

## Artistic genius on ice and canvas

by Richard W. Pound\*

The recent World Figure Skating Championships were marked by the return to Lausanne of one of the sport's legends - Toller Cranston, a three-time world free skating champion and bronze medallist at the XII Olympic Winter Games in Innsbruck in 1976. The occasion was yet another Olympic performance by Cranston, but this time at the Olympic Museum, where there was a special exhibition of his works of art,

### Skater of the Century

Acknowledged as the genius of his era on ice, Cranston was so far ahead of his time that he virtually redefined the sport of figure skating. He had not the slightest patience for the stilted routine of compulsory figures, long the bane of creative skaters but resolutely clung to

new levels of artistry and choreography and became the benchmark to which all skaters then aspired.

His presence and performance were widely compared with those of Nijinski and Nureyev. *The New York Times*, which does not hand out compliments lightly, observed: "Toller Cranston is terrific, magnificent, a Nureyev on skates! He has the virtuosity of a great dancer, with the same flamboyance and daring of the Soviet Bolshoi Ballet stars at their most entertaining." The New Jersey *Paterson News* was even more enthusiastic: "A virtual Rudy Nureyev of the skating world, Cranston demonstrates an artistry that transcends even sheer technique. He displays a skating style so unique, so effortlessly graceful, that he actually seems to be floating on air... a style [for which he has been] dubbed the 'skater of the century'. A superb innovator, he breaks through skating's limited restrictions and succeeds in bringing ballet to the ice: and in so doing truly raises ice skating to the new level of an art form."



Toller Cranston and his work "Hapsburg Ballet".

making this the first time that an Olympic medallist has been recognized as an artist of museum quality.

Olympism has often been described as the combination of sport and culture and, if this is at all accurate, it is difficult to imagine how there could be a better living example of Olympism in action than Toller Cranston.

by officials mired in the arcana of the traditional practices of the sport. Bored by the drudgery of that portion of the competition, he was always struggling from well-down in the marking system - until the free skating began. Then, he would come to life and demolish all other competitors with dazzling and creative performances that established the

### Athlete and Artist

Even during his magnificent skating career, he was no single-dimensional athlete. Indeed, it would be difficult (without a personal bias favouring one conclusion or the other) to decide with certainty whether Cranston was a skater who was also an accomplished artist, or an artist who was a brilliant skater. No matter - he moved in both worlds with assurance and originality.

His works, widely exhibited throughout North America and Europe, are broad in scope and range. They are mystical, filled with symbolism, humorous, colourful, alternately rich and spare, with nothing held back. This has been a constant feature of both his sport and his art - you get all of him, with nothing reserved.

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It is up to the viewer to decide what to feel or interpret. Cranston does not explain. He is what he is, and if he is ahead of his time, then the world will eventually reach, as it did in skating, Toller Time. But the world will have difficulty keeping up, because Cranston will already have moved on to another level. Harvard University, among others, has had him as Performer in Residence. He has been honoured in his own country with investiture as an Officer of the Order of Canada. To celebrate the centenary of the modern Olympic Movement, the Canadian Olympic Association commissioned an original work by none other than Toller Cranston.

Personally, he has the directness of one who has faced everything within himself and come to terms with whatever demons there may be. He seems on occasion outrageous in the openness that marks his art, both on ice and on canvas. There is, in Cranston, no careful

filter between his thoughts and the expression of them, no elaborate conventional taboos to impede the unfettered exploration of any subject.

#### **Generosity of Spirit**

Cranston has always been generous with his time and talent. He has supported the development of figure skating in Canada and throughout the world, encouraging young skaters, helping them to express their talents, designing costumes, developing new standards of choreography and continuing the new life of skating as art, not merely acrobatics on shares. His participation in professional skating has made the ice shows - many of them designed by him - particularly entertaining, and for this he has received recognition in both Europe and North America. Having just passed his 46th birthday, Cranston is no longer active on the skating circuit (although he insists he could be, if he wanted) and he

can look back with personal satisfaction on the changes his will and talent forced on the sport. Imitation may or may not be the sincerest form of flattery, but if it is, Cranston's sport has paid him its highest possible compliment.

His continuous generosity to the Olympic Movement is reflected in his personal donation to the Olympic Museum of an original painting selected by IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch from the works contained in the Cranston Exhibition at the Museum. Few, if any, Olympic athletes are part of Olympic history on both the sport and cultural podiums. As for the Olympic Museum, many can donate something they have won, but few can donate what they have created. All of us in the Olympic Movement are grateful for performances on and off the ice by Toller Cranston. Olympian *extraordinaire*.

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