

The Art Competitions in the Modern Olympic Games: Rethinking the Boundary Problem between Art and Sport

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1. Prehistory: Coubertin and the Classicistic Idea of Olympic

Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), best known as the principal founder of the Modern Olympic Games, was born in Paris into an aristocratic family. After abandoned his military career, he then found his way to the educational world. From 1883 to 1887, he visited to England for inspection, where he got strongly impressed by the advanced level of amateur sports, and, after returning to France, he organized and encouraged the societies for amateur sports.

In November 1892, at a meeting of a local sporting association at the Amphitheater of Sorbonne, he announced the reestablishment of the Ancient Olympic Games in Greece and won approval from the present members, which were mainly constituted of the high society people in French. This “aristocratic” origin of the Modern Olympic Games accounts well for its quintessential nature: the so-called “amateurism.” Having its origin in the aristocratic society of the 19th-century England, the ideology of “amateurism” in modern sport culture has fostered the belief that a sport, unlike “labor,” should be played in leisure time, and it has thus kept the physical working class – labeling them the “professionals” – away from the arena of amateur gentlemen. [1]

In Coubertin’s view, the principal players of amateur sports should be collage students. He zealously pursued, as an educator, the coordination of “body and soul,” often inspired by the ancient Greek’s pedagogic ideal. In an article of the *Revue Athlétique* (1891), he regrets that the present athletes have lost “all feeling for the beauty of the classic authors” and suggests “a competition in literature among athletes” in order to restore the intimate relation of “muscle and mind.”[2] We can thus say that Coubertin’s introduction of fine art into sport events was, just same as his project of the Modern Olympic Games itself, motivated by and sustained upon his classicistic idea.

In May 1906, summoning up the International Olympic Committee (IOC) members to Paris, Coubertin organized a “Consultative Conference on Arts and Letters.” At the opening of this conference, he gave a lecture entitled “A Grande Marriage,” where he emphasized the need “to reunite a long-divorced couple – Muscle and Mind” and invited the members’ views on “to what extent and in what form the Arts and Letters could take part in the celebration of the modern Olympiads.” Then he proposed “the projected creation of five competitions in architecture, sculpture, painting, music and literature designed to be awarded every four years for unpublished works directly inspired by the idea of sport.”[3] This proposal was, although it must have sounded surprising, approved unanimously by the attendance, the fact showing a

firm initiative of the President Coubertin. [4]

The decision of this 1906 Paris Conference, that is, inclusion of the five competitions of art into the Olympic Games, will have a strong effect on the IOC members and each of the Organizing Committees of Olympic Games, far beyond Coubertin's retirement and death.

2. Introduction of the Art Competitions into the Modern Olympic Games

2-1. London 1908

Just after the Italian Organizing Committee cancelled the Olympic Games on the ground of the financial difficulties caused by an unexpected eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1906, the IOC elected London to succeed the plan. It was miraculous that the Olympic Games in London won success in such a short preparatory period. But, as to the Art Competitions, its positive outcome was only the foundation of the rules.

The regulations for 1908 Games lists the Competitions of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in this order, and, modifying the registrations of the 1906 Paris Conference, omits those of Music and Literature. The bias towards the plastic arts apparent here shows that the Art Competitions could only be understood as kinds of "exhibition," not "performance," as the sports events are generally considered. The common "classical" themes were given to both genres of Painting and Sculpture, for example, "the battle of the Greeks and Amazons" or "Discus throwers." Only one winner in each competition will be awarded a Gold Olympic Medal, and hence no silver and bronze medalists.

2-2. Stockholm 1912

The members of Swedish Organizing Committee were totally negative to the Art Competitions, in spite of all precedents in the 1906 Conference and the 1908 Regulations. What perplexed them most was the problem of judgment. As the Royal Academy of Stockholm and other Swedish artistic and literary institutions had refused to accept the role of refereeing, the Organizing Committee announced to the IOC that they could not but renounce the Art Competitions. The Swedish Society of Arts, one of those rejecting institutions, clearly expressed their view that an art competition under given themes and guidelines must be unfruitful, because an artwork should be judged on the criteria of "art for the art's sake."

Although he at last succeeded in persuading the Swedish Committee into holding them, the President Coubertin had to organize the Art Competitions in the Stockholm Olympic by himself, without any local cooperations. He tried to communicate, only futilely, a classicistic idea on the art and sport to Victor Balck, the Swedish supervisor, as follows:

"There is only one difference between our Olympiads and plain sporting championships, and it is precisely the contests of arts as they existed in the Olympiads of ancient Greece where sport exhibitions walked in equality with artistic exhibitions." [5]

The Art Competitions in Stockholm were doomed to failure. Only 35 artists registered from all over the world, there included no Swedish names. And a more fruitlessness: the Gold Medalists in the Literature Competition, George Hohrod and Martin Eschbach – definitely

German names – turned out to be a pseudonym used by Coubertin. What's nonsense that the President got to be a Gold Medalist for himself!

2-3. Antwerp 1920

As the Berlin Olympic in 1916, only destined, was cancelled by reason of the World War I, the next Art Competitions in the Olympic Games were held in Antwerp, 1920.

Probably because the Olympic Games were now beginning to linkage the international affairs, some countries never received an invitation to Antwerp: Germany and its wartime allies; neither Bolshevik Russia did, while Czarist Russia did. [6]

In contrast to the negative reaction provoked in Stockholm, the Belgian Organizing Committee welcomed the Art Competitions, in view of the postwar rehabilitation of their national prestige as “the land of art.” The Belgian weekly *Ons Land* used the Art Competitions as a justification of the Olympic Games held in “the land of gothic churches, the land of Rubens (···).”[7]

In the Art Competition of 1920, the Belgian artists won 6 medals, more than half of the total number, and thus the Belgian people succeeded in enhancing their prestige of the “nation of art.” The artists from 18 nations took part in the Competitions, twice number as did in the last Stockholm Olympic. The Art Competitions enriched their details, and three kinds of Olympic Medals – gold, silver, and bronze – were awarded in full, for the first time. [8]

2-4. Paris 1924

Here the Paris 1924 Olympic should be mentioned only briefly. Worth noting are the followings: 193 artists from 24 nations took part in the Art Competitions: much greater number than in the past two Olympiads. Some artists from the Soviet Union submitted their works, in spite that the Soviet Union was not officially invited to the Olympic Games from the French Organizing Committee, for some political reasons. The famous French artists – Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, and Maurice Denis, for example – headed the juries of the Art Competitions, attracting public attention from the world. In the Music Competitions, particularly, outstanding talents joined in the judge, including Stravinsky, Honneger, Fauré and Dalcroze. But no prizewinner was announced there, maybe because the judgments were too severe.

The poor result about which the famous juries in Paris had brought urged the IOC members to reconsider the method of judgment, and then, in 1926, they determined to appoint an International Jury for the Art Competitions from among its own members.

2-5. Amsterdam 1928

After Coubertin retired from the President of IOC, the first Olympic Games were held in Amsterdam, 1928, under the direction of the new President Henri de Baillet-Latour (1925-42), a Belgian aristocrat. He faithfully took over the spirit of Art Competitions from his predecessor, and the Dutch Organizing Committee also saw them as an integral part of the Games.

Within the 1928 Olympic, the Art Competitions were increasingly enriched by subdividing the five main categories and adding new competitions: Town Planning was added to the Architectural contest; Reliefs & Medallions to the Sculpture; the Literature subdivided into

three-fold, Dramatic, Epic, and Lyric & Speculative; the Painting contest also into three-fold, Drawings, Graphic Arts, and Paintings.

By virtue of such extension of Competitions, over 1,150 (!) artworks were submitted on the whole, and the total number of the Olympic Medals more than doubled as compared to 1924. Germany, having returned to the Olympic Games after sixteen years' absence, sent a full number of participants into the Art Competitions and won 8 medals out of 29 in sum awarded there.

In the Art Competitions of the Amsterdam Olympic, some considerable changes occurred with regard to the way of exhibition of the prizewinning works.

Firstly, the prizewinning exhibition held in the Municipal Museum of Amsterdam was organized into the classification by nations, rather than by the categories of Competitions. As a result, the prizewinning works by German artists occupied a special showroom. After the Olympiad had closed, this "German Room" was transported to Düsseldorf and attracted public attention there. It might arouse an enthusiasm for the unification of sport and art among the German people, which would form a background of a fanaticism for Art Competitions observed in the 1936 Berlin Olympic.

Secondly, a more serious point, most of the prizewinning artworks were sold after the exhibition. The registration form issued by the Dutch Organizing Committee had had a checking column saying, "Is the exhibitor desirous of selling the work?" It means that the participants were not obligated to sell their submitted works, but, after all, most of the awarded works were sold at exceptional prices after the Olympiad. The IOC members censured that severely for violating the Olympic idea of amateurship, and afterwards, they stepped forward to prohibiting the sale and restricting the copyrights of the submitted artworks. That issue unexpectedly betrayed an essential difference between art and sport, which could foresee a serious deadlock of the Olympic Art Competitions in the near future.

2-6. Los Angeles 1932

The Los Angeles Olympic in 1932 also organized the Competitions of Arts. In spite of the far geographical distance from the European Continent, no less than 1,145 works were gathered, nearly equal to the precedent Games. Both the U.S. Government and the Organizing Committee supported them with the financial privileges of the custom duty and carriage fee. As to the result of the Competitions, the total number of the prizewinners increased, since the "honorable mention" awards (without medals) were established in every Competition. [9]

While the Los Angeles Games were in preparation, two items were added to the rules for the Art Competitions: "Works must have been executed during the course of the IXth Olympiad [since January 1, 1928], and must not have been exhibited at the Games of the IXth Olympiad at Amsterdam."

That new regulation tells us that the U.S. Organizing Committee and the IOC recognized how essentially dissimilar art and sport must be, and they nevertheless did not abandon the effort to bridge the gap between them. But the result was that the Art Competitions were only modified into the generally accepted formats of sport competitions, and not vice versa.

Just before the opening of the Games, they were still debating on another new regulation

that entries had to be by “living artists.” Seen from the fact that this rule will be finally adopted in the 1948 London Olympic, it is likely that even “dead artists” not merely had the right to enter, and but probably entered somehow, for the Art Competitions up to 1932. While the value and quality of the artwork is normally judged by itself independently of the author’s physical presence, the nature of the Olympic Games required the “living athletes” also in the Competitions of Arts.

2-7. Berlin 1936

It is widely known that the 1936 Berlin Olympic was politically abused by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi government; however, that is not the point here. As regards the Art Competitions, what was most striking in 1936 is their maximum expansion.

The German Art Committee, by direction of Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Public Education and Propaganda, contrived to change the official regulation in order to broaden the categories of Competitions.

At first, they asserted that a section of the film art should be newly organized. We can easily suppose that this proposal had anything to do with Leni Riefenstahl’s popular sport film “Olympia.” But the IOC and Coubertin, who still served as its Honorary Head and the founder of the Art Competitions, rejected this proposition. As a letter from Theodor Lewald, the President of the German Organizing Committee, to him implies, Coubertin seems to have taken care of Olympic’s symbol number “five” – as represented in the five rings or pentathlon – also in the Art Competitions.

Subsequently, the Germans suggested to add the Gold & Silver Smithing and Dance sections to the Art Competitions. The IOC again rejected it. Confronted with the IOC’s inflexible policy to keep the five traditional genres, they changed their plan to expand the subcategorization in each of the five genres.

As a result of that subcategorization, Music Competitions – which had ever been virtually only a single contest – had now the three contests: Compositions for Orchestra, Instrumental Music, and Solo and Chorus Vocal. The Germans’ great enthusiasm for music was also manifested in the fact that the prizewinning works were not merely awarded but also performed in public, for the first time in the history of the Olympic Musical Competitions. Furthermore, 4 medals out of 6 in the Music Competitions were given to German artists. In the Sculpture Competitions, also for the first time, the three contests in full were conducted: Medallions, Reliefs, and Statues; and German artists earned 2 medals there.

In the Art Competitions of the Berlin Olympic, as the result of their expansion above-mentioned, the total number of the medals and honorable mentions recorded a sudden increase, although the sum of the submitted works, 810, amounted less than the last Olympiad. The top five countries in the sum total of the medals were Germany (12), Italy (5), Austria (4), Poland (3), and Japan (2). Those included, whether accidentally or not, the three Axis nations and the two neighboring countries which Germany annexed in the soon future. In contrast to them, the USA artists only got one silver medal (in the Town Planning), whereas the USA athletes in the Sports Competitions got 23 medals more than the Germans (21) did.

We can hardly judge what such a result really meant, especially because the criteria of the

Art Competitions were much vaguer than in the case of sport competitions. Then, in the 1948 London Olympic, the Organizing Committee was forced to introduce a strange regulation to correct this “national bias” in the Art Competitions, as will be considered below.

2-8. London 1948

After the two Olympiads, only scheduled, were cancelled during the World War II, the IOC selected London for the first postwar Olympic Games.

The British Organizing Committee was enthusiastic for the Art Competitions from the outset. We can recognize that from an article titled “Muscle and Spirit,” in the IOC Official Bulletin, written by Britain’s Lord Aberdare, a chief member of the IOC and representative of the Organizing Committee. There, probably in anxiety about a long blank, the author re-confirms the idea and the merit of Art Competitions, honoring Coubertin’s historical achievements. He states that “the Olympic ideal itself represents a synthesis of these two principals; a strong muscular culture, supported on the one hand by the chivalrous mind, and on the other hand, by the notion of the esthetic, toward a culture that is both beautiful and gracious. (...) The Olympic Games are themselves a work of art.” [10]

However, the Art Competitions in the 1948 London Olympic were essentially changed from those in the prewar Olympiads, although the British Organizing Committee held them in order to follow the tradition established by Coubertin. And further, these changes also account why the Art Competitions terminated with the London Olympic.

What has to be noticed first is that the two items were added to the regulation. The first is, as mentioned above, a regulation that entries must be limited to “living artists.” The second is, more effective, a kind of “citizenship” item. According to it, all the artworks exhibited in the Competitions must be “previously approved by the Olympic Committee of the Nation under which the artist claims citizenship.” And moreover, accompanied with it, a limitation was set for the total number of works each country could submit. Although its primal aim was to prevent “national bias” in the sum total of Olympic Medals, as occurred in the 1936 Berlin Olympic, this limitation of nationality would drastically change the nature and condition of the Art Competitions.

In former times, participants in the Art Competitions submitted their works directly to each of the Organizing Committees. At that time, artists without citizenship, and even artists of countries which did not officially participate in the Olympic Games, had the right to enter there. The first case is the exile artists of Czarist Russian in the 1920 Competitions, and the latter the Russian artists in 1924. But now, after 1948, artists are required to submit their works to each of the National Olympic Committees according to their nationality, and then each of the National Committees forwards the submitted works to the Organizing Committees, after ranking them and adjusting the sum number of works in each contest.

As the result of this new entry system, the submitted works in the Art Competitions became endowed with more “national” characters than ever. A notice appeared in the Bulletin of IOC reads: “Only nationals or naturalised subjects of a country invited to the celebration of the Games are eligible.”[11] An original and simple regulation for the first Competitions in 1912 – “artworks inspired by or related to the idea of sport” – might be any longer insufficient.

In the Art Competition of 1948 London Olympic, accordingly, most of the prizewinning works had “national” or “ethnic” subjects, especially in the contests of plastic arts. “The Quagga Race” by Walter Battiss (South Africa) and “Riding” by Hsiao-Nan Chen (China) represent the typical examples (Both awarded the Honorable Mention in Painting). While the judgment and ranking became highly difficult, many countries almost equally reached the Olympic Medals. There was a four-way tie for first place among Britain, Italy, Austria and Finland, each with 4 medals; and no country became eminent as Germany did in Berlin, 1936.

At the first sight, it seems rather strange that such a “national” regulation did not appear in the Olympic Art Competitions until the post-World War II period, but we should notice that the international system in the postwar age had been tightening the unit of “nation” forcibly more than ever.

Thus the artworks submitted in the London Olympic generally acquired the characters of “national representative,” and, as the result, the Art Competitions came to be akin to a symbol of the international friendship, far distant from the real, serious competitions equivalent to the athlete sports. It was only too natural that the history of the Art Competitions ended with this London Olympiad.

3. Exclusion of the Art Competitions.

It was in the 1948 London Meeting when the IOC first took up for discussion the exclusion of the Art Competitions. The most serious issue was the amateurship, which had frequently been violated there. The worse was that they detected that the Italian National Olympic Committee had offered prize money for their domestic contests, which had been conducted to select the works to send to London.

In the next year, 1949, the IOC meeting was held in Rome. Although only some fractions of the IOC members were present there, the meeting unfairly voted that the next Olympiad, scheduled for 1952 in Helsinki, would adopt the “Art Exhibitions” in place of the “Art Competitions.” The shift from “competition” to “exhibition” meant that artistic contests were no longer awarded the Olympic Medals as official Competitions supervised by the IOC. According to the report of Rome Meeting, the points were the followings: (1) An association of sport and art should be formed indeed, but that is not a function of the IOC and the Olympic Games; (2) Since participants of the Art Competitions are practically all professionals, the Olympic Medals must not be awarded there. This event should be in the nature of an “exhibition.”

Over the legitimacy of the negative decision in Rome, the IOC was soon split into the two opposing groups: on the one side, those who rammed the Rome decision, represented by the new President Johannes Sigfrid Edström (Sweden) and the first Vice President Avery Brundage (USA); on the other side, those who advocated the continuation of the Art Competitions, not the “Exhibitions,” organized by Ferenc Mező, a Hungarian poet, and Alex Walter Diggelmann (Switzerland), both of them were Medalists of the past Olympic Art Competitions.

In the very midst of a confused debate, the Finnish Organizing Committee could not but

give up organizing the Art Competitions after all. The 1952 Helsinki Olympic then arranged the “Exhibitions” of artworks, instead of the “Competitions.”

The fierce dispute was finally settled in the same year, when Brundage was elected as new President of the IOC. As an ideologue of the amateurism, he had been keeping the initiative in the negative campaign against the Art Competitions. In July 1953, he addressed a circular to the IOC members, in which he exhaustively demonstrated the difficulties of the Art Competitions.

In addition to the violation of amateurship, too much cost and labor, and the indifference of the general public, Brundage pointed out as grounds to abolish the Art Competitions the lack of objectivity in judgment and the advanced ages of the artists. On the first point, he accounts as the following: “Even if the [architectural] competition is limited to sport building, how can you compare the design for a stadium with that of a metropolitan athletic club, or a boathouse, or a swimming pool? (...) In music there are songs, choruses; compositions for one or more instruments, operas, orchestral works, etc. How can one compare folk songs with symphonies? How can one compare Oriental or Arabic music with music of Western, or for that matter the bagpipe with the violin?” As to the second point, he firmly believed that the amateurship in the sport culture must be tied up with the youthfulness. While sport can only be practised till about the age of 35, most of the medalists in the Olympic Art Competitions were well over the middle age, and the aged artists were usually established professionals. Brundage once suggested the idea “that Art Competitions [should] be confined to students and/or that an age limit [should] be fixed in order to promote art among the younger generation,” but now he abandons it, concluding that “this would probably [only] lower the quality of the entries.” The Art Competitions, Brundage thus attacks, contradicts with the idea of Olympic Games in the double meaning.

In the end, the IOC Meeting in Athens, April 1954, confirmed that (1) each forthcoming Organizing Committee should organize an “Exhibition” of art, in place of the “Competition,” (2) it should be held under the care of the Organizing Committee, independently of the IOC, and (3) it would mainly represent the art of the country where the Olympiad is being held, not as an international competition.

This resolution was soon reflected in the Olympic Charter. A new article was added there: “The Organizing Committee will organize a demonstration or exhibition of Art (architecture, music, literature, painting, sculpture, sports philately [collection of postage stamps] and photography) (...) The program could also include ballets, theatre performances, operas or symphony concerts.” (Article 31) [12]

This article has led to the regulation of “Cultural Programme” prescribed in the Olympic Charter of today: “The OCOG [Organising Committee of the Olympic Games] shall organise a programme of cultural events which must cover at least the entire period during which the Olympic Village is open. Such programme shall be submitted to the IOC Executive Board for its prior approval.”[13] Herein we can hardly find any vestige of the Art Competitions, once fought earnestly by the Olympic artists from all over the world.

4. Conclusion

It is true that the Art Competitions can be called abortive flowers in the history of the modern Olympic Games, which were nourished by an illusion – not to say an ideology – of the classicistic idea of unifying muscle and mind. And it is hard to believe that they had any positive influences on the fine arts and artists, nor on the Olympic athletes, of course. However, as this article has shown, a close historical study of the Art Competitions will lead us into a critical reconsideration of the generally accepted notions of art and sport, sharpening an analytical view on the essential differences and boundary between art and sport.

As we have seen, those who sought the abolition of the Art Competitions advocated the “youthfulness,” together with the amateurship, as essential idea of the Olympic sports. It is undeniable that the Olympic artists were not always so young, and it is also the fact that the oldest Olympic medalist in history was awarded in the Art Competition: John Copley, at the age of 73, when he won a silver medal in the 1948 engraving and etching contest. But, we could not immediately conclude, based on that fact, that the art contest is much different from that of sport, if we considered that the second oldest was a shooter, Swedish Oscar Swahn, who won his last medal at the age of 72 in 1920. We know that rather elder athletes often received prizes in the shooting, or riding contests. Should they be, then, excluded from the Olympic Games? Of course, we say no. Thus, the definition of sport is open too, exactly alike in the case of art. We cannot sufficiently define a sport only by the factors of rigid rules, objective judgments, youthfulness, or amateurship, etc., although some of the IOC members believed that they could do so.

We use the same words, “play” or “player,” when we talk about both art and sport. It means that we are usually feeling that they share the essentials, regardless of their many differences and incompatibilities, as the same kind of human activities. Then, when and where could we discern a true diverging point between art and sport? That will be our next issue, after closing this paper.

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Notes

- [1] In the history of modern sport, the requirements for amateurship first appeared in 1839, at the “Henley Regatta,” a rowing event on the River Thames. It consisted of two contrasted events: a Town Challenge Cup for watermen, with a £30 purse, and a Grand Challenge Cup for amateur gentlemen, with no purse.
- [2] Stanton. *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions*. pp. 2-3.
- [3] Stanton. op. cit., p. 11.
- [4] Coubertin was the second President of IOC (1896–1925), succeeding Demetrius Vikelas (1894–1896), a Greek businessman and writer.

- [5] Stanton. *op. cit.*, p. 22.
- [6] The invitations were customarily issued by each of the Organizing Committees of the host countries, not by the IOC.
- [7] *Ons Land*. October 12, 1919. cf. Stanton. *op. cit.*, p. 57.
- [8] Only the incomplete records survive for the 1920 Antwerp Olympic, because of the financial shortage of the Organizing Committee. On the Art Competitions, no official records exist except the names of prizewinners.
- [9] A Japanese name, although unidentifiable, appeared in the record of Art Competitions for the first time: Eijiryo Naga, honorably mentioned in the Prints Competition.
- [10] Lord Aberdare. "Muscle and Spirit." in: *IOC Official Bulletin* (April 1947).
- [11] "Arts and Music Competitions." in: *IOC Official Bulletin* (July 1947).
- [12] K. R. Goddy and G. L. Freedman-Harvey (eds). *Art and Sport*, p. 14.
- [13] *The Olympic Charter* (Version September 1, 2004). Chapter 5: "The Olympic Games," Section 40: "Cultural Programme."

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The past *Official Olympic Game Reports* including the Art Competitions and the *Olympic Charters*, the most important primary sources for this article, are available in the PDF format on the following website: <http://www.olympic-museum.de/>

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