

Book Review by David Chapman

The Indian Club as Folk Art

Alice J. Hoffman, *Indian Clubs* (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), ISBN 0-8109-2670-9.

Will collectors and arts of the future ever wax eloquent about the beauty of a plate barbell, the zen-like simplicity of a squat rack or the sculptural qualities of the Soloflex exerciser? The chances are not good, but you never know.

Alice Hoffman has produced a beautiful book that argues quite effectively for the acceptance of another piece of exercise equipment, the humble Indian club, as a piece of art. In addition to justifying the clubs as art, Hoffman looks into the history of these wooden cudgels. She finds that Indian clubs were traditional weapons brought from the Subcontinent to Europe by British exercise enthusiasts in the mid-nineteenth century. They were quickly adopted as a means of improving the physique, and shortly thereafter it seemed as if everyone wanted to swing the clubs and achieve physical perfection. In fact, club-swinging became a fad that quickly spread throughout the western world.

One of the interesting points in the book is that clubs were rapidly and unquestioningly accepted by the athletic community. Within ten years, everyone (or so it seemed) was caught up in the Indian club craze. Hoffman points out a few reasons for this rapid acceptance. Since clubs could be mass produced in various weights and shapes, they were adaptable to any level of strength or body shape. Thus, they could be swung by men, women, or children with equal effect. Unfortunately, Hoffman does not offer any historical or philosophical reasons for this quick acceptance nor is there any reference to the larger sporting craze that was by and large responsible for the popularity of Indian club swinging. Neither is there any mention that club swinging was an Olympic event nor descriptions of the massed gymnastics displays featuring hundreds of club swingers swooping their clubs in unison.

For me, the biggest revelation of this book was the surprising variety of shapes, materials, and colors in which Indian clubs were produced. Despite its simple, basic contour, clubs achieved a variety of form that boggles the mind. Length, width, and weight all varied with

each manufacturer, but then added to these variations were the decorations that often adorned the clubs. They were variously festooned with rich inlaid wood, metal appliques, and painted decorations of every conceivable description.

Many of the clubs are prime examples of folk art. Folk art is defined as a utilitarian object which has been decorated or refined so that it becomes an expression of the owner's individuality and personal taste. Most commonly, these decorations included geometric designs, floral patterns, patriotic devices, and even "naughty Nellies" featuring soft-core pornography.

Hoffman posits that the linking of Indian clubs with the sinuous female physique is no mere accident. In her description of one club, the author writes, "Like a Jean Arp sculpture, the sensuous silhouette of the club is at once feminine in nature and bold in stature, embracing the space around it." This is an interesting point and I wish the author had explored it more thoroughly rather than mentioning it and then dropping the subject.

Clearly, the author is more at home when discussing Indian clubs as works of art; she is somewhat less knowledgeable when recording the historical or sporting side of things. The principal purpose of this book is to alert antique collectors to the beauty and sensuousness of these lowly and forgotten objects, so sport history must occasionally take a back seat. But in a way this is a good thing, since it allows those of us in the athletic world to view these artifacts in a new light.

This is a beautiful, large format book with magnificent photographs by William Abranowicz. It has a bibliography which is adequate but by no means exhaustive, and a list of sources to help the reader build an Indian club collection of his own. *Indian Clubs* takes a lowly piece of exercise equipment out of the gymnasium and puts it on a pedestal, thereby allowing us to view it as both a graceful tool and a true *objet d'art*. For that we should be grateful.

