
The Olympic Arts Program: An Alternative Model

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The Olympic Arts program has suffered an identity crisis from the early stages of its inclusion in the Modern Olympic Games, and that continues today. This is not to say the Arts at the Olympic Games have failed. On the contrary, as this paper will discuss, there have been varying unexpected legacies. The problem is that despite being tied to the most recognized symbol and the biggest sporting festival in the world, the arts at the Modern Olympic Games is one of the least known of international festivals, prompting the question, is it possible to appreciate a substantial arts festival alongside the biggest sporting festival in the world? The history of the art competitions, exhibitions, and arts festivals held since 1956 are now lost or misrepresented in a multitude of Olympic books and media reports. In the absence of any single book, archival collection of the works, or comprehensive collection of photos, scholars struggle to find an informative, fully comprehensive, and accurate history of the competitions and the works entered.

The Role and History of the Olympic Arts

The founder of the Modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin was the driving force behind the inclusion of the arts at the Games. Coubertin's intention for the arts and the influences behind their inclusion are now the subject of academic debate. Coubertin was a pragmatic idealist who adapted a plethora of influences in his search for an Olympic program that would work. He had a love of spectacle, choirs, trumpets, and colourful flags evident from his comments on the grandeur of these and other cultural events at the Much Wenlock Games in Shropshire, England. He was also influenced by the World Fairs and Universal Expositions held in London, Paris, and the United States during the second half of the 1800s and some of these held art competitions.

These 'modern' influences were easily molded to adapt to the understanding of the Ancient Greek Games. Although Coubertin has referred to the art competitions as being held in Ancient Olympia, academic research now concludes that art competitions were held in Nemea and Delphi but not Olympia. However, winners from the Delphi Games were given the honour of being invited to perform at the Games held in Olympia.

Ancient Greek pedagogy offers only part of the explanation for the inclusion of art at the Modern Games; but over the years these ideas have been simplified beyond recognition. In the host city publications, the arts program has often been vaguely explained as, in Coubertin's words - "the marriage of body and soul." Even the most cursory look at much of this marketing material displays a surface understanding, with the most common references alluding to a 'balance between body and soul.' Today this has very little meaning or connection to Coubertin's original pedagogical aims let alone Olympism.

Richard Mandell writes in *The First Modern Olympics* that Renaissance intellectuals developed their ideas for "an ideal education that, like the Greeks, integrated training for the mind and training for the body."¹ He states that it was "Vittorino da Feltre, Guarino da Verona, Alberti, Pica della Mirandola, and others [who] inspired later pedagogues [including John Locke and Jean Rousseau] all over Europe to include plans for physical education in their writings."² According to Mandell, it was these writers who "in turn inspired the reformers, philanthropists, and nationalists who established programs for physical training in many education systems in Europe in the nineteenth century"³

According to Jacob Burckhardt, artistic and athletic competition defined Greek life and education. He claims:

it was not until the athletic and artistic agon [contest] had completely pervaded Greek life that education began to take full account of them, not that each pupil trained to compete at the sacred games-sites, but to the extent of

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giving adequate attention to the agon as it dominated daily life. This was the aim even of the grammar teachers, the citarists and the instructors in gymnastics, the indispensable first tutors for anyone, in Athens or elsewhere, who wanted to be educated.⁴

Burckhardt states that “among the Panhellenic games Delphi was the most important for music and poetry [and that]...the wider significance of the artistic agon [was that] to a great extent the art of poetry developed under the determining influence of the agon.”⁵ This simplified understanding of body and soul could be traced to the application of the philosophy of ‘eurythmy’ which according to the Oxford dictionary is a “harmony of bodily movement, esp. as developed with music and dance into a system of education” as opposed to the Ancient concept of ‘kalokagathia’ which explained the essence of the Greek educational system as defined above by Burckhardt - an education in gymnastics, music, and later grammar.

The Modern Olympic Games and the Art Competitions

From 1912 in Stockholm to 1948 in London, artists competed at the Olympic Games in much the same way as athletes do today. At the seven summer Games held during this period, 145 medals were awarded to the winners and place-getters in Olympic arts competitions. The art competitions were terminated and replaced with ‘exhibitions’ beginning officially in Melbourne in 1956.

Throughout this century, art competitions have been problematic and, after an extended debate, IOC President Avery Brundage persuaded the IOC to terminate the competitions. He wrote in a circular letter to members. “One can be practically sure that under present conditions the winners of Olympic Fine Arts medals will do everything possible to capitalize on their victories professionally. This is not beneficial to the Olympic Movement.”

At the same time Brundage dismissed the quality of the arts competitions, incorrectly claiming that “half the time the entries have been so mediocre that medals have not been awarded.” Brundage, instead, advocated a shift to ‘special exhibitions’ which “would ensure higher standards, eliminate any possible commercialisation and probably attract more general interest.” The effect of this letter was wholly detrimental to the historical understanding and future identity of the cultural program at the Olympic Games and, because it dismissed the works as mediocre, the art competitions continue to languish in a stadium of indifference⁶ even today.⁷

A Cultural Program, Policy , Festival - or Simply Entertainment?

The first issue that should be addressed here is - what is culture? Because of space, this paper will make only cursory reference to some very important components of this question. This is not because some ideas or theories are any less relevant overall but, rather, the issue directly relates to their centrality to the question being addressed.

Gunter Kress writes, “Culture is the label that refers to the set of practices that produce meanings and to the resultant objects of those practices”⁸ as a way of life. This paper focuses on culture as a creative activity. The Olympics cultural program has been constructed according to the dominant cultural practice and interests of each host city with its own political, economic and social aims and interests within the limits of its own cultural resources. The program is tied to an international sporting festival which has its own constructed ideologically mythologized culture.

The relationship between the Olympic sporting festival and the arts festival (or program) is integral to the understanding of the broader Olympic Movement and Olympism. However, at the Games, themselves, the relationship - for those who are even aware of it - is puzzling. While the original charter required the works entered in the competition to be about sport, this is not the case today. As Josep Subirós, Chief executive officer of Olimpiada Cultural, S.A. in Barcelona said, “not all the projects of the Cultural Olympics are necessarily connected with sport. What the Olympic Charter demands, and what we are trying to do, is that the cultural programs tied to the Olympic Games have the same level of quality as the sports competitions, not that they be cultural programs on sports themes.”⁹

The perception of the Olympic Arts Festivals, and the most common criticism is of their ‘elitism’ not connecting to the feeling of the arts program as a ‘festival.’ However, criticism comes from all directions and viewpoints: cultural anthropology; cultural elitism vs. community arts; arts management, and culture as communication. And, all of these are subject to the many peculiarities of the host city. For example, how many museums or festivals does the host city already support? What is the city’s architectural history, its geographical, political, or economic relationship to other dominant cultures? Are the arts sponsored by government or by private funding? Has the arts industry developed its own marketing and management? How creatively free are the artists from Olympic politics?

Cultural anthropologist and Olympic scholar John MacAloon argues that Korea was the most successful art festival so far - not just because of its size, but because of the spontaneous ‘festivité’ that erupted evening after evening. According to MacAloon, the geography of Los Angeles, and organizing restriction on huskers, prevented this same sense of festival happening.¹⁰ One problem

overall is how to measure success.

Despite the sacrifices the local arts industry must make to its normal *modus operandi* in particular programming choices, sponsorship, marketing, and management, it generally remains interested in participating at the Games. The extent of these sacrifices varies enormously from one issue to the next. Many of the arts festivals have left unexpected legacies peculiar and in response to the host city's needs as a direct consequence of the Olympic Arts Program. These include the longer term benefits from commissioned works that otherwise would not have happened, public arts projects, new cultural spaces, the development of international diplomatic relations, and local interest in holding cultural festivals more regularly. In Sydney, the Festival of the Dreaming was the event that should have happened in 1988. And without the Olympic Games, some argue that it would still not have happened. These legacies reinforce the broader role, and need for the Olympic arts in the Olympic Movement.

What are the issues?

The issues for the Olympic Arts program have always been diverse. A fully comprehensive study of the causes for the profile of the Modern Olympic Games Arts Program must consider all of these viewpoints. Even the definition of what constitutes a festival depends on which of these viewpoints on which one wishes to focus. In the push to claim the best cultural program so far and to make a mark in Olympic history, successive organizers have criticized their predecessors.

According to Jeffrey Babcock, cultural director of Atlanta's 1996 Games, the program at Barcelona in 1992 was too spread out across the city. Atlanta's answer was to restrict its cultural program to within a 5km circle of the Games. According to Barcelona, the 1984 program in Los Angeles was bereft of a cultural history that in Barcelona formed a spectacular backdrop to a host city rich in cultural heritage. Despite this readiness to cite why previous festivals have failed to command standing ovations, none have referred to the difficulties of hosting an art festival occurring at the same time as the sporting festival while under the ultimate control of an international organizing committee with little real contact or knowledge of the host city's arts industry.

As a media event, printed or television, the arts program at the Olympic Games struggles to find a profile. The printed media has historically misrepresented the history of the arts at the Olympic Games and television coverage has been non-existent. If sports overshadow the arts on television this does not have to be seen as some kind of 'imperialism' but the result of market-driven programming and that current technology is still better suited to the representation of sport on television than culture.

But does it have to be like it is? Television, Culture, and Sports

The dependent relationship between television and the Olympic Games today is an important defining difference in any consideration of the profile of culture and sport at the Olympic Games. The Olympic Arts gets only marginal, if any, television coverage during the Olympic Games. Whereas Miguel de Moragas has argued "The presence of sport in television companies' programs in different parts of the world is constantly on the rise. It could even be said that sport is one of modern television's major 'goods', ...[s]port coverage now takes up nearly 10% of the total broadcasting time on television."¹¹ Cultural programming would be hard pressed to reach 1%.

The complexity of the relationship between sport and television may need some refining in absolute terms but, even so it is important to recognize that as Manolo Romero, (Vice-president, Host broadcasting group ACOG 96) said, "Television provides coverage in the form of information and has made it possible for sport not only to become known, but also to become an element of everyday life. It has paved the way for many marginal sports to be discovered."¹²

The question for the Olympic Games is - can television do the same for the cultural program? Olympic scholar Bruce Kidd argues that changes need to be made at the IOC level, particularly in regard to Olympic broadcasters. For Kidd, Olympic rights holders should "include some coverage of the Olympic arts and culture festival, and the cultural background of the country where the Games is being staged."¹³

Conclusion - Modeling Festivals

Is it possible to define a model for the Olympic Arts Festival? Is there any single model for any festival? Many involved with the organization of the Olympic arts program would argue to cancel the program altogether, even though they recognize the direct benefits derived from the Olympic Charter's inclusion of a cultural program. Two Directors of the Olympic Cultural Program, Jeffrey Babcock (Atlanta 1996) and Craig Hassall (Sydney 2000) have both argued the IOC needs to be more definitive and less controlling of the cultural program. There is no doubt that the Olympic arts program needs to be given a higher profile by the media. And, given the diversity of criticism from so many viewpoints, only particular one model (e.g. cultural elitism, cultural anthropology) can be judged the one to most succeed. It has been suggested that the international festivals that succeed to have high profiler, such as Edinburgh, Avignon, and Adelaide do so because of the inherent sense of place. In these situations, sense of place and intimacy of place are important contributors to the festival's success.

But what about the Olympic Games? It is now generally argued that the original reason for the inclusion of the arts in the Games program is wholly irrelevant. But many ‘true believer’ argue that the arts have always been an integral part of the greater worth of the Olympics or Olympism, that elusive ideology arguably will survive longer than the Games themselves. The role of art in the Olympic Movement as the representation of the best demonstration of cultural creativity parallels the degrees of excellence and the expression of humanity that defines Olympic ideology in sport.

Endnotes

1. Richard Mandell, *The First Modern Olympics*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976), p. 27
2. Ibid. p 32.
3. Ibid. p. 28.
4. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, Ed. By Oswyn Murray, Trans. By Sheila Stern, ST. Martin’s Press. New York, 1998. p. 182
5. Ibid. p. 182.
6. The history of the works entered into the Modern Olympic Games Art Competitions is the subject of my Ph.d research.
7. See Debra Good, “The Role of the Olympic Art Competitions in Modern Art,” 8th Post-Graduate Seminar Paper, International Olympic Academy, May 4 - June 14, 2000.
8. Gunther Kress, ed., *Communication and Culture an Introduction*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1988. p. 10.
9. Josep Subirós, “The Cultural Olympiad: objectives, programme and development,” in *Olympic Games media & cultural exchanges: The experience of the last four Summer Olympic Games*. p. 85.
10. John MacAloon, interview with Debra Good, International Olympic Academy, 8th Post-Graduate Seminar, Olympia, Greece. May-June, 2000
11. Miguel de Moragas, “Television, sport and the Olympic Movement,” in *The Olympic Movement and the Mass Media*, p. 77
12. Manolo Romero, “The media, the fourth pillar of the Olympic Movement,” in *The Olympic Movement and the Mass Media*, p. 45.
13. Bruce Kidd, “The Olympic Movement and the Sports-Media Complex,” in *Olympic Movement and Mass Media Conference*, Calgary - February 1987. p. 1-8.