

IGOR MITORAJ: MY SPORT IS CULTURE

Olympic Museum:
Can you tell us how you came to exhibit your work at the Olympic Museum?

Igor Mitoraj: I think that, given the nature of my work and the history of the Olympic Museum both had to come together one day, it was almost unavoidable. Also, Juan Antonio Samaranch (IOC President) had noticed me a long time before, and we had remained in contact until this exhibition.

Q: Have you exhibited your work in Switzerland before?

A: This exhibition is the first really big one. These works have never been exhibited in Switzerland, and I am very happy to show them here.

Q: How do you feel about seeing your sculptures in the Olympic Museum park on the shores of Lake Geneva?

A: First of all, I have to get used to the idea. The setting is truly magnificent, between mountains, water and nature, it is superb. I think that my sculptures look well here, and there are some which are really already in place.

Q: If I say Olympism or Olympic Games to you, what do you think of?

A: I think of Ancient Greece and the Olympic champions of that time who were heroes, status symbols. I also think of the power of certain 'sponsors' of antiquity, who had

their own schools, horses, etc. They also had their own athletes. Olympism makes me think especially of that, naturally.

Q: The Olympic Museum is where sport, art and culture come together. Do you think your work is linked to Olympism?

A: It is the quest for the soul, ancient art, Greek art which was also the great democracy in sport.

Q: So for you, the link with Olympism is its Greek origins?

A: Yes, the origins which were then thankfully taken up by Coubertin. It is truly extraordinary when the Games begin, the whole planet is in a state of excitement.

Q: Is this something which inspires you?

A: Yes, I love to watch the Opening Ceremonies, or diving and other such events.

Q: Do you like or practise any sport? Which sport? Who is your favourite athlete and why?

A: My sport is sculpture!

Q: And do you like watching sport on television? Are there athletes that you like to see?

A: Yes, sometimes, but I am not a great fan. In Italy, where I have been working for many years, there is football I have some friends who are well-known footballers ... I also have my favourite athletes. One of them is Phidippides, an athlete from Ancient



Igor Mitoraj, in front of his work in bronze 'Eros Benato'.

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Greece, of course, who died for his country. He was already an Olympic champion at the time. [In 490 BC, in the Greek city of Marathon, there was a famous battle between the Greek and Persian armies. Knowing that victory was almost won, the Greeks sent a messenger to Athens to announce the good news. After covering the 40km between the two cities, the soldier Phidippides cried "Victory!" before dropping dead.

Q: So it is the man himself who impresses you?

A: It is the man in his sacrifice, that is truly very important, he gave his life. And then there was another athlete called Nikomachos, which means victory maker. He is depicted in the most beautiful Greek sculpture I know, which is on a small island in Sicily. It is the representation of an auriga (chariot driver) wearing a garment which is almost drenched - and this is produced in marble! It is sumptuous. I am very moved when I see this kind of sculpture.

Q: Are you moved by the technique used?

A: Not by the technique but it embodies such poetry, such strength that it is impossible to resist.

Q: You work on a large scale and your sculptures are imposing - why?

A: I think that for a sculptor it is important to work on a grand scale because it is a test of yourself to see the possibilities that you can achieve using large dimensions. You have to see if it works as well as on a smaller scale, or if the



Sculpture in white marble 'Cacciatori Bianchi'.

larger work is stronger. Personally, I have to say that I feel better working on a large scale. I have also done that for several cities around the world, like Atlanta, Tokyo and London, and my "Cuirasse" is here: I love that. It is really hard work, but I like it a lot because it complicates things.

Q: So it's a challenge?

A: Exactly. It is a challenge against yourself.

Q: Large-scale works are exhibited outdoors, so you must like seeing your statues in the open air?

A: Yes, because I believe that with the light from the sky, from the sun and also the moon, the truth of the sculpture emerges. I believe that this is the best light there is.

Q: What is your preferred material and why?

A: My favourite material changes. Some months, I work only with clay,

then I move on to bronze for a while, and after that I start with marble again. One example is what I have done here for the Olympic Museum. I produced some completely new marble works, in black and white marble. There is also a sculpture in Greek marble, the same as that used for the Parthenon. It is here, at the centre of the exhibition.

Q: What leads you to choose one material rather than another? Is it already the idea behind the work which makes you want to use bronze or marble? How does this work?

A: I first have a mental picture of the sculpture. I never draw or make any sketch on paper or anything. The idea matures in my head, and I already see it completed in a specific material. Marble, for example, has a completely different history to bronze, another light, another sense of timelessness. It is very different from other materials.

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Q: Your work pays homage to ancient Greek culture - why?

A: What I am looking for in ancient culture is to understand how and why this type of aesthetic arose, one that is completely mystical and at the same time religious, sensual yet human, too. It is not a naturalistic approach for example, it is completely different. There is such emotion in it that I try to find out why and how. My quest is in this direction. Knowing what there is

Igor Mitoraj has made his home in Tuscany, in Pietrasanta, near the famous quarries of Carrara reputed for the incomparable quality of their white marble, of an unparalleled purity and texture. Their origin can be traced back to Roman times, and Michelangelo used to come there himself to choose the slabs from which he sculpted his masterpieces. Mitoraj did not choose Pietrasanta simply because of this geographical proximity. In fact a number of artists who love their work live there and pass on from father to son the traditional techniques for cutting marble and that of *cire perdue*, which makes it possible to create very large-scale sculptures in bronze. As one might imagine, transporting and setting up such works of art requires special means. In addition to their size - the largest *Ikaria* is nearly seven metres tall - their weight is also often considerable, around two and a half tonnes in the case of *Ikaria*. Three articulated lorries brought Mitoraj's work by road to Lausanne. Some of the largest sculptures were carefully propped and strapped up in the back of the vehicle while the smallest were stored in open-work boxes. Unloading them in Lausanne and setting them up again required exceptional means and special skills: a giant crane-truck, expertly manoeuvred by a crane operator, whose patience and precision could be seen throughout these particularly delicate operations ranging from the strapping of the works to their conveyance

inside and what is speaking to me, that moves me greatly.

Q: Your sculptures of bodies are often incomplete and concealed by bandages - why?

A: I think that the bandages, in fact I am now almost sure, are the expression of my past in Poland, where even now there is still a great deal of suffering. I believe that it is an aesthetic, plastic expression of suffering, of the

from the ground to the sky, not to mention setting them up several metres from the cabin of the crane operator without his being able to see where the sculpture was going to be placed. Through the use of an on-board computer, walkie-talkies, and with the aid of visual signs this presentation was completed very quickly and with all the necessary delicacy. In this outstanding and large-scale project, we should not forget the artist's assistants in Italy, who helped to pack the works and load the vehicles before tending their invaluable assistance in Lausanne to the Museum technicians who competently took care of setting up the works in the gardens of the Olympic Park. Several weeks earlier, Mitoraj had strolled many times through the Olympic Park. Together, we had identified a number of locations which took into account the sculptures which were already there, the general surroundings and, of course, the size and theme of the sculptures. Once these ideal locations had been identified, it was necessary to take into account some purely technical considerations related to providing access to them, bearing in mind that during the final locating process some last minute adjustments would be necessary. Two days, including one when it did not stop raining, were needed to complete this operation the results of which should fully satisfy the artist.

Jean-François Pahud, Curator.

lack of communication between people and the difficulty of living. It's something like that. The fragments are another story. I feel that a piece of arm or a leg speak far more strongly than a whole body. It leaves a lot to the imagination, too.

Q: This interview will be published on our Internet site. What do you think about new technology and especially the Internet?

A: I use the Internet often myself for photos, but in a very limited way. I have all my photographic archives on CD so that I can send them to publishers, museums, etc. But apart from that I don't know much about the Internet. I know that it is growing fast, and that I am on several sites around the world, but I haven't yet learnt to surf, even though it is interesting as you can find a great deal of documentation.

Q: What are your plans?

A: My plans. In the short term, they involve spending almost all the seasons here, with spring, summer and autumn in Lausanne (the exhibition runs from 29 March until 7 October). I am currently working on a series entitled "Ypnos", in which I look at sleep, people asleep and dreamers, where my subjects are heads lying down, things like that. Next year, I think there will be a big exhibition in Darmstadt, Germany, a retrospective. And then there is something in Salonika, at the Archaeological Museum, in the middle of ancient works. That will be difficult for me, as the competition will be very tough!

Q: We are coming to the end of this interview. Do you have a special message that you wish to convey?

A: My message is in my sculptures. I cannot say any more as it would be pointless to do so - they speak for themselves.