

PARIS 1924

by Jean-Yves Guillain

In 1924, the Olympic art contest was part of a more comprehensive cultural programme. This featured many official (and unofficial) artistic events such as lyric festivals, musical concerts, folk ballets and plays. These took place in Paris from May to July.

The ideal proposed by Pierre de COUBERTIN at the 1906 Congress of "Arts, Letters and Sports" held in Paris was to "ally Body and Mind". However, his idea still had to be promoted within the Olympic Movement. Pierre de COUBERTIN'S aesthetic project consisted of supporting the development of both athletes and society through the combination of Art and Sport:

"He sincerely believed in the educational value of both sport and art and promoted the alliance of body and mind in a beautiful harmony". He championed the educational concept of training of mind and body, whereby the unity of the two would result in motivating both participants and spectators. At the same time, he endorsed the sense of beauty as a form of individual and social progress".

However, prior to the 1924 Olympic Games, art contests were not fully accepted by National Olympic Committees and officials. In 1912, a limited number of artists submitted their works (thematically connected to sport) at the Stockholm Olympics. The Swedish artists were even against the idea of an art competition. Eight years later when the games resumed in Antwerp after the war, the number of artists and nations were higher, thanks mainly to the personal involvement of Count BAILLET-LATOUR, president of the Belgian Organising Committee. Even so, the artistic competitions had a poor coverage in the international press.

Marquis Melchior de POLIGNAC from the French Olympic Committee was responsible for the organisation of the third edition of the Olympic art contests in Paris. He was supported in his role of president of the "Commission des Arts" by renowned intellectuals such as writer Jean GIRAUDOUX (representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In 1922, the first responsibility of this newly formed commission was to inform all Ambassadors and Ministries of foreign nations in Paris of the decision to include a Fine Arts Competition in the forthcoming Paris Olympiad. The competition rules (drafted by a few well-known artists from each discipline and sent to interested artistic parties worldwide for review) were finally published at the end of 1923.

Announcements in international newspapers requested that artists should only be inspired by the "sporting idea". In addition, Art works would

not be accepted if they had been exhibited prior to the VIII Olympiad: "works for which their authors have not declared the unpublished status of the work in writing, will not be considered for the competition". To increase participation, the "Commission des Arts" decided to nominate an international jury for each artistic discipline including eminent artists or authors of that time: Tony GARNIER and Theo Van RYSSELBERGHE in Architecture, Bela BARTOK and Maurice RAVEL in Music, Paul CLAUDEL and Gabriele d'ANNUNZIO in Literature, Paul LANDOWSKI and Antoine BOURDELLE in Sculpture, Maurice DENIS and FOUJITA in Painting. Melchior de POLIGNAC approached the French Academy of Fine Arts, as well other art groups to enlist them in the Olympic art programme. Such a broad spectrum of participants would assure the competitions' success.

In 1923, Marquis de POLIGNAC personally wrote to the Baron de BLONAY, IOC member for Switzerland, and to Count BAILLET-LATOUR of Belgium, asking their support to encourage the press of their country to promote the mandate of the 1906 Consultative Conference re-establishing the Olympic Art contests.

According to the General Secretary's report, 235 artworks were submitted to the French Olympic Committee, but only 158 were accepted and exhibited at the Paris Grand-Palais from May 15 to June 30, 1924. This exhibition was held in four rooms, but only after numerous negotiations (and failed attempts) to provide an adequate facility to the Olympic art competitions.

Journalistic chronicles were ambiguous about the quality of the art works in the contest. Some articles mentioned that most of the works of this Olympic art exhibition in sculpture and painting "expressed a strong desire for painting or sculpting sporting life". But others reported that the art works didn't succeed in reflecting sporting culture or Olympic movement.

Headed by Frantz JOURDAIN, the jury of the Architecture competition first decided that no submission was worth an Olympic medal. After Pierre de COUBERTIN appealed for them to be less severe in the verdict, the jury reconsidered its position and awarded a silver medal to Alferd HAJOS and Dezso LAUBER from Hungary and a third prize to Julien S.S. MEDECIN from Monaco.

1. Not awarded
2. HAJOS, Alfred and LAUBER, DEZSÖ (HUN)
Plan for Budapest Swimming Stadium
Silver Medal

3. MEDECIN, Julien S.S. (FRA)

Stadium for Monte Carlo
Bronze Medal

A total of 21 artists participated to the 1924 Architecture Olympics.

There were 43 members of jury for the Music competition. ... but only seven participants!

After lengthy discussions at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees, it was decided that no prize would be awarded for this competition.

32 authors competed in Literature. The jury was under the jurisdiction of Jean RICHEPIN. A French poet, GEO-CHARLES (pseudonym of Charles GUYOT), won the gold medal beating a more prestigious author: Henri de MONTHERLANT. Sportsman and director of *Montparnasse*, (a Parisian literary journal), GEO-CHARLES was awarded for his modern "Jeux Olympiques", a 50-pages play combining music, dancing, poetry and outdoor sports. In December 1925, this spectacle would be played at the Cirque Royal in Brussels.

1. GEO-CHARLES (FRA)

The Olympic Games Gold Medal

2. STUART, Dorothy Margaret (GB)

Sword Songs Silver Medal

PETERSEN, Josef (DEN)

Euryale Silver Medal

3. GONNET, Charles-Antoine (FRA)

Vers le Dieu d'Olympie Bronze Medal

GOGARTY, Oliver St. John (IRL)

Ode to the Tailteann Games Bronze Medal

There were a total of 32 participants to the 1924 Literature Olympics.

Overall, 68 artists (from 15 countries) submitted their works to the sculpture contest in Paris. The Greek DIMITRIADIS for his "Discobole finlandais" (clearly inspired by antique sculpture) won the gold medal. The naturalised son of Paul GAUGUIN, Jean-Rene GAUGUIN (Denmark) received a bronze medal for his pugilist model. Many sculptors proposed a new vision of their art. Between Figuration and Abstract art, the pieces tended to be synthetic and innovative than realistic and traditional. Many well-known sculptors (FRAISSE, GUIRAUD-RIVIERE, BOUCHARD) didn't receive any prize.

1. DIMITRIADIS, Konstantinos (GRE)

Discobole Finlandais Gold Medal

2. HELDENSTEIN, Frantz (LUX)

Vers L'Olympiade Silver Medal

3. GAUGUIN, Jean-René (DEN)

Le Boxeur Bronze Medal

MASCAUX, Léon-Claude (FRA)

Médailles sportives Bronze Medal

This competition attracted 68 sculptors.

The president of the Painting contest was Olivier SAINSERE. 65 artists from ten countries participated in the competition. Unfortunately, the most famous painters of the inter-war period were not interested in taking part of that kind of contest, especially if they belonged to the "Art for Art" movement. Dogmas established by dominant art schools (Dada, Surrealism, Expressionism, Abstract Art...) usually resulted in a mechanistic and pathetic vision of sport, strongly opposed to the optimistic ideals of the Olympic Movement.

So in this context, the gold medal was won by Jean JACOBY for three of his artworks ("Corner", "Start", "Rugby") glorifying the sport's movement. The second prize was awarded to an Irish artist: Jack YEATS. The Dutch Johan VAN HELL placed third with his winter skating scene. The French painter Jacques-Henri LARTIGUE, one of the major photographers of the 20th century, was not rewarded for his set of sporting works submitted in 1924. Georges VILLA, well known in the Twenties for his sporting engravings and posters, submitted fencing artworks but these were not deemed worthy of an Olympic medal.

1. JACOBY, Jean (LUX)

"Etudes de sport" Golde Medal

2. YEATS, Jack Butler (IRL)

"Swimming" Silver Medal

3. VAN HELL, Johan (HOLL)

"Skaters" Bronze Medal

A total of 65 painters participated to this competition.

The 1924 Olympic Games may be considered as the "apex" of the Olympic art contests: "for the first time, the Art competitions were viewed around the world as an important artistic event". The geographic or geopolitical context of the following Olympiads partly explains the progressive decline of the Olympic Art competitions. These artistic contests were also victims of "a dogmatic protection of amateurism" and a radical evolution in modern art, leading to a strict separation of sporting and artistic fields. These later evolution of Olympism would mark the end of "Olympic Art" and somehow explains the specific and dominant status of the 1924 Art Competitions.