

# Designed but not issued – the Olympic Philately of Helsinki 1940

By Manfred Bergman



The 1<sup>st</sup> prize in the philately competition went to Gustaf Adolf Jysky for this design. Modified from a photo it shows the Olympic discus victory of the American Kenneth Carpenter in 1936.

Illustrations: Manfred Bergman, Volker Kluge Archive

Helsinki first announced its interest in organising the Olympic Games at the 1930 Olympic Congress in Berlin. At that time people were still focusing on 1936. The plans became concrete six years later when the Finnish capital stood as candidate for the 1940 Games against Tokyo and lost.

The Japanese were at war with China but it was not until 1938 that they accepted that they would not be in a position to host the Games of the XII<sup>th</sup> Olympiad. All the more credit to the Finns that they declared themselves ready to take over, only four days after the Japanese NOC had given the Games back to the IOC. That was not altogether surprising, for the Finns had been known for many years as a people obsessed with sport and had taken part in all Olympic Games since 1906.

In Finland a career as a well-known athlete always proved a good reference for a top job later. Some examples: The head of the NOC and of the Finnish Sports Association was Urho Kekkonen, 1924 national standing high jump champion and since 1937 Interior Minister. He also became state president in 1956 a position he held for 25 years.

The Deputy Mayor of Helsinki was called Erik von Frenckell, who from 1940 was permitted also to bear the honourable title of "city manager". He had led the Finnish Football Association since 1918.

The banker Jukka Rangell, Finnish triple jump champion in 1912 and 1913, became President of the Organising Committee for 1940. He was also co-opted to the IOC by postal ballot on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1938. He remained a member until 1967. Rangell attained an even higher office at a difficult time for his nation in a time of war when they were moving towards closer relations with Nazi Germany. In 1941 he was named Prime Minister.

## Special issue stamps as a source of income

Finland had not embarked on the Olympic challenge unprepared. Even before they were officially named as hosts on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1938, the new Olympic Stadium was opened on the Tivoli grounds. Its capacity was extended from 40,000 seats to 61,463. The exhibition hall, completed in 1935 in close proximity to the stadium was intended to stage indoor sports. At the end of 1938 construction work on the swimming stadium and the velodrome began. In 1939 there followed the completion of the rowing venue and the topping-out ceremony of the Olympic Village, built on a former trotting track in Käpylä.

Despite the American slump of 1937, which had also severely damaged the Finnish economy, the government earmarked 300 million Finnmarks for the Olympic building programme. The shortfall was to be financed through the sale of bonds to a value of 200 Markkaa each.

Another important source of income was the issue of special postage stamps. The Organising Committee modelled their denominations on that used for the Games in Berlin, when Olympic stamps with supplements had first appeared on a large scale. The profits from these



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flowed into the "Hilfsfonds für den Deutschen Sport", founded in 1933 by the Reichssportführer. From 1934 this was known as "Deutsche Sporthilfe" – a foundation which served to prepare German athletes for the 1936 Games and give them social backup.

### Throwing the discus – not an unprofitable skill

At the start of 1939 the Helsinki Municipality announced a competition to run from 20<sup>th</sup> April to 16<sup>th</sup> June 1939. What was sought was a set of special issue stamps covering the full range of values. The designs that have been preserved, show clearly that Berlin was the model. The values indicate a supplement, customary in Finland since the beginning of the 1930s with charitable issues in aid of the Red Cross.

Participation was lively. Ten artists handed in no less than 103 designs, to be judged by a six-member commission headed by Rafael Blomstedt, Rector of the Central School of Arts and Crafts. The jury, met in the City Hall. It comprised representatives of the Finnish designer and philatelist association, and chose ten proposals, which were passed on to the postal administration, even before had established a final ranking.

The postal administration, however, favoured the artist Signe Hammersten-Jansson (1882–1970), with whom they had worked for a long time, and had printed numerous colour proofs from her works. They even went further by printing three collective proofs in black, blue and brown, though the jury only gave her a consolation prize. The jury awarded the 1<sup>st</sup> place to the graphic designer and painter Gustaf Adolf Jysky (1893–1966), who had apparently not taken any great trouble searching for his motifs.

His design shows a discus thrower, which can be clearly recognized as the American Olympic champion of 1936, Kenneth Carpenter. The image was identical to number 55 in a popular collectors photo card series distributed in great numbers by the Hamburg Cigaretten-Bilderdienst. Why the artist gave his design the title "Limppu", which

in Finnish means a thick piece of bread, was not revealed. Perhaps this was because his work was awarded 5000 Finnmark, and therefore proved anything but an unprofitable skill ...

### Wirkkala's "galloping horses"

The prize of 4000 Finnmarks went to the then little known designer Veli Tapio Wirkkala (1915–1985). He had taken his degree in Helsinki School for Sculpture in 1936. (The centenary of his birth has been marked with exhibitions this year in Finland)

For the 1940 Games Wirkkala had envisaged a stamp with two runners, to which he gave the title "Parivaljakko", by which in fact two galloping horses are intended. But especially the "balanced stride" of the two athletes reminds us of Wirkkala's famous fellow-countryman Paavo Nurmi, who put Finland on the world map in the 1920s.

Wirkkala's great career did however not take off until 1946 when he won a competition organised by the glass manufacturer Littala. Today his works are to be found in the collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris as well as in the New York MoMA. They include glass ware with ice like surfaces which command great sums of money.

But Wirkkala remained tied to sport. Although the 1940 Olympics were cancelled Helsinki did ultimately host the Games of the XV<sup>th</sup> Olympiad in 1952. Four stamps were produced in late 1951 in connection with these. Two of these bear his signature. This time, however, he had decided on two footballers and a sprinter at the start and in front of the background of his predecessors of antiquity.

### The shared third place

The 2500 Finnmark prize was shared between brothers Eino Rafael Rapp (1902–1953) and Aarne Alexander Rapp (1897–1939) and competition winner Jysky. As appropriate

When Helsinki made an application to stage the 1940 Games, an advertising vignette was produced. Adjacent: Tapio Wirkkala's "Duo" which won second prize.



The design by Eino and Aarne Rapp featured a shot-putter and a javelin thrower. They received third prize, but had to share this with Gustaf Adolf Jysky. The competition winner presented a design with the Helsinki stadium tower. Twelve years later this was used for an Olympic stamp, but the doves were missing on the 1952 version.

for brothers, the Rapps also drew two athletes, to whom they gave the title "Kuula ja keihäs" – thus shot and javelin.

The choice of disciplines was understandable: the silver medal of the shot-putter Sulo Bärlund in 1936 in Berlin was still fresh in the popular memory. As for the javelin, it was at the time unquestionably a "Finnish" domain. In 1912 – in throwing with both arms – and in 1920 the Finns occupied the first four places, and in Jonni Myyrä they produced the 1924 winner. In 1932 they also won all three medals. Only in 1936 did they have to hand over the title to the German Gerhard Stöck.

Whether Jysky was also inspired by javelin throwing when he sent in a design with the stadium tower, which brought him a further prize, can only be guessed at. In any case the legend endures to this day that stadium architect Yrjö Lindegren and his partner Toivo Jäntti had fixed the height of the tower, on whose top the

Olympic Flame was to burn, at exactly 72.71 metres – the distance with which their countryman Matti Järvinen had become Olympic champion in 1932 in Los Angeles. In reality the builders did not have that in mind. Instead, the height of the tower, which in fact is only 72 metres, resulted from the calculations of the structural engineers.

Twelve years later Jysky came along with his design, to which he had given the name "Nyt se alkaa" – "Now it begins". Nonetheless he did without the white doves in the Olympic stamp of 1952. Perhaps the symbols of peace at a time of danger of atomic war appeared to him unsuitable or somewhat naive.

In this later work, however, there is a remarkable similarity with a design by Signe Hammersten-Jansson, who had gone unrewarded for her stadium stamp in 1939.

### Secret winner: Signe Hammersten-Jansson

Born in Sweden, she was undoubtedly the busiest and best stamp designer. Between 1929 and 1963 she designed no fewer than 173 postage stamps – among the most used was a stamp with the lion coat of arms from the year 1954/1955. Besides she worked as an illustrator, designing letters and banknotes. She also worked as a cartoonist under the pen name "Ham". Her daughter Tove Jansson, who developed the well-known Mumin comic books, clearly drew on the mass of work she left behind.

Despite her reputation, this highly regarded lady did not emerge from the competition as the winner. This is an indication that the Finnish postal administration

Two of several proofs from designs by Signe Hammersten-Jansson, who drew on Finnish national feeling with her work. Right: the face of an Olympic champion. The flags in the background indicate that he is a Finn. Adjacent: the Paavo Nurmi statue by Wäinö Aaltonen.





The Greek head of a young victory won fifth prize for heraldist Olof Eriksson (far left). Adjacent: extra prizes were given to Signe Hammersten-Jansson, to Aarre Karjalainen for his runner design and to Henry Czarneck, who had placed Helsinki into the "Centre of the World" in his design.

was poorly or not at all represented on the jury. For the post office she remained number one, as the three collective proofs show.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Hammersten-Jansson chose universal motifs like the Olympic Flame of Myron's Diskobolos. She also drew on Finnish national feeling. This is shown most clearly in the stamp with a portrait of an athlete withdrawn into himself at the moment of the prize-giving, symbolised by her with the wreath on his head and three Finnish flags on their masts – possibly recalling the clean sweep by the 10,000 metres runners at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

Of course in this connection one must not forget Paavo Nurmi, whom the sculptor Wäinö Aaltonen, then only 30, had sculpted in bronze as early as 1925 after his five Olympic victories in Paris, commissioned by the Finnish government.

One of Signe Hammersten-Jansson's designs shows this famous statue, which at that time still stood in the Atheneum of Helsinki, until it was moved before the 1952 Games to the square outside the stadium, where today the monument to Lasse Viren keeps it company.

### Helsinki 1940 – the "Centre of the World"

As far as the remaining placings are concerned, there remain some mysteries. The heraldist Olof Eriksson (1911–1987) is named as a prize winner. His entry bore the title "Hellaasta", showing the beautiful head of a Hellenistic athlete with a victor's ribbon in his hair and which brought him the fifth prize. More significant is however the fact that Eriksson created the present-day Finnish state coat of arms, showing a golden lion with the European sword in its right paw, while it tramples down a crooked Tatar sword with its rear paws.

While only the name of the sixth-placed has come down to us – Bertel Lindholm – and nothing is known of his design entitled "Elizabeth", we discover from the preserved meeting minutes that the jury awarded an additional three prizes. One went to Aarre Karjalainen

(1905–1966), who had entered a sketch named "Urheilujuhla" ("Competition"), showing a long-distance runner with the stadium tower as background.

Six years later at the end of the war, Karjalainen was to design the first series of Finnish stamps which showed five athletes from sports in which Finland had been particularly successful: wrestling, horizontal bar gymnastics, long-distance running, cross-country skiing and javelin.

A consolation prize went to Signe Hammersten-Jansson as well, whose work in the minutes is described as "4 + 1". Whatever is meant by that – perhaps the nominal value of the stamp: 4 + 1 Markkaa.

Allegorical: A map of Finland as the goddess of victory Nike.



Fascination with the torch relay race: three artists, whose names remain unidentified, took this as their theme.



Finally Henry Czarneck (or Czarnecki?) is named, of whom we only know that he also handed in a design with the stadium tower as a motif. The title "Maailmankeskipiste" ("Centre of the World") – is justified by a globe.

### Finnish Nike, torch relay and marathon race

Among the designs whose creators are unidentified is an abstract sketch of the map of Finland, which soon afterwards as a result of the "Winter War" of 1939/1940 was reduced in area by the eleven per cent that Finland had to hand over to the Soviet Union. During my research it turned out that various stages of development of this motif exist. Once the unidentified artist laid a laurel wreath and the Olympic rings on the map of Finland, the next time he transformed the outlines into an allegory – the goddess of victory Nike.

The artist had also found inspiration in the torch relay. The planned route was in its first part to a great extent identical with that of 1936 – however with a "jump sideways" to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, independent since March 1939.

From Berlin the relay was to carry the flame to Copenhagen, in order to make the crossing in rowing boats from Helsingör over the Öresund to Sweden. From there the route led via Oslo and Stockholm and finally along the Swedish-Finnish coast to Helsinki.

The second great theme was the marathon race,

in which the Finns had achieved victories in 1920 and 1924 through as Hannes Kolehmainen and Albin Stenroos, later groundsman at the Olympic Stadium. Here too there was reference to Paavo Nurmi, for the "Wonder Runner" had planned to end his sporting career in 1932 with a victory in Los Angeles. But then he had invoiced expenses for races in Königsberg and Danzig. These were considered excessive by officials. The German IOC Member Karl Ritter von Halt had handed over incriminating material to IAAF President J. Sigfrid Edström and Nurmi was banned.

Ignoring the ban which had already been pronounced, Nurmi competed on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1932 in Viipuri in the Finnish Olympic qualification race. This was in what the Finns described as a "short-marathon" of 40.2 km. It was his first attempt over the distance but he won in a record time of 2:22:03.8. The Finnish NOC then nominated him for Los Angeles, and when the entry was rejected, Kekkonen, then also President of the Finnish athletics federation, protested in vain.

While the IAAF excluded Nurmi, he retained his amateur status in Finland. He contested his last races in 1934, and with 15:20 min over 5000 m and 31:39,2 min over 10,000 m the 37 year old proved that he was still world class. His fellow citizens nominated Nurmi to be the last torch-bearer in 1952. This may well have annoyed Edström, by then IOC President.

### Baillet-Latour officially announced the cancellation of the Games

Despite the Second World War, preparations in Helsinki initially proceeded according to plan. After the victory over Poland Hitler briefly allowed the rest of Europe a short respite, but Stalin extended his sphere of control by annexing the Baltic states. However his policy of expansion failed temporarily in Finland, as it was not prepared to concede a security zone in Karelia, whereupon on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1939 the Soviet attack began.

Designs by Signe Hammersten-Jansson: gliding, which was part of the programme for the first time in 1940. Adjacent: typically Finnish – javelin throwing. Neither of these won prizes.



The "Winter War" changed the situation. The conflict also cost the lives of Olympic competitors Gunnar Höckert (gold 1936 in the 5000 metres), Birger Wasenius (silver in speed-skating 1936) and Mauri Noroma-Nyberg (gymnastics bronze 1932/36). The Finns were able to hold out until March 1940, but after 105 days the mediator Juho Paasikivi was visibly relieved to negotiate a peace treaty with the Kremlin.

Only when the German troops marched into Denmark and Norway did the Helsinki Organising Committee on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1940 draw a final line under their withdrawal. IOC President Count de Baillet-Latour officially cancelled the Games of the XII<sup>th</sup> Olympiad on 2<sup>nd</sup> May.

## Epilogue

The variety of philatelic material shows that the Games of 1940 in Finland were in good hands even in the view of a collector. Knowledge of it is especially due to the marathon runner and Olympic philatelist Ossi Virtanen, who searched the Helsinki city archives, where the original designs had once been kept.

His article, published in 1991 in the *SPI Journal* remains the best that has been written on this subject.<sup>3</sup> He only had various loose colour copies and photocopies of the prize-winning designs at his disposal, and these then disappeared after an exhibition.

A great deal has been lost through carelessness and ignorance, so that in retrospect it can still be regarded as a stroke of luck that the city administration of Helsinki at one stage gave the caretaker permission to keep the competition documentation which was regarded as superfluous when they were moved.

He took them to an auction house, where they were sold into private collections. In the late 1990s some of the objects eventually made their way into the philately collection at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. ■

1 *Die Olympischen Spiele 1936 in Berlin und Garmisch-Partenkirchen*, Vol. 2, published by the Cigaretten-Bilderdienst Hamburg-Bahrenfeld 1936, p. 45.

2 Helge Nygrén, *Olympia-uli joka sammui sodan tuuliin: XII olympiadin unelmakisaat Helsin gissä 20.7.-4.8.1940*, Suomen Urheilumuseosäätiö, Helsinki 1991, p. 57.

3 Ossi Virtanen, "Finland's 1940 Summer Olympic Games: Stamps, Essays and Vignettes", in: *Journal of Sports Philately*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1991, pp. 13-16.



The eternal marathon proved a popular theme. The unidentified artist who created the design above, however gave the athletes a running style reminiscent of a sprinter. Top left: "The three victors". The original design is in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. Left: in the "Winter War" in 1939/1940 the Swiss gave their support to the Finns with charity stamps.