

From Athens to Mexico: Posters of the Olympic Games

by Walter Umminger



Walter UMMINGER, German journalist and writer, author of several works on sport and the Olympics, one of which we mentioned in No. 28 of the Olympic Review, "The Olympic Games of Modern Times from Athens to Munich", has recently written a study on the Olympic posters, witness of their times, for "Publik". With their permission, we republish this work and thank him for this contribution to Olympic history.

In our day and age it only seems natural to inform the general public of the Olympic Games. For this purpose, the Organising Committee for the Games of the XXth Olympiad in Munich in 1972 has a Press, Publicity and Graphic Arts Department.

An organisation of this kind has gradually developed from the very simple and often moving beginnings of the Olympic Games themselves and their history, which can be traced by means of the posters, does not lack charm.



1896 Athens: We cannot as yet talk about posters but more of leaflets. Although it is true that in 1854 Ernst LITFASS, from Berlin, had already invented his famous poster columns, at the time of the Games, Athens still preferred the Greek columns. These columns, printed on to a 'poster', are Corinthian or Doric and support a temple frieze decorated with Epebian wrestlers, discus throwers, a solitary boy of the LAOCOON family and a young Greek girl in national costume. The poster also shows the Olympic stadium recently constructed in the form of a horseshoe, the Olympieion and of course the Acropolis. It would have been difficult to add any more classic memories. The inscription is one of immense pride yet to be equalled by any other poster ... and for good reason: 776-1896.



1900 Paris: The French Olympic Games' posters, published within the framework of the Universal Exhibition, are involuntarily comic. This is not at all astounding if one considers that the track and field events on the official programme come under the heading of "Means of developing the mind and morals of the worker". It is as if Henri TOULOUSE-LAUTREC and Alfons MUCHA had not yet created an art poster.



1904 St. Louis: The first signs of a new style seem to have reached the United States. The poster drops the motif idea as the World Fair, which was also held here, carried greater importance. However, we must mention the "fish eye", the symbol used for the city organising the Games.



1908 London: On a background greatly resembling the main entrance of a Victorian house is seen a jumper using a very strange technique. Beneath the athlete, one can distinguish with great difficulty the Olympic stadium of Shepherds Bush, the cinder track and a swimming pool. The designer responsible for this poster seems to have come up against insurmountable problems of perspective.

1912 Stockholm: These are the first Olympic Games to correspond to the wishes of Baron pierre de COUBERTIN and it is also the first poster to be worthy of such a name. It is artistic, youthful and original: an effect of flags swirling round flag-bearers.



1920 Antwerp: The Belgian poster draws inspiration from that of Sweden. Even the material covering the naked thighs of an athlete gives an impression of having already been seen. However, the whole thing seems to have been designed by a dilettante. An involuntary impressionist effect is gained by the badly proportioned hands of a discus thrower which would have made MYRON smile.



1924 Paris: The French want to make people forget what they did to COUBERTIN and the Olympic Games 24 years before and to atone for the indifference against this great idea of their now illustrious compatriot. But the poster did not help very much. It subtly hides the fact that Paris at this time harboured the minds of Picasso, Braque, Chagall, Léger, Chirico, Ernst, Miro, Arp, etc. Even the sportsmen could only guess what the athlete represented on the poster was trying to throw. It certainly was not a javelin, more like a sword without its handle or even a poker. The poster also ignores the Olympic rings which COUBERTIN designed 10 years earlier.



1928 Amsterdam: The realists and 'pop' artists of today could thank the Dutchman, Jules ROVERS. In 1912, the effect of his poster is already striking. He is also the first person to show the flag with the Olympic rings.



1932 Los Angeles: Instead of asking Metro Goldwin Mayer, who are experienced in designing publicity posters, the Americans seem to have resorted to the services of a baker. This Olympic poster is the least successful of all of them. It even ignores the order of the Olympic rings which are printed in sea blue, sky blue, green, yellow and red, as opposed to blue, black, red, yellow and green.



1936 Berlin: As was expected, the poster is heroic and monumental but not in such bad taste as one might have thought. That is how the Third Reich announced the Olympic Games. The poster is more a witness of the spirit of that time than of its atrocities.

1948 London: For the last time, the British capital organises an Olympic art competition at great expense. Its poster is more than conventional. Big Ben and a poor interpretation of the Discobolus by MYRON do not stir up much interest for the Olympic Games although they can regard themselves lucky at being able to celebrate them once more.

1952 Helsinki: Wäinö AALTONEN's statue of Nurmi, and the globe had already been used as publicity for the 1940 Games. When it was the turn of Finland to organise the Games, twelve years later, the same poster was brought out of the archives, with just the date changed. The second World War does not seem to have affected the world of Olympic posters.



The Olympic Games and their Ages: the posters only give a brief glimpse. They are more of a proof of missed opportunities than of those taken. Possibly within this very idea is the whole theme of the Olympic Games.



W.U.

1956 Melbourne: The Australian poster, corresponding exactly to the character of the Games on the fifth continent, is as sober and objective as an invitation card. It rejects any form of decorative drawings; the Olympic rings are the most important feature. Just by modifying the text, the same poster could be used again. However, it does not attract enough attention.

1960 Rome: The she-wolf of the capital entirely dominates the scene. The Olympic rings float over her head like a halo. But the she-wolf is grumbling, in the same way that the people of the Eternal City received the Games. Rome did not welcome them open-heartedly but with the coolness of a city that has seen more than one "circus maximus".

1964 Tokyo and 1968 Mexico: These two cities deserve to be mentioned together. As if they were not content with one poster, they designed a whole collection, each poster exceeding the one before. For the first time, the Japanese used photography whilst the Mexicans came up with a whole series of all the subtle graphics that they could have dreamed of. For Munich, it will not be an easy task to equal Tokyo and Mexico.

