

Isaac Israels: Gold Medal Winner In the 1928 Art Competition

By Ruud Paauw

What do we know about the medal winners in the Olympic art competition (1912-1948)? Not much, I am afraid. It is the Cinderella-part of the Olympic history. But if we look into the matter thoroughly we may find interesting stories. Here is an example: Isaac Israels (1865-1934), the 1928 Olympic gold medallist in painting.

ISAAC ISRAELS and his "RED RIDER"

When the name of Israels is mentioned in the Netherlands most people think of the famous painter and watercolorist Jozef Israels (1842-1911). So we may say that it must have been a doubtful pleasure for Isaac to be born as the son of such a national hero. The story goes that if Jozef Israels entered a restaurant or a theatre people whispered: "Israels, Israels!" Isaac lived long under the shadow of his father, who was the painter of the 'human touch'.

But Isaac had qualities of his own. He appeared to be a child wonder, and he got strong support from his father. When he was six years old, Jozef told friends: "My Isaac is so fond of animals that he speaks and dreams of them; he is a clever animal painter and with the aid of the Lord he will be a better colorist than his father."

Isaac left school very young and went with his parents on long travels to France, Italy, and Austria. Every year

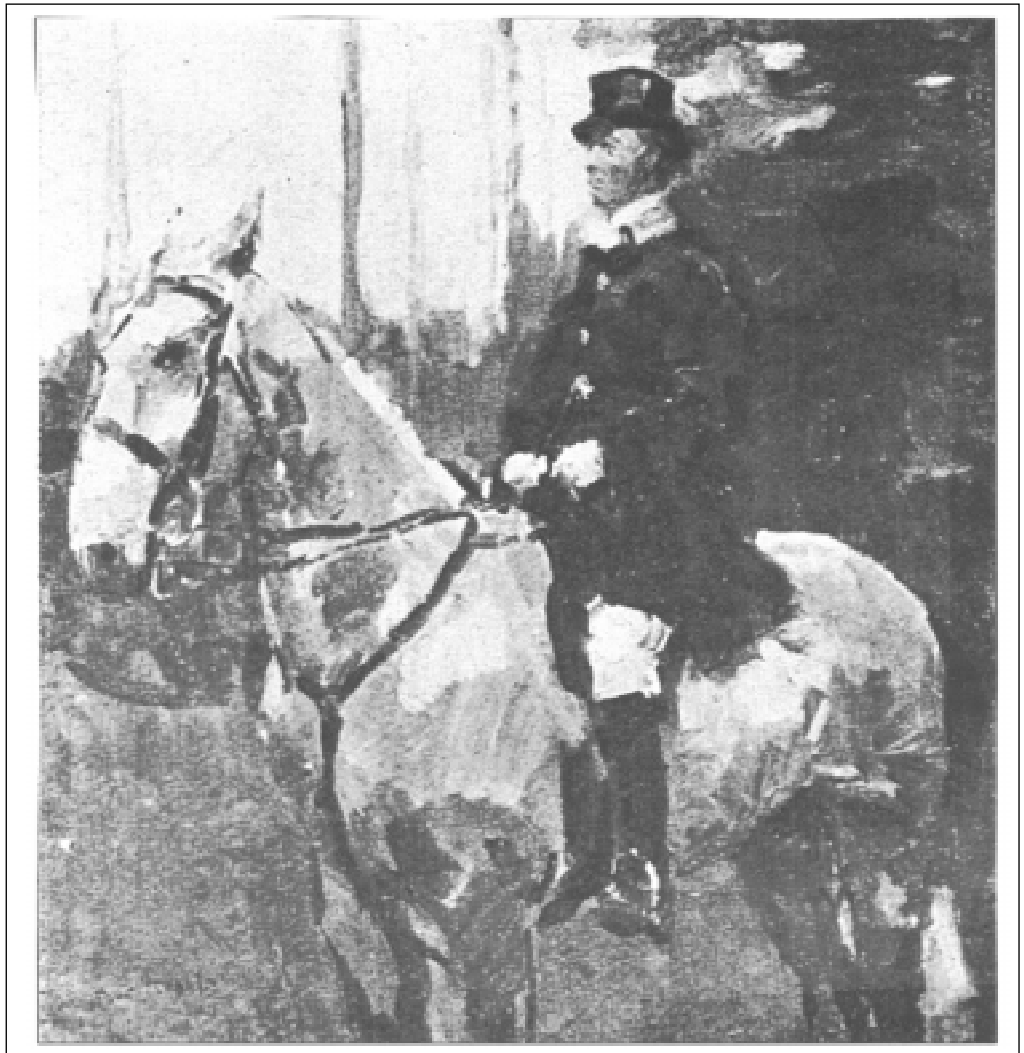


A proud-looking Isaac Israels

they went to Paris. When he was 16 years old he sold his first painting, the monumental "Het transport der kolonialen" (The transport of the colonials). In the beginning he painted just as his father: sober and subtle with interest for ordinary life. But when he grew older and got other friends he discovered the sparkling city-life of Amsterdam and Paris and adopted another course. The realism of the "Haagse School" and that of his father's work was not enough for him. He wanted to depict the big city as a metaphor for modern life with its confusing stir, work, pleasure, outskirts. At the end of the nineteenth century he was an accomplished impressionist of the zest for living in coffeehouses, streets and theatres. If he had caught the action the painting was finished for him. He never showed any interest in making a full painting in which every detail was carefully reflected. His eye worked as a camera with unusual optic angles, recorded in a split second. That's perhaps why critics reproached him that his outlook on life was too superficial.

The highlight of his career was his stay in Paris (1903-1914) in which he showed a brilliant technique in his compositions. There were exhibitions of his work in Paris, Bordeaux and Venice. A trip to the Netherlands Past Indies (now Indonesia) gave him material for paintings and watercolors in which he, par excellence, caught the atmosphere of country and people.

Isaac Israels was a great admirer of women and had a very special and optimistic view of them. He made a lot of portraits. He painted the women remarkably spontaneous, hale and hearty, as beauties. One of them was the



J.P. Leeuwenburgh, "The Red Rider."

infamous Mata Hari. Israels traveled a lot and was an easy-living man. There were no notable tragedies in his life. Compare this to Van Gogh! Yet on October 4, 1934, he was knocked down near his house by a motorcar and died a few days later.

Sixty-five years after Isaac Israels' death two outstanding Dutch art galleries, De Kunsthal in Rotterdam and the Kröller-Muller Museum at Otterlo, devoted at the same time large exhibitions to his work. I hoped to see there "The Red Rider," the painting for which he had received the gold medal in the 1928 Olympic art competition. From his notes we know that he "highly enjoyed the prize especially, since I was crowned together with swimmers, runners and jumpers-it gives you a youthful feeling."

But to my personal regret, neither in

De Kunsthal nor in Kröller-Muller "The Red Rider" could be found. Nobody could tell me anything about this painting. Then I made inquiries at the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (Documentation Center for Art History) in The Hague. There I had some luck. The expert for 19th century Dutch painters was a man called Leeuwenburgh. He told me an amazing story: his grandfather J.P. Leeuwenburgh IS "The Red Rider!" J.P. Leeuwenburgh had asked Israels in 1928 to paint him on his horse, Tristan. But he was, according to his grandson, not at all satisfied with the result and refused to accept the painting. Israels then sent it to the Olympic art competition and won the first prize. It is most remarkable that a painting refused by the principal for lack of quality consequently got the Olympic gold medal. The grandson did not know where "The Red Rider" is at the moment. It must be in a private collection.