



JORDI ALUMÀ ARTIST TO OLYMPISM

By Ramón Badius Juli

In the office of the President of the IOC, at Château de Vidy in Lausanne, a painting of extraordinary symbolism catches the eye. It depicts the well-known Olympic rings, but surrounded and entwined with a whirlwind of rings of different sizes and shades, which give the work a feeling of movement, depth, profusion and yet, at the same time, unity. The painting, "Símbolos Olímpicos" (Olympic Symbols) is the work of Jordi Alumà i Masvidal.

Jordi Alumà i Masvidal was born in Barcelona in 1924, into a family of artists. His grandfather on his father's side (Alumà) was a sketch/lithograph artist, his grandfather on his mother's side (Masvidal) a sculptor and his father, Josep Alumà, a painter and outstanding poster artist. The is undoubtedly where he acquired his artistic vocation and basic training. From his grandfather Alumà he also inherited a hobby which he practises to this day: flying delicate home-made kites. This was an extremely common activity in Catalonia in the early part of the century, with the obvious poetic significance of trying to create the impression of ascending peacefully into endless space.

The young Jordi's childhood was soon to be seriously disrupted by the Spanish civil war which broke out in 1936 when he was 12 years old, bringing three years of deprivation, distress and danger. Nevertheless, he began artistic studies in 1937 with the sculptor Coscolla. Soon after he was introduced to painting, as an apprentice in the Propaganda Department of the Generalidad de Cataluña (Autonomous Government of Catalonia), where he had an opportunity to contemplate the skills of artists like Benigani, Bofarull, Fontseré and especially Antoni Clavé, whose murals, posters and paintings had considerable influence on his concept of art.

If the war years were hard, the post-war years were even more of a struggle. His father was arrested for his work in the Draftsmen's Union during the conflict, where he had designed numerous posters of political import; this left tremendous responsibilities on the shoulders of a 15 year old boy, who had to replace his imprisoned father.

THE ITALIAN INFLUENCE

In 1941, he joined the arts and craft workshop of the Salesian College of Barcelona, where he started decorating liturgical images and objects and began learning retable techniques under the guidance of the Salesian painter of Italian origin, Petruccio

Canzio. It was this experience which gave him his taste for painting on wood, a process to which he has remained totally loyal to this day. He exhibited his work for the first time in 1948, at the Sala Argos in Barcelona, displaying religious retables of clearly Gothic influence, the most striking feature of which were the abundant gold and silver backgrounds.

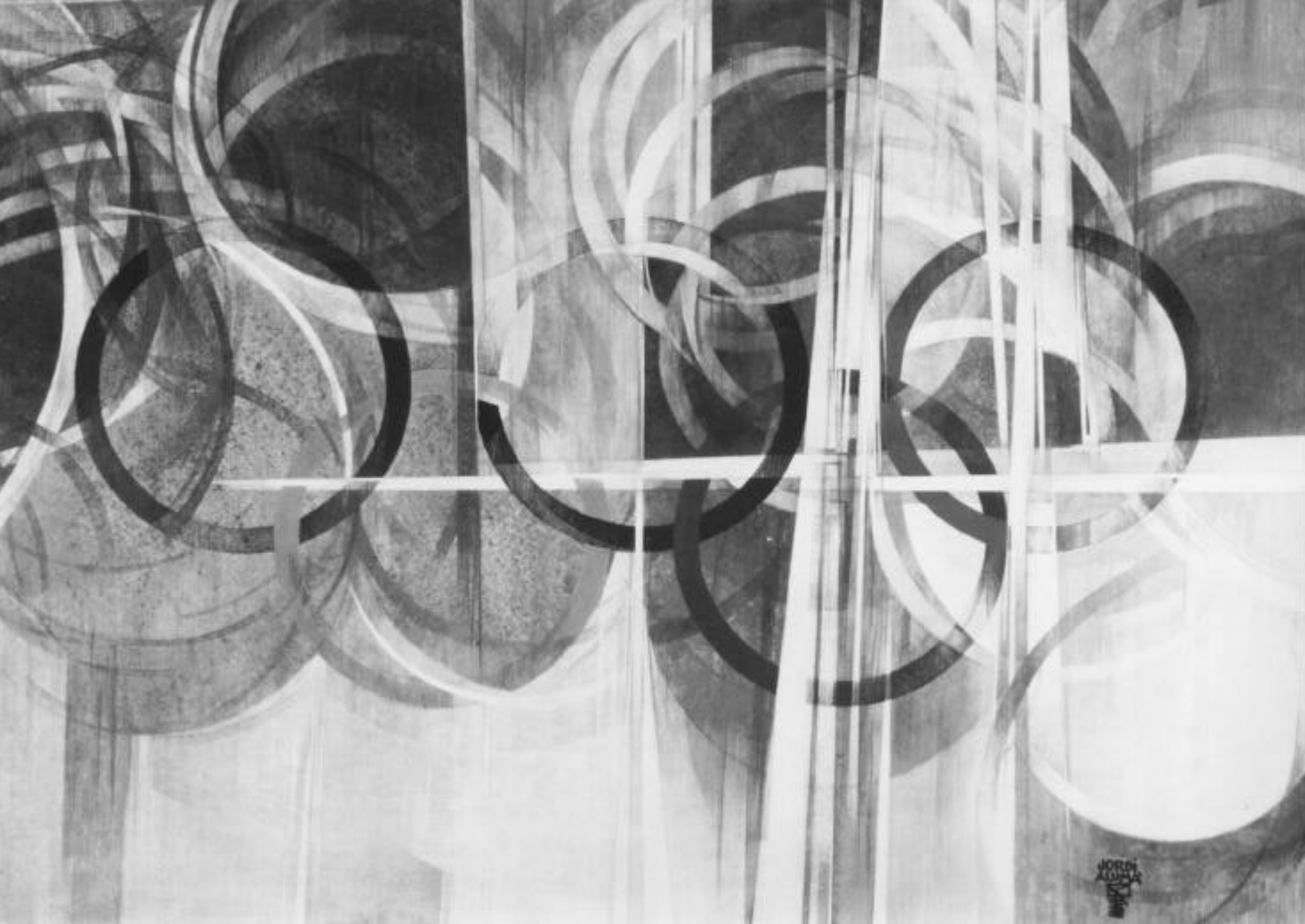
In 1955 he won the San Jorge Prize, awarded by the Diputación de Barcelona (Barcelona Council). Part of the prize money paid for a journey to Italy, where he was able to study the extraordinary painting of the quattrocento and cinquecento and deepen and perfect his knowledge of retable techniques. For a few months, he lived with a group of Catalan artists and moved in art circles in Rome. An improvised and unprecedented street exhibition of retables in the Via Margutta in Rome brought him considerable success, particularly from the financial point of view.

RESTARTING FROM ZERO

Meanwhile, in 1953, the sculptor Federico Mares, Director of the Escuela de Bellas Artes (School of Fine Arts), had nominated and appointed him as Professor of Painting and Polychromy at that prestigious school in Barcelona.

1958 saw a turning point in the artist's career. That year, at the Sala Parés, one of Barcelona's leading art galleries, he exhibited with some considerable success his latest religious retable works, many of them depicting the Virgin Mary. After the exhibition, Alumà felt the need to abandon a theme which he feared would end up by limiting him and preventing him from developing a broader artistic outlook. He took a courageous and determined decision to abandon and leave behind the theme of religion and adapt the retable technique to painting other subjects. He himself recently told us that to him this decision was tantamount to complete self-destruction. It was like starting from scratch again, albeit with a wealth of experience built up over the years.





“A painting of extraordinary symbolism catches the eye...”

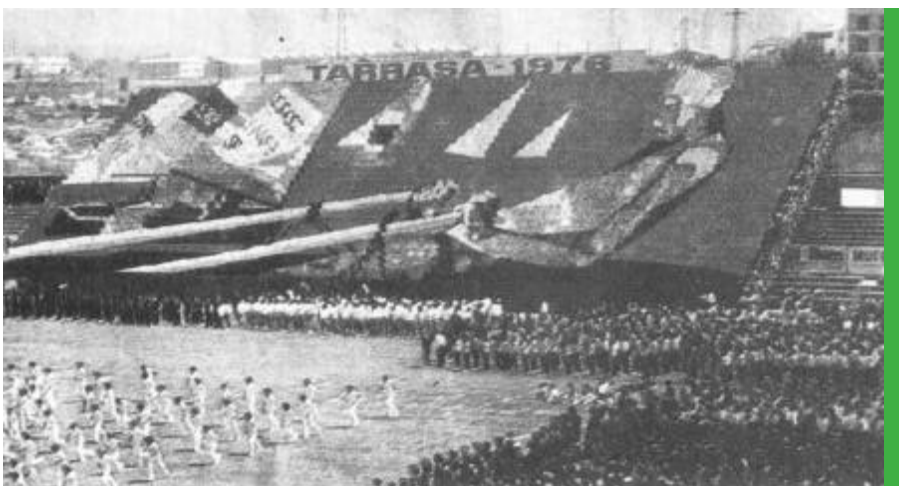
This revolutionary step was consolidated in 1959 by a stay in Amsterdam, where the artist encountered an atmosphere of mist, murky waters and tugs, very different from his native Catalonia. It was in the extensive series of urban landscapes which he produced in Amsterdam, many of them depicting tugs, that Aluà began to move towards his particular brand of geometrical structure. His compositions are fashioned on the basis of a system of lines which split the subject into compartments, yet without depriving the work as a whole of its unity. These networks of lines, which are totally straight for landscapes, become more curved as soon as human figures appear. Soft colour tones are generally used, with gentle changes of shade within the same tone between the geometric compartments; these effects are achieved by using egg-based paint (egg tempera), a 14th century technique employed by the great retable masters.

FLYING KITES THE WORLD OVER

The Amsterdam trip was the first in a series of long stays abroad during which the artist visited various towns in the United States and Canada, as well as Paris, London and Geneva. All these trips were made with two aims in mind: to present his work and to fly his delicate silk-paper and rice-paper kites. Thus, in 1962 he exhibited at the F.A.R. Gallery in New York, at the Gress Gallery in Washington, and at the Kasman Heman Gallery in Chicago; in 1963, at the Stefan Silagy Gallery and in 1964 at the Beilin Gallery, both in New York; in 1965 at the Cristal Home in Beverly Hills and in 1967 at the Rath Museum in Geneva. At the same time, he flew his valuable collection of kites from the top of the Empire State Building and the Rockefeller Centre, from the foot of the Obelisk in Washington, in the Place de la Concorde in Paris, in Tra-

falgar Square in London, from the Mont Blanc Bridge in Geneva, and, of course, from the terrace roofs of Barcelona.

1967 was an important year for Jordi Alumà. He won first prize at the first “Biel del Deporte en las Bellas Artes” (Biennial competition of sport in the fine arts), held in Barcelona. The winning entry, called “Ciclistas” (Cyclists) stood out for the tremendous movement and speed it exuded. The artist confessed to us that these striking effects were achieved only a few hours before the closing deadline for the submission of entries for the contest, thanks to the discovery of an improvised pictorial formula, which included a commercial representation of a dishwashing product. This was his first contact with the world of sport; a contact which was soon to be renewed!



Sports Department, and to be called, making quite appropriate use of an expression borrowed from music, the “Olympic Suite”. Alumà accepted the challenge and set to work with enthusiasm on what was clearly a bold venture, producing a set of retables forming a veritable “suite”, with the Olympic sports as leitmotif. On each panel, various — generally unconnected — sports are depicted in different interlaced geometric planes. In this way watersports, combat sports, athletic sports and sports of speed are juxtaposed. They are works of mellow colours, in which the distinctive dynamic feature of each sporting activity is accurately and precisely highlighted. Two of the murals, namely the one devoted to “Football and Basketball” and the one entitled “Las tres medallas” (The Three Medals) were exhibited at Mexico’s Guadalupe Museum during the 1968 Games and the whole “Suite” was displayed at the Sala Parés in 1969.

At the Barcelona Boat Show in 1973, Jordi Alumà presented a set of 14 paintings on a maritime theme, the main feature of which, apart from his usual geometric rigour, was colour. Throughout 1974, Alumà worked on what he himself considers to be his biggest work so far — panels for the “Arxiu de Comptes” room in the Palace of the Generalidad de Cataluña. The ideas for these were conceived in the Italian town of Arezzo. The work, which describes the origin, funding, construction and history of the Palace in which it is housed, was unveiled in 1975. The very same year, it obtained first prize at the “Biel del Arte en el Deporte”.

OLYMPIC SUITE

With his proverbial artistic flair, Juan Antonio Samaranch, then the leading figure in Spanish sport, patron of the “Biel”, and a member of the panel of judges who awarded the prize to Alumà, recognized the artist’s potential in the field of sport art and entrusted him with an important assignment: eight large murals, to adorn the Madrid headquarters of the National

TABLEAUX VIVANTS

In the Spring of 1976, Alumà designed the nine mosaics formed by more than 2,000 school pupils for the opening of the Sant Jordi Games. This was the first time that an artistic event of this type, common in mainland China, had been held in Western Europe. Since then, Jordi Alumà has worked in a studio in Alella, a small village near Barcelona, where he enjoys the

necessary peace and tranquillity to continue his work, as well as a beach where he can often be spotted early in the morning flying kites.

Perhaps thanks to his habit of climbing to the top of buildings, Alumà discovered long ago the plastic attraction of the terraces, rooftops and domes found in large towns. In 1980, he won the prestigious Ynglada-Guillot international drawing prize with a pencil drawing on this theme called "Conté Pencil". This was the prelude to a large exhibition the following year, in his favourite Sala Parés, entitled "La Closca de Barcelona" (Barcelona's shell). In 35 paintings on wood and 25 sketches, the artist presented a novel landscape of austere lines and different colour schemes, but with no lack of characteristic ornamental details and personal views of architectural modernism in Barcelona. The exhibition was also the public's first opportunity to see the "Olympic Symbols" mentioned earlier, which the artist painted for his friend Samaranch, then already President of the IOC.

OLYMPIC IDENTITY

As another Olympic meeting approached, again at the express request of President Samaranch, Alumà prepared the "Olympic Suite No. 2", which was presented in Barcelona in May 1984 and subsequently at the Justin Lester Gallery in Los Angeles. The "Olympic Suite No. 2" consisted of 20 pictures depicting as many sporting situations. The one devoted to the pole vault alludes to the artist's city, Barcelona, at the time a candidate to hold the 1992 Games; the athlete's jump is set against one of the towers of Gaudí's church of the Sagrada Família. The work as a whole and each individual picture are richer in colour and have a more mural aspect than the "Suite No. 1", although to our mind the latter, by virtue of its complex and original composition, has more of an Olympic identity. In painting his "Suite No. 2", the painter reveals the essence of his sports works, in which he evokes "the flight of seagulls in swimming; the harmonious oneness of man and machine in cycling; the languid ballet whirl of basketball; a goldtoothed



'Pole vault', tribute to the city of Barcelona.



The artist in his studio at Alella, in the outskirts of Barcelona.

ART AND SPORT



"The mysterious face of a woman".

Jordi Aluà with the IOC President at the presentation of his latest works on the theme of the birth of the Olympic Movement in the Château de Vidy.



comb in women's gymnastics; the dishevelled rhythm of athletics; the overt splendour of the arabesque in football". In short, he paints a sport which is unaggressive, peaceful, "inspired by the stylish movement of some Olympic sports".

Jordi Aluà's last exhibition took place at the end of 1987. It was entitled "Reflexiones sobre Gaudí" (Thoughts on Gaudí) and was the result of a meticulous study of the work of that brilliant architect, the largest and most striking sample of which is undeniably to be found in Barcelona. On the basis of Gaudí's captivating shapes and colours, Aluà created an exceptional symphony of new forms and hues, from which invariably emerges a mysterious face of a woman.

To the works devoted to sport described above must be added a number of posters for sporting events held in Catalonia, the idea (not finally chosen) for the logo for the 1982 World Football Championship and the artist's efforts in launching and coordinating the Arts Biennial, organized since 1985 by Barcelona Football Club, of which Aluà is a keen supporter.

Aluà is currently busy in his studio in Alella preparing for three events which will be taking place in the near future — the construction of a vast ceramic mural on a sports theme in the Olympic stadium at Montjuic, in Barcelona; installation at the Chateau de Vidy of the large retables, recently completed, depicting the birth of the Olympic Movement; and an exhibition to be held at the end of the year in Japan, a country where "Thoughts on Gaudí" is bound to receive high acclaim. Aluà, whose trade mark remains the kite, is probably already dreaming that his inseparable companions are winging their way across the skies of the Land of the Rising Sun, taking off from the Imperial Palace itself.

R. B. J.