustrates, searching for the “Armenian” tag in Hoffman’s archives can only offer a set

by Merkurov became the most reproducible “iconic” and “accurate” face of Lenin. This mechanical reproduction provoked an interesting criticism of *LEF*, the famous cultural, radical/avant-garde journal of the Left Front of the Arts.

of mislabels. This situation consigns my search to the default emphasis in the art archive on the visual. Provocatively, the image of Hoffman's anomalous so-called "Armenian"³⁰ (ca. 1930s), i.e., the "Armenian Jew" discussed in the book of Kinkel, and particularly, the visual features of the *colorful* image of the same head from the Christie's database appears to share many features with Merkurov's first death mask of Mkrtych Khrimian (1907). Along these lines, further searching at the Getty Research Institute reveals a video from the Hoffman archives, made by Hoffman and showing Merkurov (Hoffman, 1924). They had obviously met. As Rodin made well known, reproduction (casting copies or photographing) is an important part of circulating the artist's oeuvre. It is known that Merkurov cast several copies of his death masks afterwards, to be distributed to certain institutions, photographed or shared with his small group of influential peers. All this further informs how porous the relationship between labeling and the visual nature of the archive remains. While this text tries to present that labeling, visuality and racial profiling— 'Amenoid', 'Armenian Jew', 'Armenoid-Armenian', or even 'Shylock'—are interchangeable porosities in the archive, there is also the visual experience which can be termed as a visual sliding (*glissement*).³¹ This is both a possibility and disruption that echoes with my opening discussion on discovering anomalies in archives.

³⁰ This is the one, which is listed "95. Armenian Male: Armenia (Bust). Not in Field Museum group."

³¹ According to Kristen Campbell (1999), in his departure from the Saussurian linguistic theory towards the psychoanalytic field, Jacques Lacan argued that the notion of *glissement* is the rupture of the interrelationship between the signifier and the signified. The sign is never complete and "the signified constantly slides under the signifier" (p. 137). In this article, in the constant flux of mislabels and misvisuals, as well as in the instability of meanings, *glissement* is another possible reading of slippages of the signified, including all misattributions as the new signified. I want to acknowledge our recent discussion with Professor Norman Bryson, who directed me to this concept.



Figure 5. Sergey Merkurov, *Khrimyan Hayrik* (the first death mask), plaster cast, 1907, Sergey Merkurov Museum, Gyumri, Armenia. Copyright by Sergey Merkurov's House Museum.

Conclusion

It is no surprise that the search-tag for “Armenian” in the archives around the early 1930s is about absences, conflicting visual appearances, and mislabeling. Hegemonic archives reflecting nation, identity, and history are always likely to contain such problematic tag-label-visual relationships. Technological promises of digital fidelity cannot fix this situation. For example, if archiving Hoffman’s materials re-inscribes a flaw, hidden within the beautiful surfaces of artistry, digitization will further inscribe the flaw. So too does the auction catalog, where one of Hoffman’s mislabeled scientific commissions for “Armenoid” appears as a liberated artwork, but retaining the wrongly attributed title.

In the case of Merkurov, he himself was by default an eyewitness of something intangible--the death of a revolutionary subject through an art form that draws as near as possible to a scientific artifact. The death mask, with its requisite eyes-closed expression, cannot have the ability to return the gaze of the viewer. Merkurov’s artistic gaze is not concerned with a sculpture portraying the “animate” but to

collect the political meaning and character behind that moment of an individual becoming “inanimate.” This should be understood within the context of Stalin’s political repression from the early-1930s, which suppressed liberal thought, radical institutions and individuals, as well as utopian visions of a revolutionary future.

On the other hand, Hoffman allows herself an agency that evaluates phenotypes, then executes her work to the point that her own self reveals the flaws in such a “science” of observations. Her works serve the institutional legitimization of “universal” archetypes as a world specimen database. The *Races of Mankind* reduces the depicted individual to an inanimate object with eyes open—the sign of animate life in sculpture. These objects stand for the mastery of her artistry as the global eyewitness who travels the world and develops the “authentic” self. Yet, the conflicting story and example of the “Armenian Jew” tag reveals the reality of the artist’s own prejudices as the vision at work.

In 1984, Merkurov’s collection was turned into a museum in Armenia. His collection was organized and donated by his son. In the post-Soviet situation, Merkurov’s body of work can be seen as an anomaly itself. He achieved a collection that encompasses portraits of both victims and perpetrators that link directly to the implications of the 1917 October Revolution. But after 1991, with the independence of nations from the Soviet history, the locus of conditions that allowed the viewer to “see” these portraits was erased.

In comparison, the purchase of the Hoffman archives coincides with the launching of the Getty Research Institute in 1985, at that time named the Getty Arts and Humanities Institute. Through being archived, Hoffman’s work was re-evaluated as part of the Getty’s intention to join the fields of arts with the humanities. Today, the Hoffman archive embodies three Western systems of classification: a racial classification realised through sculpting; the imposed colonial logic to classify the peoples of the world; and the contemporary archiving system of arrangement and description used by the Getty. The latter is based on the American and British descriptive approach, “More product, Less Process,” whose intention is to improve the economic distribution of an archivist’s labor, by dividing the materials into boxes and folders, and producing cleaner descriptions in

the hierarchical finding aids.³² Searching for the keyword “African” in Hoffman’s finding aids, one finds: “Box: 91: Part I: Portraits of African “racial types” - 26 photographs;” “Box 34, Folder 11: Exhibition of “Daboa” (African Dancing Girl)” or “Box 132, Plate 3: “Mask of African Slave.”

The archival instability between labels and visuals opens up a space of inquiry where different disconnected routes pass. For this text, I selected four that reflect my ongoing interest in collecting indexical absences around the so-called “Armenian” as a contemporary narrative. In each example, the archive is the promise of a portrait-making apparatus that can never deliver a unity. This means that querying “Armenian” and immediately receiving the so-called “correct tag” paradoxically has an agency. It allows us to recognize that an archive is a transmitter of the flaws contained in its collections, but that those flaws comprise human logic and imaginary states that reflect the “real” embedded in the material. This takes us back to one of the main reasons why my interest developed in bringing together archival, visual, institutional and curatorial practice--such a conjunction allows us to engage the archive as discursive space, thereby accepting that the archive’s legitimizing and representative frameworks are what produce its visual nature through the human errors and inaccuracies they instigate.

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³² I want to thank Beth Guynn, who processed the Hoffman archives at GRI, for her valuable discussion with me on these subjects back in 2017.

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