

# GODDESSES AND ATHLETES IN THE WORK OF JOSEP CLARÁ

by RAMÓN BALIUS I JULI

For some months, near the main entrance of the new Olympic House, there has been a piece of sculpture representing a young, nude athlete, in an attitude of easy relaxation. The statue, donated to the IOC by the Spanish Olympic Committee and given to President Samaranch by Prince Felipe, the Crown Prince of Spain, is an original work by the Catalan sculptor Josep Clará i Ayats. Last November, the IOC presented to the Korean NOC an identical copy, simultaneously cast in bronze, which will be displayed in the open-air museum being prepared in the Seoul Olympic Park.



*"Discus-thower, 1953, bronze, Clará Museum, Barcelona.*



*"Athlete", 1945, varnished plaster. Clarà Museum, Barcelona, with replicas in both Lausanne and Seoul.*

Clarà is undoubtedly one of the most important artists of our country, whose work is well-known throughout the world.

Born in 1878 in Olot, a small city of Catalonia which is particularly famous for its school of landscape painters and its sculptors of religious images, he began his artistic life in his native city and was then trained in Toulouse and Paris, where he lived from 1900 to 1932.

In Paris, he became a close acquaintance of Aristide Maillot, a Catalan like himself, from Banyuls-Sur-Mer, who introduced him to the great Auguste Rodin. These sculptors were to have a decisive influence on his art, although Clara, who was admired by both of them, tried at all times to maintain his independence and his artistic personality. His work, after a distinctly modernist Rodin-like period with statues such as "Exstasy", "Erato" or "Sorrow" moved, after he had seen the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon in the British Museum, in the direction of a Mediterraneanism more classically rooted than that of Maillot.

In 1909, he carved his most representative statue, "The Goddess" (originally called "The Enigma"), which was regarded by Eugeni d'Ors, the philosopher, as the image of the birth of "novecento" art. In 1910, he reached the heights, with his first great successes in Brussels, Paris and Madrid, a prelude to an artistic life marked at regular intervals by the attainment of the most important rewards in sculpture.

Clara, who regarded the nude as the perfection of form and the study of the naked body as the focal point of his artistic education, dedicated almost all his work to the subject of woman: "Repose", 1909, "Rhythm", 1910, "Cadence", 1910, "Divinity", 1915 and "Meditation" 1929, as well as "The Goddess" of which he produced many versions, being his best-known statues. In Barcelona, a city rich in Clara sculpture, there can be seen his "Serenity", 1915, "Youth", 1920, "Fraternity", 1928, a version of "The Goddess", 1929, the monument to the Catalan volunteers who died for France in the First World War (1936) and the monument to the fallen of the Spanish Civil War (1952).

There was a very interesting relationship between Clara and Isadora Duncan, the great American dancer. The sculptor met Isadora in Paris in 1903 and very soon realized that she "was the incarnation of rhythm and of eternal grace". Clara, obsessed by the movements of her

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body, made hundreds of sketches of the dancer's marvellous postures which enable us to revivify her extraordinary dances and which constitute a remarkable specimen of movement caught at the moment. In 1913, together with Rodin and Bourdelle, he participated in a Berlin exhibition of drawings dedicated to the art of Isadora Duncan.

In 1930, Clara visited Greece, having been invited by the Greek Government to the Delphi Festival. In the Clara Museum at Barcelona, there are eight delightful little water-colours of the countryside near Olympia which commemorate this visit (see page 172).

In 1940, after the Spanish Civil War, which he went through living quietly in his home town, he began working intensively again in Barcelona. It was in these years that he produced the four sport statues which can be seen in the Clam Museum, which was opened in 1969 — eleven years after his death — in what had been both his home and his studio. They are : "The Athlete" and "The Seated Athlete", bronzes of 1941, "The Athlete", in varnished plaster (bronze casts of which are now in Lausanne and Seoul) and a strange "Discus-thrower" in bronze of 1953. It is possible that Clará, who knew little or nothing about sport, was hesitant when the time came to interpret it, since it is surprising that an artist obsessed with rhythm and movement should model static athletes, athletes at rest. What is still more astonishing is that such a Hellenistic figure as the discus-thrower should be modelled in a position which is certainly original but has absolutely nothing to do with sport. In all probability, Clara was simply trying to create male nudes, in preparation for other works, and based himself — like the Greek sculptors — on models from the stadium and the gymnasium.

For Clara, **Goddesses and Athletes** meant the highest expression of formal perfection.

R. B. J.



*"The Goddess", 1929, marble, Barcelona.*