Re-uniting Sport and Art: The Potential of Olympic Posters

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ABSTRACT

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the Modern Olympic Games, envisioned the Olympic occasion as being about more than sport. He regarded the underlying idea of the Olympic Games, Olympism, as a 'cult of humanity', concerned with the pursuit of excellence in both sport and art. The presentation examines how Olympic posters have been, and may continue to be, used to carry on de Coubertin's ambition for the marriage of sport and art in modern times. A case is made for viewing the Olympic poster as an object with aesthetic worth and thus apart from its instrumental purpose as a 'promotional vehicle for Olympic Games'. Problematic questions, such as whether or not Olympic posters can be viewed in detachment from the political regimes that effectively endorse them, are addressed in the discussion.

KEYWORDS

art, poster, Olympic Games

The paper will discuss the significance of Olympic posters. The aim is to make a case for posters as a way of reigniting the so-called marriage of sport and the arts, as called for by the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The paper was inspired by my attendance of an exhibition in London in 2008, *A Century of Olympic Posters* and most of the posters I discuss can be seen in the accompanying book to that exhibition, edited by its curator Margaret Timmers (2008).

I begin by foreshadowing my position: I accept de Coubertin's humanistic desire for excellence within sport and the arts and for the celebration of these activities in harmony every four years. This is not to mean that I stand before you as an official spokesperson of some kind. I share many of the concerns of others about various aspects of today's Olympic Games, but I do remain a believer in the Olympic ideal. As such I take seriously the notion of the Olympic Games as a celebration of cultural excellence and thus that displays of artworks and art performance accompany the sporting games of the Olympic occasion. As much as possible, I would like to see a connection between sport and the arts during Olympic Festivals – dare I go as far as to say art inspired by sport, and sport inspired by art. When the Olympic Games come around every four years, it is fair to say that most people think of sport and few of art. Many, possibly even the majority of people who look forward to the Olympic Games, will not even know of the existence of the Cultural Olympiad and related activities. I intend to argue – in part by looking back into Olympic Games' history – that commissioned posters provide an excellent means of bringing the art and sport nexus to the attention of the general public.

The case for the artistic merit of the poster is difficult to make in some countries, if not others. It is difficult in England, a country where posters have long been regarded as of instrumental rather than artistic value – existing primarily for the purposes of advertising an event, a campaign, a product or a service. For example, the famous Victorian art critic John Ruskin spoke out against posters having a negative impact on fine art. Ruskin was concerned not only with the lack of intrinsic value in posters but the way in which they threatened how art is viewed by taking it from the gallery to the street. An interesting painting in this regard is George William Joy's *The Bayswater Omnibus* (1895), which shows commercial posters on display in a London streetcar (Timmers 1998, pp. 8-10).

Against the idea of art being restricted to official galleries, my own advocacy of Olympic posters rests on arguing for the accessibility of art in popular spaces such as the sports stadium – a point I come back to in conclusion.

Beyond the question of their material form, the artistic credibility of Olympic posters may be seen come from the artists who have created them – in many cases these are quite well-known artists. Let us start with the poster from the Stockholm Olympic Games of 1912 by Olle Hjortzberg, a member of the Swedish Royal Academy. Hjortzberg was also a passionate believer in the poster as art form and was a member of the 'Artistic Posters Society'. Hjortzberg's poster is described by the curator of *A Century of Olympic Posters* Margaret Timmers in the following way:

"His composition represented a parade of nations, each athlete bearing a billowing flag – with Sweden's at the forefront – and marching towards the common goal of the Olympic Games. It was also a celebration of the nude male body as an ideal, a symbol of athletic perfection in the classical tradition." (Timmers 2008, p. 21)

It proved to be a controversial poster. The original design was altered from a totally observable naked male body to the version we see here, with the male subject's genitalia covered by ribbons. Within the traditions of western art, Hjortzberg's naked male body is uncontroversial, yet in the context of a poster heralding the modern Olympic Games it was regarded as too much. Even this amended version was challenged as indecent. For example, it was withdrawn from a railway station in Holland for being "in the highest degree immoral". Thus the display of posters in wide-open public forums raised a censorship problem that did not so much exist for art displayed within the confines of the gallery.

This raises the issue of 'art for art's sake' – can posters enjoy this pure form of appreciation or are they more constrained by the social relations of their facsimiled materiality and appearance in non-art sanctioned spaces such as railway stations? Furthermore, does their promotional usage, for example, to advertise events such as the Olympic Games, impact upon our ability to view them as works of art removed from their instrumental purpose?

My own answer to these questions is no. Many of us will be familiar with Walter Benjamin's mid 1930's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', which raises questions about the authenticity of the artwork, from the time that photography and related technologies were able to make copies (Benjamin 2001). To suggest that someone may artistically appreciate a poster is, in itself, no different from saying that someone may artistically appreciate the reproduced images in a book on the paintings of Picasso. I accept that someone can so appreciate Picasso, so I therefore accept that someone can similarly appreciate a reproduced Olympic poster by Hjortzberg or Lenica. For my answer to the second question, regarding the instrumental purpose of the poster impacting on their appreciation, I draw upon the experience of my own visit to the *A Century of Olympic Posters* exhibition.

Posters I remember being of personal appeal, at the time, include Hjortzberg's Stockholm poster, Martha Van Kuyck's poster for the Antwerp 1920 Games, Jean Droit's poster for the Paris 1924 Games and Iilari Sysimetsa's poster for the 1952 Helsinki Games. Each of these posters

I looked at for several minutes and came back to observe on a second round through the exhibition (Timmers 2008, pp. 30, 32 & 60).

Also amongst posters I enjoyed looking at on the day were Franz Wurbel's poster for the 1936 Berlin Games and Ludwig Hohlwein's poster for the 1936 Winter Olympics (Timmers 2008, pp. 43 & 46). A stated appreciation of the 1936 posters is perhaps provocative given the historical association of the respective Games with Hitler's National Socialist Regime. The artistic appreciation of Wurbel's and Hohlwein's posters is perhaps as problematic as an appreciation of Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia*. Writing in the 1970s, Susan Sontag declared *Olympia* to be an 'official production' of Hitler's regime rather than of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and, therefore, not appreciable beyond its horrid political context (Sontag 1980 [1975]).

May the same be said for the posters by Wurbels and Hohlwein? As Margaret Timmers claims, 'the 1936 Berlin Games offered Hitler a supreme opportunity to promote his regime's prestige on a world stage...not only to invest the Third Reich with the pomp and glamour of the modern Games but, by appropriating and inventing images from antiquity, to associate it symbolically with the grandeur of the Roman Empire and the glories of the classical world' (Timmers 2008, p. 45). After an initial failure to find a suitable poster via an open competitive process – the process that is now familiar in the lead-up to Olympic Games – Wurbel's design was selected from amongst a small group of drafts that were commissioned directly by the publicity committee. Wurbel's image of a gigantic golden coloured victor arising above the Brandenburg Gate was regarded as in keeping with the 'heroic realist' style favoured by Hitler.

Hohlwein's poster is, perhaps, even more provocative in its possible promotion of Germanic superiority. We are inevitably left to question whether not the victorious Olympic skier in the image is raising his right arm in a Nazi salute. Hohlwein had a close working association with the Nazi Party, so it would be of no great surprise if this were his intention. Nevertheless, apart from this association, Hohlwein was widely regarded as a leading poster designer in the first half of the twentieth century and we come back to the question of whether or not we can enjoy his work in an 'art for art sake' capacity. The answer to this question would appear to ultimately exist as a matter of personal opinion and whether or not one accepts the 'art for art sake' principle.

Few Olympic Games will be regarded as servicing the ideals of a political regime more than the Berlin Games of 1936, but, to a lesser degree, all Olympic Games are subject to political manipulation in one way or another and posters can reflect this state of affairs. Alan Tomlinson notes that following the 1936 Olympic Games, posters became less aggressively nationalistic, but this did not mean politics disappeared altogether (Tomlinson 2007, p 121). Interesting examples of more recent time include the official posters from the consecutive Olympic occasions, Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984 (Timmers 2008, pp. 99 & 102). For those who regarded the Kremlin as a symbol of Soviet politics, the poster by Vladimir Arsent'ev may carry a political message. To my reading, the LA poster by the well-known abstract expressionist Robert Rauschenberg may also be interpreted politically. The 'star in motion' is a distinctly Los Angeles emblem but within the interlocking stars a collage of photographic images is inserted. Some of the images depict sporting activity, others random snaps of people that seem to give view to the diversity of American society. The overall image may be read, I suggest, as one of dynamism and progress – intended, perhaps, as a positive statement on the American way of life.

Even a seemingly innocent poster such as that for the 2000 Olympic Games held in Sydney may be seen to carry a political message – the Aboriginal iconography in its official poster suggests a reconciliation with the Indigenous people at a time when the Australian Prime Minister remained strongly opposed to initiatives intended to make some amends for White Australia's racist history (Timmers 2008, p. 122).

By the time of the Sydney Olympic Games – as we can gather from this image – Olympic posters had become dominated by the corporate logo of the Games. This has been the case with

subsequent posters, such as those for the previous Games in Beijing and the forthcoming Games in London. My own point of view, which by definition is subjective, is that the shift to the corporate poster represents a retreat from art. However, this does not undermine my case for posters being at the forefront of the art and sport nexus. I almost surrender to the inevitability, for the foreseeable future, of the official poster being designed in advertising board rooms.

My hope is for the enhanced use of what I will continue to refer to as ‘fine art’ posters within the attempt to make the cultural connection between art and sport. No better example is there, that I know of, than the posters project for the other Olympic Games that were held in Germany – the Games of Munich 1972. Sadly, that Olympic occasion is remembered for the tragic events involving terrorism, but well may it be remembered for an important contribution to art involving posters.

Planned from the outset, the Munich organizing committee adopted the view that high-art could indeed be carried in poster form. They set out, and I quote, “to engage the best [international] artists” in a poster series that would “relate artistic activity to the Olympic Games” (Timmers 2008, pp. 84-89). Five series containing seven posters were produced. Some versions of posters were produced on high quality paper – these were done by way of limited edition aiming at a collectors’ market. The artists were selected by an appointed art commission and artists, who would deliver avant-garde work, were deliberately targeted for inclusion in the series.

Artwork more accessible to a sports audience was presented in what was called the ‘sports series’ of posters that offered images of 21 different sport activities. Although there is a differentiation between the sport posters and the art posters, this does not mean that the sport posters are without artistic merit and it may well be argued that they too have their place within the sport and art nexus. The role of the art posters was to highlight the desired humanistic relationship between sport and art. Many of the art posters in 1972 were challenging, probably quite odd looking to the person not familiar with modern art, but the important point is that they potentially took art to an audience that might not otherwise engage with it.

In conclusion I will come back to make mention of the Munich posters as an exemplary example for the future. In working towards the conclusion I want to make further comment on the sport art nexus at the Olympics as it has developed overtime since the beginning of the modern Olympic Games in 1896. Baron De Coubertin was as pragmatist as much as he was an idealist. As much as he believed that the relationship between sport and art was natural, he recognized that in modern times this relationship needed to be re-established because sport and art had been effectively separated within industrialized society – within the German and English kulturkritik tradition, sport could be said to have become associated with the realm of civilization (the practical areas of life) and art with the higher realm of culture. De Coubertin regarded this as a false division and truly believed the Olympic Games offered an occasion to seek a rightful reconciliation. As a means to make this happen he put forward the idea of an arts competition to occur in connection with the Olympic Games. Importantly, he advocated that entries to an arts competition to cover various fields of artistic activity must involve art directly inspired by sport – I reiterate, art directly inspired by sport.

The first major endeavour to bring art into the modern Olympic occasion was an Advisory Conference titled ‘Incorporation of the Fine Arts in the Olympic Games and Everyday Life’, held in Paris in 1906. The conference was largely de Coubertin’s initiative and, even from this early stage, he met with resistance. Parisian sport writers ridiculed de Coubertin’s talk of a grand marriage and reunification of mind and muscle, sport and art.

His idea of a ‘pentathlon of the muses’ in the form of an Olympic competition for the arts, comprising music composition, literature, sculpture, painting and architecture, did not occur until the Olympics of 1912. But even then the organizers of the Stockholm Games were reputedly lukewarm about an arts competition. Richard Stanton’s book *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions* gives detailed account of the correspondence between de Coubertin and the Stockholm organizers (Stanton

2000). From this correspondence it is apparent that de Coubertin was of the view that the planned art's competition did not receive the level of support he believed it warranted.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on art inspired by sport was spelt out in invitations to the first Arts Competition and was encoded in the relevant Olympic Games regulations codified in the year of the Stockholm Olympics – these were called Regulations of the Contests Literary and Artistic. However, momentum gathered over the years for a shift from the holding of arts competitions to the arts festivals. This idea was strongly supported by Avery Brundage when he became President of the IOC in 1952. In a 'circular' published in July 1953 Brundage set out the case as to why he believed that Olympic arts competitions had seen their day. One reason was that the arts awards tended to go to professional artists and Brundage saw this as being at odds with the amateur ethos of the Olympic Games. He further believed that the criteria for judging were necessarily arbitrary. To quote Brundage, "even if the competition is limited to sport buildings, how can you compare the design for a stadium with that of a metropolitan athletic club...or a swimming pool?" In regard to literature, Brundage noted that there was not just a problem in dealing with the assessment of different genres but also entries in various languages. To quote him, "Who is there that understands all these languages and can compare the entries?" (Stanton 2000, p. 244).

By the time of the Melbourne Olympic Games of 1956 the arts competition was officially replaced by an 'Arts Festival' and related events were held at locations such as the Victorian National Gallery, the Melbourne Public Library, the Botanic Gardens and the Melbourne Town Hall (*The Arts Festival* ... 1956). In each category the displays had more to do with showcasing Australian art than with celebrating art 'inspired by sport' in the de Coubertin tradition. Indeed, the closest the Arts Festival seemed to come to this was a symphony concert held inside the architecturally praised Olympic Swimming Pool.

Although the cultural programming for subsequent Olympic Games has been significant, since Barcelona 1992 involving the staging of events over the four years in lead up to the Olympics, the sport and art marriage promoted by the early arts competitions seems to be lost. It may well be the case that the games and the cultural program of the Olympic occasion attract largely different audiences. The natural symbiosis between sport and art seems far away from the general public perception of the Olympic Games occasion.

The sociologist Beatriz Garcia actually suggests de Coubertin made a mistake in strategy from the start, by talking about reconciliation or marriage. To quote Garcia: "Rather than separate identities that must be "blended", sport, culture and education should be seen as dimensions of the very same principle. The sports and recreation science literature understands sport as a cultural manifestation and an activity through which education takes place. Thus, it is not possible to understand the concept of sport or Olympic sport, without reference to the concepts of culture and education. For this reason, the concept of a cultural programme separated from the sporting and educative programmes seems to be redundant. One would expect all of them to be integrated and perceived accordingly by everybody involved within the Olympic experience, from athletes to coaches, organisers and spectators. However, the lack of an integrated sporting cultural discourse perceived as such by average Olympic audiences and promoted as such by Olympic organisers, supporters and media, reveals that the idea of a perfect and evident integration of these concepts within people's minds is far from being a reality" (Garcia 2008, p. 366).

For a start, I think Garcia may be too tough on de Coubertin. When reintroducing the Olympic Games to modern times, de Coubertin was profoundly aware that the split of sport away from culture, as mentioned earlier, had already occurred. Ancient Greece offered an ideal not an aspiration to actual return. The marriage of which he spoke between sport and the arts was to be a union of distinct, but hopefully connectable fields – sport and art are related in that both contain aesthetic qualities, but they have undoubtedly developed as separate spheres of cultural practice in modernity. De Coubertin recognised this in his time and anticipated the widening of the separation if it was not actively worked

against. The Olympic art contest, De Coubertin believed, offered a means of making the desired connection between sport and art.

The Art contests and the Melbourne type arts festival may have seen their day, giving way to the contemporary Cultural Olympiad. The Cultural Olympiad with a significant remit on community arts and getting young people involved in art related activity moves away from the notion of excellence, in art as in sport. I am not opposed to the idea of a community art legacy being left behind after the Olympic occasion, in London and elsewhere, but the art and sport connection I am interested in is, in the manner of De Coubertin, a concern with both sporting and artistic excellence. In this regard it is an advocacy of sport in connection with 'high art'.

It is in this regard that I return in conclusion to Olympic posters and to the example of the posters from the Olympic Games of 1972. I believe that the series of art posters commissioned in association with this Olympic Games was an outstanding example of De Coubertin's ambition in practice, providing people with the opportunity to engage with the contemporary art of their time via the medium of posters.

I conclude by suggesting that this example be recalled to provide renewed inspiration for how the sport/art relationship may be reconciled. Specifically, then, it is proposed that commissioned artwork, 'inspired by sport', in the form of posters be commissioned by Olympic organizing committees or the cultural planning sub-committees thereof. This would be best done not just via the production and circulation of high quality prints but with the original poster artwork being put on display in a location in close proximity to, if not within, the main Olympic stadium.

Beside each poster would be a short narrative by the artist giving some explanation of the work and its relationship to sport. Such a display, in keeping with the Munich example, would exhibit sport-inspired artistic posters as well as a series of individual 'sport' posters. This seems a promising way of getting the idea of the essential sport/art nexus (both art and sport as culture) across to a general audience. People may still end up not appreciating artwork such as Horst Antes' rather abstract offering in 1972, saying that it in no way reminds them of sport, but at least, in the context of the type of exhibition proposed, they may come some way to engaging with it and considering its aesthetic possibilities – art inspired by sport and a re-appreciation of the sport/art relationship inspired by posters.

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