

Pierre de Coubertin resuscitated

by Jean Durry



A sports writer, responsible for the creation of the Sports Museum in France, our friend Jean Durry gives us below a portrait of Pierre de Coubertin as shown in the French pavilion of the “Man and his World” exhibition in Montreal, on the occasion of the celebration of the last Olympiad. We thank him for this interesting article.

“The Gaulois and his son”, a bronze presented in 1895 by the USFSA, union of French sports associations of the period, to its Secretary General, Pierre de Coubertin.



An exhibition by the French Sports Museum in Montreal, 1976

At the time of the Olympic Games in Montreal, there were many special displays devoted to sport in the national pavilions of the “Man and his World” exhibition which—on the island of St. Helena, in the middle of the St. Lawrence River—prolongs to a certain extent, year after year, the 1967 Universal Exhibition. This was the case, for example, of Greece, Iran, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia and the USSR, to mention but a few of the most striking.

It was also the case of France, whose pavilion, in a circuit over a mile long, showed sports from the Middle Ages right up to the present day, in a display composed of a dozen themes as varied as: tournaments and hawking, the world of French sport, sports posters before 1914, the ice-sailing boat, the giants of the road (the “Tour de France” cycle race). It was essentially with the collections and the help of the French Sports Museum (Secretariat of State for Youth and Sport) that these various themes had been treated.

Very special importance was given to Olympism, with two sectors devoted to precise subjects: first, “*The Olympic Games through exhibits and photographs in the Sports Museum*”; the other: “*Pierre de Coubertin Resuscitated*”. An entire hall was dedicated to the revival of the modern Games, without restricting itself to this single aspect of his work. Objects, pictures, books, photographs and manuscripts had been gathered together to show that Pierre de Coubertin is no myth but, on the contrary, a man of flesh and blood, with a vision that was often prophetic, a man both generous and broadminded, who followed courageously until the very end of his life the path he had traced out for himself.

After gazing for a moment on the face of Coubertin, as immortalised in 1928 by the Swiss sculptor Milo Martin, the public’s attention was naturally drawn to the panel addressing the organisers’ warmest thanks to

the International Olympic Committee “without whose generous assistance”, it was indicated, “this exhibition could never have taken place”. As a matter of fact, after the idea had been submitted by Mrs. Monique Berlioux, Director of the IOC, to the President, Lord Killanin, the latter authorised the exceptional loan of a number of exhibits preciously guarded at “Mon Repos”, in the apartment occupied by Coubertin during the whole of the last part of his life.

Four themes

For the sake of clarity, the exhibits were grouped in four showcases. “*The youthful years*”: a painting by Charles Fredy de Coubertin, Pierre’s father, showing the Château de Mirville, near Bolbec in Normandy, which played such an important part in Coubertin’s childhood; photographs and exercise books of the schoolboy; his Bachelor of Arts, Sciences and Laws diplomas; an original pen and ink drawing, a “Colombine”, on loan (with other exhibits) from the collection of Mr. Geoffroy de Navacelle, Coubertin’s great nephew, who has succeeded today in bringing the old family home of Mirville back into the family. “*The athlete*” showed that Coubertin himself was a great all-rounder: a fencer’s outfit, swords, sabres and foils, boxing gloves, a “bicycle riding licence”, photographs showing him at Oxford in 1894, or on a motor tricycle, playing tennis, rowing on the lake at Mirville in the family boat “Tam-Tam”, a treatise on equestrian fencing, a speciality for which he even drew up the regulations without ever succeeding however in making it popular. “*The man and his influence*” gave an idea of the extent of the tremendous work he achieved as teacher, historian, in short as a humanist and a man of great sensibility; an idea too of the happy moments and the vicissitudes of his existence: the lyre-chair faced the roll-top mahogany desk on which still stands the little calendar, open for ever at the month of September 1937...; his walking stick with its silver pommel, so often used for long walks, was within easy reach; the certificate awarded him in 1909 by the “Society for the Encouragement of Good” and the diploma of “Honorary Citizen of the Town of Lausanne”, dated 22nd June 1937, represented a few of the landmarks in the itinerary of his life; photographs of Coubertin with his wife and his two children,

then those of a man gradually approaching the end of his days with a smile of great courage and eyes lit by an inner brilliance, lay side by side with original manuscripts, and books too, representative of his countless written works (60,000 printed pages!), whose extent and variety have been so well brought out by Bernard Gillet’s remarkable bibliography.

Finally, we come to “*Olympism*”. Here we have the invitation to the 1894 Congress for the revival of the Olympic Games, and the address book so carefully filled in by the young baron himself, 31 years old at the time. Here is a bronze, “The Gaulois and his



Son”, presented by the Union of French Athletic Sports- Associations to its Secretary General in 1895, as well as a modest stone from Athens marked with the date 1896, the year of the first Games of the modern era. A commemorative plaque to the memory of the Reverend Courcy-Laffan, who was one of the most fervent supporters and dearest friends of Coubertin after the Le Havre Congress in 1897. Programmes, medal cases, the manuscript of the opening speech for the “Sports Psychology Congress” in Lausanne in 1913. The text of the Prague speech in 1925, when Pierre de Coubertin voluntarily retired from active Olympism to devote the rest of his life to his work as an educationist. The fine album containing the homage rendered him by his peers at the Palais de l’Elysée in Paris, endorsed by the President of the Republic, in 1929. The briefcase for the Berlin Congress in 1930... This was the creation, continually improved down through the years, of one who succeeded in giving the modern Olympic Games a sound structure and sound intellectual foundations, so that his creation has withstood the test of time and continues to develop even though he has left us.

200,000 visitors

One would like to describe one by one all the objects and documents assembled here. Over 200,000 visitors from Quebec, Canada and all over the world passed before these four large showcases with their clear and well set out displays. In this hall, placed first of all under the aegis of Charles Fredy de Coubertin’s large painting “Allegory to sport”—which served for a long time as frontispiece to the “*Olympic Review*”—and, second, under the the sign of the appeal launched from Olympia on 17th April 1927, in such noble and vital terms “to the sporting youth of the whole world”, in this hall one could really feel Coubertin’s presence.

All those who visited this exhibition will have come away enriched with a deeper understanding and a more detailed knowledge of modern Olympism and the man whose idea it was.

J. D.

