

# The Only Artist to Win Two Olympic Gold Medals

By Pierre Gricius

For many years the painter and graphic artist, Jean Jacoby, was the only official Olympic champion from Luxembourg.<sup>1</sup> At the arts contests he won two Olympic gold medals. These prizes were awarded to him for water colours: in 1924 in Paris for the triptych, 'Etude de Sport' (Corner, Départ, Rugby), and in 1928 Amsterdam for 'Rugby'. At two additional Olympic Games, he was distinguished with an 'Honourable Mention': in 1932 for 'Before the Goal', and in 1936 'Abfahrtslauf (Ski)'. But more of that later.

## Coubertin's 'Pentathlon of the Muses'

The Olympic arts contests were the favourite child of Pierre de Coubertin. In order to reunite 'Muscle and Mind', the IOC founder invited people, ten years after the Games of the first Olympiad, to a congress in the Comédie Française.

To be sure, the 'ex-partners' had not yet had any children, as he wrote later in his memoirs, but nonetheless a closer approach between the long divided was successful:

*It was no mere matter of chance that in ancient times writers and artists gathered together at Olympia to celebrate the Games, thus creating the inestimable prestige the Games having enjoyed for so long. Wishing to revive not so much the form but the very principle of this millennial institution, because I felt*



A self-portrait of the Luxembourg painter, draughtsman and graphic artist Jean Jacoby

Photo: Pierre Gricius Archive



First-day cover with the Luxembourg special stamps for the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki and the Cycling World Championships, with drawings by Jean and René Jacoby

*it would give my country and mankind as a whole educational stimulus they needed, I had to try and restore the powerful buttresses that had supported it in the past: the intellectual buttress, the moral buttress and, to a certain extent, the religious buttress.<sup>2</sup>*

Pushed by Coubertin, the existing 'Pentathlon of the Muses' became a part of the Olympic Games, consisting of the areas of architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpture. Yet the echo of the IOC President was limited. Even at the premiere, the organisers of the Games were unwilling to realise the project, so that the arts contests became more or less Coubertin's private affair.<sup>3</sup>

Only a few architects, writers, composers and artists handed in their works. Even Coubertin's colleagues had doubts which were discussed in the IOC after his



**Luxembourg's small team at the opening of the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. Right: Jean Jacoby. Far right: Jacoby's Olympic gold medal of 1924.**

Photos: Official Report Paris 1924; Pierre Gricius/Henri Bressler Archive

resignation in 1925. Some founded their rejection on the subjectivity of the verdicts. Others, like the Swede J. Sigfrid Edström, placed the arts contests completely in question because the participants were professionals, which could not be reconciled with the amateur spirit of the Olympic Games.<sup>4</sup>

Several times the rules were modified and new categories created in order to be fair to all areas. The 'Pentathlon', which appeared on the Olympic programme from 1912 to 1948, grew in 1928 in Amsterdam into a contest with 13 sub-groups. The record number of 15 contests was reached in Berlin 1936, although the quality of the works often did not meet expectations. That was especially true of music; no prize was awarded in 1924. In 1928 of the nine possible medals only one bronze was awarded.

There was little resistance when the three-man 'Brundage Commission' in 1949 recommended the dropping of the arts competitions. One argument was decisive: "... it appeared illogical that professionals should compete at such exhibitions and be awarded Olympic medals"; this was stated in the report of the Greek IOC Member Angelo Bolanachi (Bolonaki).<sup>5</sup>

In order to make the departure as painless as possible, it was agreed to organise in Helsinki 1952 an art exhibition instead of a contest. However, the exhibition did not take place. The chief organiser, Erik von Frenckell, who had been opposed to it from the start, allowed the preparations to be delayed until it was too late.

Jacoby was spared experiencing the demise of the arts contests. If he had not died in 1936, he would have experienced the Games in Helsinki as a splendid event for Luxembourg sport. For the first time, an athlete of the Grand Duchy was victorious – Josy Barthel, who sensationally won the 1500 m race.<sup>6</sup>

Indirectly, Jacoby had a part in it. For the first time, the Luxembourg Post Office issued in 1952 a series of Olympic stamps, the profit from which went to the Comité



Olympique Luxembourgeois (COL). For five of the six stamps, works of Jean Jacoby were used. The sixth, which appeared in connection with the World Championships in road cycling, was designed by his son René Jacoby, an artist who had not attained the same mastery as his father.<sup>7</sup>

That was complete in the tradition: As early as 1928 postcards with Jacoby's sports motifs had been sold, contributing to the financing of the Olympic delegation

### **Born in Luxembourg, grown up in Alsace**

Who was this artist who was honoured uniquely with two Olympic gold medals? Jean Lucien Nicolas Jacoby<sup>8</sup> was born on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1891 in Luxembourg City. His father was Michel Jacoby, an official with Luxembourg Railway Society CFL (Chemins de fer Luxembourgeois). Their headquarters were in the Alsace town of Strasbourg (in German Straßburg), which was annexed by the Germans after the war from 1870–71 against France.

One year after the birth of Jean, whom his German friends also called 'Hans', his father was transferred to Molsheim. Here the eager son attended primary school, and then the Strasbourg Lycée St. Jean.

Even as a youth Jacoby discovered his talent for painting. It was his teachers who encouraged him from 1909 to attend the School of the Fine Arts in Strasbourg. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1912 he received his diploma as teacher of painting and drawing for the lycées and normal schools (responsible for the teacher training) in Alsace-Lorraine. Among the conditions was that he should be in possession of German citizenship. In the same year he married a German, Rose Richter, who came from Marburg. She bore him three children, two of whom died in their early years.

The pedagogical profession was, however, not to the taste of the young professor. In 1913 he chose the adventure of an independent artist. After a short

period of study in Paris he worked as a draughtsman in Strasbourg. With a painting bearing the title, 'After the fitting', he took part for the first time in 1915 in an exhibition at Baden-Baden.

In 1918 Jacoby left Strasbourg for Wiesbaden, where he experienced the end of the First World War. One year later he settled in Frankfurt am Main. There he realised a series of art window projects for the firm of Witthuhn. A catalogue of the Frankfurter Künstlerschaft of 1920 mentions him among the exhibitors with the painting, 'Lustige Gesellschaft' [Funny company].

As a result of the agreements of the Versailles Treaty, Alsace-Lorraine had again become French and Jacoby lost his German citizenship. He returned to Strasbourg, although he had not accepted French citizenship, but that of the land of his birth – Luxembourg. Professionally, there were no disadvantages for him. He became artistic adviser of the Imprimerie Strasbourgeoise (ISTRA).

### Jacoby finds his direction – drawing sport

In his works Jacoby understood how to capture the whole dynamic that was contained within sport. He possessed not only a remarkable artistic talent but he obviously knew much about the methodical processes of sport which cannot be acquired only as an observer.

Jacoby was an active sportsman. He was part of the first football team of the AS Strasbourg (ASS), and was a close friend of some of his sports comrades. Later he also remained faithful to football. In his Berlin days he was part of the entourage of the elite football club Tennis Borussia, on whose team from 1926 a certain Sepp Herberger also played. Later Herberger was trainer of the German world champion eleven in 1954 which brought him fame and honour.

In 1923 Jacoby's first sporting works appeared. As a breakthrough, he won the first prize in a competition organised by the famous French sports newspaper *L'Auto* – the predecessor of *L'Equipe*. Now Jacoby was firmly convinced that he had definitively found his artistic direction as a sports artist. He received the confirmation by post in 1924 with the winning of the Olympic gold medal.

After this success Jacoby received many offers, especially from Berlin which, with its four million inhabitants, was developing into the fourth largest city in the world and a prosperous metropolis. The German capital was famous because of its broad newspaper landscape. Jacoby worked for the Ullstein Verlag, which engaged him as artistic adviser of the *Berliner Zeitung*. His drawings were found in other products of the publishing house: in daily papers like *BZ am Mittag* and *Berliner Morgenpost*, in the weekly *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and in the fashion magazine *Die Dame*, whose title page was designed by well-known artists.

When Jacoby came to Berlin in 1926, there were only a few press artists who illustrated articles. It was Jacoby who increased the value of the publications of the Ullstein publishers with his works. That affected also the income of the artists which tripled over the course of years. As the person generally responsible for the illustrating, Jacoby employed the artists and photographers in areas which corresponded most with their abilities and interests. He felt especially attached to football and athletics.

Jacoby was part of Berlin's cultural avant-garde. He was a member of the local artists' association and regularly presented his works at exhibitions in castle Bellevue. Among his friends were painters, actors and well-known sportsmen. The Berlin period became a high point of his artistic activity; also, his creative eagerness was enormous. The newly arisen media offered many possibilities. On Jacoby's initiative, the radio programme magazine *Sieben Tage* was founded in 1931, which reached a circulation of 300,000 copies, where he worked as picture editor.

The situation deteriorated in 1933 when Hitler seized power. The Ullstein family were forced to give up their business as part of the anti-Jewish 'Aryanisation' programme introduced by the Nazis. In 1937 the publishing house was then completely forced into line, renamed as *Deutscher Verlag* and joined to the central association of the Nazi party. Forced into the artistic wilderness, Jacoby left his beloved Berlin with a heavy heart. He moved with his second wife, Maria, to Mulhouse in France, an Alsatian provincial town.

### France and Britain boycott

Jacoby hoped in 1936 to win a third Olympic medal. But the preconditions were radically different from those in the previous Games, which is why he had initially hesitated to exhibit in Berlin. The German

Jean Jacoby:  
'Football'.  
Lithograph  
82 x 112 cm (1935)

Photo: Pierre Gricius/Henri Bressler Archive



Reichskunstwart responsible for the arts contests, Edwin Redslob, was sent into retirement by the Nazis in 1933.

The art committee was now under control of the propaganda ministry, led by Joseph Goebbels, which monopolised and kept an eye on the entire cultural life of Germany with a bureaucratic apparatus. The command for the arts contests was handed over to long-serving National Socialists. The president was the head of local government in the propaganda ministry, Dr. Kurt Biebrich; the leadership of department A (Fine Arts) lay in the hands of the insignificant painter Adolf Ziegler<sup>9</sup> and the graphic artist Hans Schweitzer known as 'Mjöltnir', who with his caricatures in the Weimar Republic wanted to 'kill' its representatives through ridicule, as Goebbels, a friend of his, wrote.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time as the German museums were being combed through by ideological guards to detect 'decadent' works, the Olympic art exhibition was being prepared, but to the disappointment of the propaganda ministry and as a protest, not a single participant from France or Great Britain entered.

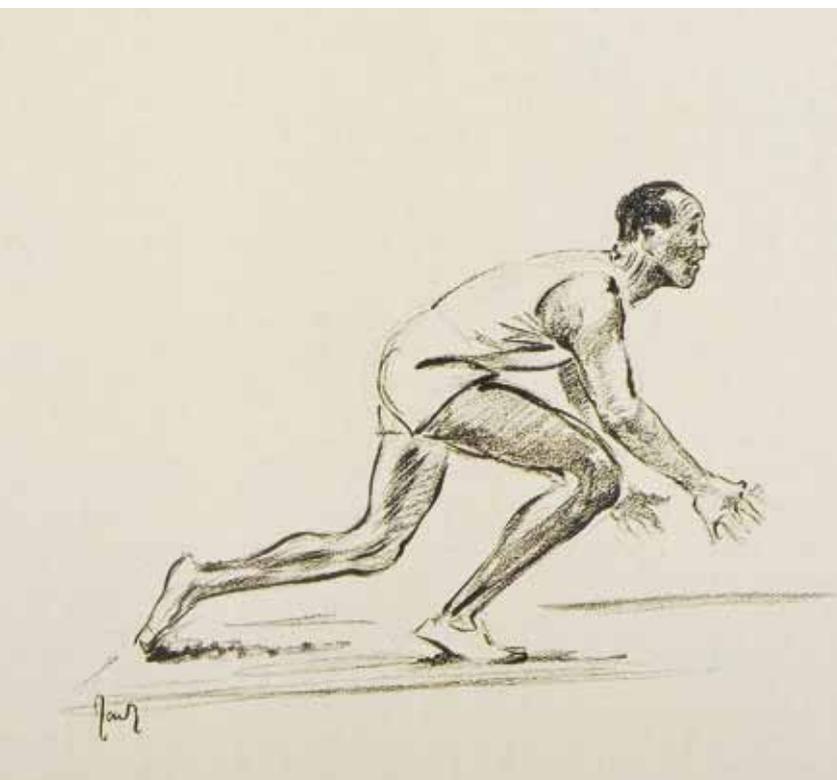
To maintain face, the NS regime took the trouble to set up an internationally balanced prize jury. The French and British representatives proposed for painting refused as well, so that they had to be replaced by the Austrian Professor, Hans Ranzoni, and the Hungarian, Dr. Lajos Tihamér. In the graphic art sector, foreign countries were represented by the Flemish painter, Paul Lambotte, and



the Polish Professor, Tadeusz Pruszkowski", who had to cope with a superior force of three German jurors. To avoid the reproach of preferential treatment, the art committee decided to unite the German votes into one.

### "The level in Amsterdam was a better one"

In his speech regarding the Olympic art exhibition, which was seen from 15<sup>th</sup> July to 16<sup>th</sup> August 1936 in the fair pavilion VI, Goebbels praised the works exhibited on architecture and sculpture. Monumental building works like those, conceived by brothers Werner and Walter March, the Berlin Reichssportfeld with the



At the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936 Jacoby was not just a spectator. He drew, among others, Jesse Owens in the long jump. Under the lithograph he wrote: "The Owens' jump is not elegant, not high. Only the product of his run-up." Photos: Pierre Gricius/Henri Bressler Archive



Jean Jacoby: 'Start', 'Fight', 'Finish'—three wall paintings which were exhibited in Berlin and intended for a club house.

Olympic Stadium, or heroic sculptures like Arno Breker's 'Decathlete' came probably closest to the artistic taste of the Nazis. Goebbels believed "that by all the manifold nature of what is exhibited here the painter still stands the furthest away from sporting events", which he tried to explain to himself with "false standards".<sup>12</sup>

The prize jury made this standard their own, as they awarded only seven in the group 'painting and graphic drawing' out of twelve possible. In the four subgroups there was only one gold, which went to the Swiss Alex Walter Diggelmann in Applied Graphics. In the category of Graphics, no single work was found worthy of distinction. In the exhibition, Luxembourg was represented with 21 works, of which 17 stemmed from Jacoby,<sup>13</sup> although he had to content himself with 'consolation prizes'.

Jacoby was disillusioned and he shared his disappointment after his return to Mulhouse with the Organising Committee in temperate words:

*I visited the exhibition. It made a rather good impression on me. You wish my open verdict. So I must say that the level in Amsterdam was a better one, as the artists who at that time exhibited emphasised even more the captivating movement in sport as in the exhibition in Berlin. Especially I must say that Germany there in Amsterdam was better represented. Brighter and more colourful.*<sup>14</sup>

To be sure Jacoby named no names, yet one can imagine of whom he may have thought. Certainly the famous impressionist painter, Max Liebermann, who in 1933 because of his Jewish origin had been forbidden to paint. Certainly, also, Max Slevogt (who died in 1932) as well as George Grosz, who emigrated to the USA, one of the best-known representatives of the 'Neue Sachlichkeit' [New Objectivity].

For a long while, the Nazis had forbidden painting, and artists were often driven into exile. Expressionists like August Babberger, Erich Heckel, Willy Jaeckel, Wolf Röhrich, Fritz Heinsheimer, Gert Heinrich Wollheim, or the representative of the modern art, Willi Baumeister,

who in 1928 had represented Germany in Amsterdam. Their works were lined up in the exhibition 'Decadent Art' and some of them burnt in March 1939. The Jewish author, Ernst Weiss, who had won a silver medal in 1928, saved himself by going to Paris, but in 1940 after the German invasion, took his own life in desperation.

Even having a Jewish grandmother was enough to exclude a sculptress like Renée Sinternis, whose 'Football Player' in Amsterdam had been awarded bronze from the art academy.

With others it was a Jewish wife. Yet before the artists were released into American exile, they still had to hand in their works – Waldemar Raemisch, the 'Olympic Order', and Ernst Böhm, the Olympic diploma for medallists.

### A memorial for a 'pacemaker'

Despite the defeat he had suffered in Berlin, Jacoby did not argue with the jury, whose work he described in his letter as "difficult and especially then ungrateful", "when it follows a motto incomprehensible to the public". The reasoning of the prize jury can no longer be comprehended, as in the concrete case no documents exist.<sup>15</sup>

Jacoby experienced subjective verdicts repeatedly. He was enthusiastic in the Berlin exhibition about the painting 'Cyclist' by the 25-year-old Pole Jeremi Kubicki, about whom Jacoby wrote: "Nobody has painted the competition on the street so well."<sup>16</sup> The judges saw it differently, although Kubicki was a pupil of Professor Pruszkowski, which brought him no advantage.

As far as his own work was concerned, Jacoby departed from Berlin not only with bitterness. After he had walked as an unknown among the exhibition visitors, he heard much praise of his works. Many – among them German painters – were amazed that he had not been better valued. For that reason, Jacoby wrote: "I must also say myself that I had the impression after I had no longer seen the drawings for months, that I am still leading in sports drawings in Europe and will remain so for a long



Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels walking round the Olympic art exhibition in 1936 in Berlin. To his right: the infamous caricaturist Hans Schweitzer. Far right: a glimpse of the Luxembourg exhibition with works by Jean Jacoby. Photos: Official Report 1936; Pierre Gricius/Henri Bressler Archive



time.<sup>17</sup> But nothing came of it. Jean Jacoby died on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1936 in Mulhouse of heart failure.

With this Luxembourgier died also a “pacemaker of German sports drawing”, as he was described in journalistic circles. It was his idea to present movement in sport for, in his view, drawing was more suited than a

photographic image. In this respect, one can regard his last letter as a type of legacy. In it is stated: “Sportsmen demand of the artist that he goes beyond the photo and not the thousandth of a second of the movement, but catches the entire movement in a respect both artistic and understood in sport.”

A year after his death, a memorial was inaugurated for Jean Jacoby in the south of Luxembourg – in Schiffingen – but after the invasion of the German Wehrmacht in May 1940, it was destroyed. Scarcely had Luxembourg been liberated than Jacoby received a greater one. The town stadium was given his name.

## ‘D.O.O.D.’ – the 1936 Art Olympiad in Amsterdam

At the same time as Berlin was preparing for the Olympic Games, 70 posters were featured in Amsterdam, depicting a shotputter who was hindered in his movement by a swastika. The poster indicated a completely different art exhibition. Its title: ‘De Olympiade onder Dictatuur’<sup>1</sup> – abbreviated ‘D.O.O.D.’. In Dutch, the word means ‘death’.

The exhibition, the aim of which was to protest against the cultural disgrace in Nazi Germany, was chosen in November 1935 by the Netherlands Committee for the protection of the Olympic Idea (BOG) and organised together with the League of Artists in Defence of Cultural Rights (BKVK). The driving force was the music critic of the newspaper *Het Volk*, Paul F. Sanders.<sup>2</sup>



Poster of the Amsterdam exhibition ‘The Olympiad under the dictatorship’

Source: Cas Oorthuys/Johan J. Voskull, Gemeentearchief Amsterdam

A four-language brochure invited artists worldwide to take part in an exhibition – a rallying call which found a broad echo. One hundred fifty artists, predominantly from the Netherlands, but also from Belgium, Great Britain, France, Denmark and the USA, as well as German emigrants, sent over 300 works of art. Their content was mostly political.

The exhibition, which opened on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1936 (the same day as the Berlin Olympic Games began) consisted of two sections. First, there was information on conditions in Nazi Germany, life under the dictatorship and a map indicating prisons and concentration camps. A second section on the upper floor housed the fine art.

The organisers had wisely chosen a private house, ‘De Geelvinck’ at Singel Gracht 530 as the exhibition location. Yet even there they did not remain undisturbed. The German consul alarmed the Amsterdam Mayor, Willem de Vlugt, who however so no way of stepping in. But he found the

- 1 The Marathon Olympic champion of 1900, Michel Theato, should not be forgotten. He was a member of the Paris club Saint Mandé, but was born in Luxembourg and was a Luxembourg citizen.
- 2 Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympic Memoirs*, IOC, Lausanne 1997, p 89.
- 3 Cf. Ansgar Molzberger, "A Premiere with Obstacles: the Olympic Art Competitions 1912 in Stockholm", in: *JOH*, Vol. 20, No. 2/2012, pp. 52–60
- 4 IOC, Minutes, 34<sup>th</sup> Session, Oslo 1935, pp. 11–12
- 5 IOC, Report on Art Exhibition, 44<sup>th</sup> Session, Rome 1949, in: *Bulletin du Comité International Olympique*, No. 27, June 1951, p. 34
- 6 Cf. Pierre Gricius, "When tears write history", in: *JOH*, Vol. 25, No. 2/2017, pp. 45–49
- 7 Regnard (René) Jacoby was born in 1916 in Strasbourg. In 1946 he became Co-Editor of the magazine *Sport Illustré*.
- 8 See also: *Médailleurs luxembourgeois aux concours artistiques des Jeux Olympiques Jean Jacoby et Frantz Heldenstein*, Exposition realizee par Pierre Gricius en collaboration avec Georges Klepper, Luxembourg 2008; *JOH*, Vol. 14, May 2006, Special Edition
- 9 Although Adolf Ziegler (1892–1959) could not present a single significant painting until 1933, he became a professor in 1934, and on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1936 he was nominated as President of the Reich Chamber of Plastic and Graphic Arts. In the following year, he was the main person responsible for the propaganda exhibition 'Degenerate Art' in Munich.
- 10 Elke Fröhlich (Ed.), *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Teil 1/II, München 2005, p. 166. Schweitzer (1901–1980) joined the NSDAP as early as 1926 and was then counted among the first 30 party members in the Reich capital. In 1927 he was co-founder of the newspaper *Der Angriff*, for which, along with other NS publications, he regularly produced illustrations. Hitler named him in 1933 to be 'Zeichner der Bewegung' [Artist of the Movement]. Two years later he became Reichsbeauftragter für Formgebung [Reich commissioner for shaping], in 1937 Professor, and later president of the Reich Committee of Press Artists. In the Second World War he served as SS-Oberführer and artist of a propaganda company.
- 11 Tadeusz Pruszkowski (1888–1942) was a portrait painter and Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. After the German invasion he joined the resistance. He was arrested in 1942 and executed on 1<sup>st</sup> July.



- 12 XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936, *Amtlicher Bericht (Official Report)*, Vol. II, Berlin 1937, pp.1126–1127
- 13 XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936, *Olympischer Kunstwettbewerb, Katalog der Olympischen Kunstausstellung*, p. 39. With one artwork each, the painter Jang Thill ('Rugby') as well as the sculptor Julien Lefèvre ('Außer Kampf gesetzter Boxer') and Wentzel Profant ('Hürdenlauf') were represented. Jacoby's wife Maria took part in the competition with a wall hanging on silk ('Mädchen beim Kugelstoßen').
- 14 German Federal Archive (BArch), Berlin, R 8077, Letter from Jacoby to the Berlin Organising Committee, 19<sup>th</sup> August 1936. The letter is obviously directed to the administrator of the department of art, Edith Lobeck.
- 15 A great part of the Berlin Olympic Archives was annihilated at the end of the war or was lost.
- 16 Letter from Jacoby to Berlin Organising Committee
- 17 Ibid.

project "very unsympathetic", which is why he ordered to remove the posters on city propertiesites.

Put under pressure by Berlin, the Dutch foreign ministry found the complaints of neighbouring Germany more serious. Yet the responsible justice minister did not see a reason to pronounce a ban. He did, however, have the police, two days before the opening, remove some critical works. Among these were drawings by the German, Karl Schwesig, living in Belgium in exile, from the series 'Three days in the torture chamber', which in July 1933 he himself had suffered in Düsseldorf. Also confiscated was the 'Zeitbild 1934' of the Dutch painter, Herman Meurs, which showed a man tortured by SA hitmen.

In the following days, the exhibitors had two more visits. The raids were directed in particular against the documentation section, in which the Nazi bosses were met with biting scorn. Among the seized objects were also photomontages by the German

graphic artist, John Heartfield, among them the famous collage which shows Goebbels leading athletes by Olympic (nose-) rings through the arena.

In view of the concern, only a side role could be played by 'normal' sport. Yet it, too, was to be seen. Thus the German-Jewish artist, Kurt Isestein, who had fled to Denmark, and had as early as 1928 exhibited at the Games in Amsterdam, was represented with four bronze figures and seven sports medals. Reality immediately pulled in the visitor again. Adjacent was the portrait bust created by him of Albert Einstein – a copy. The original, which stood in the Potsdam workroom of the brilliant physicist until 1933, the Nazis had thrown out the window.

The exhibition, which continued until mid-October 1936, and which numbered 7000 visitors, was a success despite all interventions. The beautiful appearance emanating from Berlin at the same time was counteracted. Avant-garde, oppositional,

or Jewish artists, who were unwelcome at the Berlin Olympic Art Exhibition, had the opportunity to show their works.

The intention to continue the exhibition in Rotterdam was not fulfilled. After massive German interventions, it was closed after a few days. To the irony of history, it turned out that the confiscated exhibits and documents remained in the archives of the Dutch police, so that 'D.O.O.D.' could be partly reconstructed years later. The result was seen in 1996 in Amsterdam as well as in Berlin.

Volker Kluge

- 1 'The Olympiad under the Dictatorship'
- 2 Paul F. Sanders (1891–1986) was a composer who supported artists who had to flee Nazi Germany. After the occupation of the Netherlands, he went into underground. In 1946 he became the correspondent of the newspaper *Het Parool* in the USA and, also, with the United Nations.