

LONDON 1948

by Philip Barker

Time was the key as London prepared for the 1948 Olympic Games. Preparations were of necessity hurried. Though no one knew it at the time these were to be the last such contests to date. They were beset by problems from the outset.

Preparation

In January 1947 the first public newsletter of the Organising Committee set out the rudiments of the competition. General Sir Ronald ADAM was appointed Chairman of the Arts Sub Committee and his deputy was Sir Eric de NORMANN KBE. Major AA [Alfred] LONGDEN was appointed Art Director and Secretary to the Committee and it fell to him to make the art contests happen. In June 1947 the Olympic Organisers made a general progress report to the IOC and had this to say about art.

*"An exhibition of Fine Arts was arranged to begin on 15th July but if we are unable to acquire the London Gallery we have in mind we shall hold the exhibition in Wembley Town Hall."*¹

The Gallery they had in mind was nothing less than the *Victoria and Albert Museum*, a splendid 19th century building in the heart of the Royal Borough of Kensington, one of the most exclusive areas of London.

Lord PORTAL of Laverstoke (Organising Committee President) wrote to George TOMLINSON MP at the Ministry of Education asking for facilities to be made available:

*"We are experiencing the greatest difficulty in acquiring a centre which will be worthy of such an important exhibition"*²

Within a fortnight he had a positive reply from TOMLINSON.

*"Space could I think be made available in the Victoria and Albert Museum. There are however practical difficulties as repairs to the wartime damage are far from complete."*³

TOMLINSON then contacted Museum Director Sir Leigh ASHTON who recorded in his notes:

*"I have had a visit from the committee and have agreed to give them the lower ground floor set of galleries provided that they decorate them."*⁴

That was one problem solved, but further obstacles remained.

The very same day ASHTON wrote to Colonel TPM BEVAN (Olympic Organising Committee General Secretary).

*"A rather large snag has arisen (which) would entirely rule out holding the exhibition unless some means can be found of getting rid of it."*⁵

The problem was that the rules of competition made provision for the Organising Committee to act as a go between in arranging the sale of works exhibited.⁶

This contravened the museum regulations and it was only after further assurances came from from the Olympic Organising Committee that no sales would be conducted during the time of the exhibition came that the museum decided it would be happy to proceed.

Further meetings at the Museum now detailed the work necessary to make the galleries fit to welcome the world.

The entrance hall display was designed by the architects department of the Ministry of Works. It featured the Olympic rings lettering depicting the XIV Olympiad and the flags of the competing nations. Special stands were constructed for the 83 exhibitors in the sculpture section and tables for entries in the architecture session. Some 1.144 (352m) was available for hanging the exhibits in the painting competition. Three of the galleries were devoted to oil paintings and a further room housed the water colours. In all the construction work was carried out at a cost of £666. The figure for staging the entire exhibition was given at £3000.⁷

In February 1948, the final rules were announced. The organisers specified that although the entries had to concern sport in some way *"the connection between sport and art will be very liberally interpreted to give the artist more liberty in the execution of their work."*⁸

By March of the Olympic year, Major LONGDEN was able to report that plans were *"well advanced for the exhibition."*⁹

Each nation was able to select up to three entries in each category to be sent to London. The deadlines and precise destinations varied according to discipline.

In each category, there were three medals to be won gold (actually silver gilt) silver and bronze and in addition a diploma.

The jury could at its discretion also give honourable mentions, and it was also empowered to withhold any award if it felt the required standard had not been reached.

Entries had to be executed in the life span of the Olympiad that is to say after 1st January 1944. Regulations also state that no entry was permitted which had been entered for a previous Olympic competition.

Encouraging notes of interest began to appear in the Olympic bulletin in the early part of 1948.

The Italians staged their own exhibition in January 1948 in Rome with 42 prizes and a fund of 2.5 million Lira.¹⁰

The Canadians were also singled out as enthusiastic supporters in a later issue.

The heads of the subcommittees were announced, and the British Judges supplemented by an International Jury selected by Ballot (cp. sidebar). The Music sub committee headed by Sir Arnold BAX (Master of the Kings' Musick) had the dual responsibility of dealing with the Arts competition and organising the massed choirs which would sing at the opening ceremony conducted by popular conductor Dr Malcolm SARGENT.¹¹

The other juries would be similarly eminent but for all the positive notices in official publications as the games approached there were difficulties in attracting the calibre of artists. These problems were revealed in the reports submitted after the games

Even the British Olympic Association Official report noted the problems. They recruited Daily Mail Art critic Pierre JEANNERAT to write their summary.¹²

"When one looked around the galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum one had to deplore the absence of most of the best known living artists."

The USOC apparently decided against participation because *"of the lack of interest shown by American artists in 1936."*

The absence of the best known French artists was also a cause for concern.

"Other glaring gaps, Among the French one looked in vain for names which recent controversies had made familiar in every household - like Matisse and Braque."

Even the editorial in the official catalogue felt obliged to emphasise the absence of America (North and South) and also Australia and New Zealand from the contests.

The home artistic community did enthusiastically back the competition and the exhibition was duly opened by HRH the Duchess of GLOUCESTER. Nearly 1000 guests attended this gala occasion including IOC president J. Sigfrid EDSTROM and Organising Committee President Lord PORTAL.

But when it came to the paying public there were further difficulties as the official report later noted.

Entrance was two shillings (approximately ten pence in decimal currency) but although reductions were made for students and children the official report noted pointedly *"a number of people with children abandoned the idea of entering on hearing of the charge"*.¹³

The contests had an advertising budget of £135 and advertisements were taken out in national newspapers and magazines.

Despite this they seemed unsure just how to pitch the arts competitions for public consumption.

In their recommendations the Jurors called for a more intense press campaign which would *"result in supporters of sport becoming interested in art."* Such a campaign amongst intellectuals would lead to an enrichment of the Olympic idea.

Two publications had been produced to mark the exhibition. A non illustrated catalogue and an illustrated souvenir which contained almost a hundred black and white photographs of exhibits but this unfortunately offered only basic information about the artists or the work and was not comprehensive. It included 97 illustrations.¹⁴

Even so the exhibition began on 15th July and stayed open throughout the games - on two nights each week the galleries remained open until 10pm.

196 commemoration medals and diplomas were sent to overseas exhibitors and 44 entries were received in the literature competition and 36 music pieces.¹⁵

The exhibition included the competitors but also embraced a number of other works including those by judges. Norman WILKINSON, chairman of the painting jury exhibited his depiction in oil of the Fastnet sailing race, and 1928 Architecture champion Jan WILS displayed his designs. The Route of the torch relay in water colour by J Heather CHILD was displayed along with examples of the torch itself. Designed by Ralph LAVERS. Visitors could also see the slightly different torch design as used by John MARK the runner who lit the cauldron at Wembley Stadium and no less than twenty five examples of studies on horse racing by Sir Alfred MUNNINGS, President of the Royal Academy.¹⁶

Architecture

In this competition there were two categories

1. Town Planning
2. Architectural Design

Entries were requested in the form of three dimensional models but draft plans were also admissible.

The Times architectural correspondent noted *"the models of the winning designs are all beautiful examples of craftsmanship especially that of the Swiss training centre awarded the silver medal in the planning section. The architectural quality however of the Austrian group of winter sports buildings ... is not impressive and that applies to several of the commended designs"*¹⁷

Painting

The regulations for graphic art were similarly wide ranging.

The winner of the oil painting went to a work depicting the London Amateur Boxing championships. The artist Alfred THOMSON was deaf and dumb. It was perhaps appropriate that an artist with a disability should be so honoured for this was the year the first paralympic games were held in Britain.

But the French artist Albert DECARIS did earn some praise - his *Swimming Pool* which won the prize for engravings and etchings was according to JEANNERAT, "*remarkably composed and carried out.*"¹⁸

Sculpture

There were three categories

1. in the "Round"
2. Reliefs
3. Medals and Plaques

The Swedish entry *Homage to Ling* [Creator of Swedish drill] by Gustaf NORDAHL was criticised by JEANNERAT

*"However capable as a specimen of straightforward modelling, lacked real sporting interest. A boy and a girl stand motionless and sport surely is motion."*¹⁹

Literature

This called for entries in the following sections

1. Lyrics. This included poetry, odes, hymns and cantatas
2. Dramatic works - as a concession to the new age this include plays for radio
3. Epic works

Depending on the nature of the work, writers were allowed up to 20,000 words, and had to submit four copies of their work together with a precis in English, French or Spanish.

Translators from the University of London were called in to help. The situation was clearly far from ideal.

After the games the judges would recommend only the two official Olympic languages should be permitted In the official report they noted

*"It is impossible to judge fairly form a precis... The question of language made things extremely difficult"*²⁰

The author could also keep his identity secret during the judging.

*"Should the author wish to remain unknown for the time being the work should be sent identified by an distinguishing word"*²¹, it was a rule which COUBERTIN had used in 1912 to good effect.

Music

The competition had three elements

1. Songs: the setting of words for one or more voices, accompanied or unaccompanied - up to 45 minutes in length
2. An instrumental setting for one or more instruments
3. Choral or Orchestral work maximum length 90 minutes.

The BBC music department were called in to help sort through the entries before judging.

Original plans called for a special concert which would feature the winning entries in the contest. This idea did not come to a fruition but there was an Olympic Concert at the nearby *Royal Albert Hall*, one of London's most celebrated concert venues.²² The *IOC Bulletin* described "*a very fine concert, which was greatly appreciated by all IOC members.*"²³

Aftermath

As the games came to an end, the National Olympic Committees contacted LONGDEN to request a report on the competition. Much of the feedback identified what was wrong with the London competition and what needed to be improved for future games ASHTON himself replied.²⁴

"I think the simplest and most constructive thing to say is:

that we considered that the placing of so many different kinds of applied art into one group made judging almost an impossibility

that the most outstanding objects were not nominated for a prize

some of the entries in the poster competition were ruled out because they were unfinished

OR

whilst the design was admirable the lettering was not visible at sufficient distance."

ASHTON was not alone. His views were echoed in the official report

Such was the variety of entries that the judges found it difficult to judge many of the categories.

They called for the architecture contests be greatly simplified. "*A real competition amongst nations for a definite project*" and that a prize be given for the best model submitted.²⁵

The panel who judged the sculptures recommended sculptors be given greater notice of the competition "*owing to the lengthy process of creating important works in stone or bronze.*" A time scale of at least fifteen months was suggested.

In their list of suggestions the judges anticipated the separate contests to find an Olympic hymn for the Helsinki and Melbourne's Games. Two such competitions would follow though no medals would be awarded.²⁶

Raising the profile of the Artistic competition could be achieved they said by making a display of some of the larger sculptures in the open air near the stadium. The graphic art and crafts judged well in advance of the games would enable the material to be used "for and at the games."²⁷

The prizes were presented by the IOC President J Sigfrid EDSTROM in a special ceremony at the museum, accompanied by Lord BURGHLEY the Chairman of the Organising Committee.

Incidentally BURGHLEY later wrote to the Victoria and Albert offering a set of Olympic Medals.²⁸

This was declined by ASHTON.²⁹ It was an unimaginative response which somehow seemed in tune with the times, and by the time the Olympic Flame was lit again in Helsinki, the Olympic Art contests were no more.

Detailed studies of the Music competitions have subsequently been carried out by Bernhard

KRAMER. He believes the London competition with its eminent jury should have made a breakthrough

*"It could have been the starting point for a revival of the Olympic music competitions. The broad-mindedness of the juries would certainly have made the event a lot more attractive and the fact that 36 compositions had been submitted could have been a signal."*³⁰

Jean Yves GUILLAIN expresses no surprise that the Olympic contests were suspended. He suggests a number of factors, the complexity of the competition with so many categories leading to a devaluation of the Olympic medal. Furthermore as artists were paid for their work, they were de facto professionals.

*"This multiplication of medals destroyed the credibility of artistic competition."*³¹

There was doubt over the quality of the artists, the lack of big names and difficulties with publicity.

The International Jury

The International Juries are listed in various sources. It is impossible at this distance to confirm which is correct but the following are the most complete available and has been compiled from the following sources

The Official Report of the XIV Olympiad, Mc Corquodale 1951

The Official British Olympic Association Official Report of the London Games 1948

Regulations Art Competitions - Organising Committee XIV Olympiad

Illustrations from the XIVth Olympiad Sport in Art Exhibition London 1948, Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue

The Times (19th February 1948)

1948 Juries - A cumulative list

Architecture

Sir Percy THOMAS (GBR),
Robert MATTHEW (GBR),
Professor William HOLFORD (GBR),
1928 Gold Medallist Jan WILS (NED),
Howard CRANE (USA)

Painting

Sir Norman WILKINSON (GBR),
Walter HUTCHINSON (GBR),
James LAVERS (GBR),
Paul BRET (FRA),
Professor Giulio Carlo ARGAN (ITA)

Graphic Art

Malcolm OSBOURNE (GBR),
Viktor STRETTI (CZE),
Sakari SAARIKIVI (FIN),
James LAVERS (GBR),
Alfred LONGDEN (GBR)

Craft Applications

Blake- More GODWIN (USA),
Sir Leigh ASHTON(GBR)*,
Gordon RUSSELL (GBR)*,

Sculpture

Sir William Reid DICK (GBR),
Sir Charles WHEELER(GBR),
Stig BLOMBERG (SWE),
Professor Henrique SALVIO (BRA)

Literature

Sir Alan HERBERT (GBR),
Major General John HAY-BEITH (GBR),
Professor Max WILDI (SUI),
Sigfred PEDERSEN (DEN),
Bernard DARWIN (GBR)*

Music

Sir Arnold BAX (GBR),
Sir Malcolm SARGENT (GBR),
Edric CUNDELL (GBR),
Sir George DYSON (GBR),

Sir Stanley MARCHANT (GBR),
Paul LEROI (FRA),
Bruno ROGHI (ITA)

The names asterisked appear only in the listing of judges in the official catalogue.

Whereas many sport fans could identify ZATOPEK and BLANKERS-KOEN as heroes of '48, few are even aware of the artistic champions.

There has subsequently been an artistic element to the games and almost four decades later, appropriately the British Olympic Association appointed an Olympic Artist for the first time.³²

When London next stages the games in 2012 the cultural festival will be an integral part of their efforts.

Notes

1. *Report of the XIV Olympic Games Organising Committee to the IOC*, June 1947
2. Viscount PORTAL to George TOMLINSON MP at Ministry of Education Letter dated 22nd July 1947. Held in written Archives of Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue No ED84/327.
3. TOMLINSON to PORTAL letter dated 6th August 1947. Held in written Archives of Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue No ED84/327.
4. ASHTON, hand written Memo, 19th August 1947. Held in written Archives of Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue No ED84/327.
5. ASHTON to Col BEVAN, Letter dated 19th August 1947. Held in written Archives of Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue No ED84/327.
6. *Regulations Art Competitions - Organising Committee XIV Olympiad* "In order to ensure the co-operation of artists, the organising committee would act as intermediary for the sale of works".
7. *Official Report of the XIV Olympiad, The Committee*, Mc Corquodale 1951
8. *Regulations Art Competitions - Organising Committee XIV Olympiad*.
9. LONGDEN, in *Olympic Newsletter* (March 1948).
10. *Olympic Newsletter* (March 1948).
11. *Olympic Newsletter* (January 1947). Dr Malcolm SARGENT was knighted by the King in 1947 and conducted the massed choirs in the Opening Ceremony as well as the concert for the IOC at the Royal Albert Hall on August 8th 1948.
12. JEANNERAT, "Olympic Sport in Art" British Olympic Association Official Report - World Sports 1948.
13. *Official Report of the XIV Olympiad The Committee - Mc Corquodale* 1951
14. *Illustrations from the XIVth Olympiad Sport in Art Exhibition London 1948, Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue*.
15. *Official Report of the XIV Olympiad The Committee Mc Corquodale* 1951
16. *Illustrations from the XIVth Olympiad Sport in Art Exhibition London 1948, Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue*.
17. *The Times* (June 30th 1948).
18. JEANNERAT "Olympic Sport, in Art" in British Olympic Association Official Report - World Sports 1948.
19. JEANNERAT, "Olympic Sport in Art" in British Olympic Association Official Report.
20. *Official Report of the XIV Olympiad, The Committee*. Mc Corquodale 1951
21. *Regulations Art Competitions - Organising Committee XIV Olympiad*
22. *The Times* (9th August 1948). The only music which had a connection with sport was the Olympic Hymn, "Non Nobis Domine" by Roger QUILTER with words by Rudyard KIPLING. In addition members were entertained by a more orthodox programme. Sir Malcolm SARGENT conducted the Roman Carnival Overture by BERLIOZ, Eva TURNER sang an aria from VERDI'S *Un Ballo in Maschera* and ELGAR'S Overture *Cockaigne* - In London Town - was an appropriate choice.
23. *Olympic Review* (September 1948).
24. ASHTON to LONGDEN, memo dated 16th August 1948. Held in written Archives of Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue No ED84/327.
25. *Official Report of the XIV Olympiad The Committee Mc Corquodale* 1951.
26. In 1951-2 the Finns staged a nationwide contest to provide music and lyrics for a new Olympic hymn and in 1954 Prince Pierre of Monaco organised an International competition on behalf of the IOC to find an Olympic hymn for Melbourne.
27. *Official Report of the XIV Olympiad The Committee Mc Corquodale* 1951
28. E Blanchard CHRISTIE (Organising Committee Secretary) for Lord BURGHELY to ASHTON 18th January 1948 offering the Victoria and Albert Museum, a set of Olympic medals. "As a permanent record of the London Olympic Games with which your museum was so closely associated." Held in written Archives of Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue No ED84/327.
29. ASHTON to BURGHELY, letter dated January 22nd 1948. "we do not have any important collection of coins or medals at the museum." Held in written Archives of Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue No ED84/327.
30. KRAMER, Bernhard, "Musica Olympiaca - The Forgotten Composers of the Olympic Art Competitions", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 13(2005)3.
31. GUILLAIN, Jean Yves, "The End of the Olympic Art Competitions", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 13(2005)3.
32. Kevin WHITNEY by coincidence born in the London Olympic year of 1948 was appointed BOA artist at the suggestion of Don ANTHONY - as such WHITNEY attended the Los Angeles and Barcelona Olympics, was artist in residence at the International Olympic Academy and continues to paint on Olympic themes. Gerry BLOOD, an exhibitor in 1948 another British artist was commissioned to paint the Opening Ceremony in Seoul 1988.