

# Rings: Five Passions in World Art

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RINGS: FIVE PASSIONS IN WORLD ART. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, 1280 PEACH-TREE ST.N.E., ATLANTA GEORGIA. (404) 733-4400. JULY 4 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 29, 1996. 1996 OLYMPIC ARTS FESTIVAL.

When 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games tickets went on sale in the United States in May 1995, potential buyers were given the opportunity to purchase tickets to the "Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games Cultural Olympiad." This 1996 Olympic Arts Festival was billed as the most comprehensive multidisciplinary arts festival ever to take place in the South and one of the modern Olympic Games' largest cultural celebrations. Tickets could be had to an array of music, visual arts, theater, dance, and humanities productions and exhibits (more than 70 in all). Some events, such as the "International Opera Gala," were ticketed as high as \$75 and seats were limited, while other entries were easy to obtain, such as "Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South," at \$5 admission. Admission to *Rings: Five Passions in World Art* was ticketed at \$10. I note these prices for their comparison to admission to the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games at more than \$600 a head.

J. Carter Brown, the Director Emeritus of the National Gallery of Art, Ned Rifkin, Director of the High Museum, and staff mounted a blockbuster show, "Rings," that is said to have established the High Museum alongside the high echelon of arts institutions like New York's Museum of Modern Art. As with all of Atlanta during the Games, the exhibit attracted high attendance. And no wonder. "Rings" was showcased as a once in a lifetime opportunity to view more than 100 masterpieces spanning 8,000 years, ranging from Greek bronzes to African figures, Picasso, Monet, and Rodin. Furthermore, tickets could be ordered at the same time as Olympic Games tickets; in so many words, the message was that the arts events were "authentically" Olympic, a chance to get a little culture while sports spectating.

The exhibit was not without pre-opening criticism. How dare feelings (precisely “love,” “anguish,” “awe,” “triumph,” and “joy”) be divided into a westernized, invented narrative continuum! How arrogant to presume that there are only five (because there are five Olympic rings) fundamental human passions and that art can fit into these categories! There was also debate on the seemingly token third and fourth world contributions—for example, there were three masks and figures from Papua, New Guinea, and Nigeria.

Nonetheless, I knew that this was an exhibit that I wanted my children, ages 10 and 12, to experience. For all my poststructuralist, postcolonialist sensibilities, I still tremble at the canon of art; I love standing before pieces that appear in art history introductory texts, for these works inhabit the liminality of super-celebrity because they deserve to, and there is nothing quite like experiencing them (e.g., Edvard Munch, “The Scream”) firsthand.

Many of the major works—and by major I mean the “high” art that permeates our popular culture, the art that one finds on pseudo-arty greeting cards, T-shirts, umbrellas, and date books—were at the High Museum. Matisse, Renoir, Van Gogh, Eakins, Monet, Van Honthorst, Rubens, Tiepolo, Poussin, Caravaggio, El Greco, Kiefer, Munch, Church, Turner, Rembrandt, Picasso, Titian, Cassatt, Gerome, and Rodin, among many others (125 in all) were represented at this truly Olympian event. There were Japanese bowls, Chinese screens, Greek Panathenaic Prize amphoras, Tibetan textiles, ancient Indonesian sculpture, and my favorite, Cycladic art (“The Harpist”). There was the obligatory primitive art in civilized places: ancient Mesoamerican, contemporary Ecuadorian, 19th-century Zairian, Hawaiian, and Nigerian figures and masks were used as juxtapositions of works from, for instance, 13th-century Japan, 17th-century Spain, and 5000 B.C. Hamangia. Somehow it all worked.

One might assume that the major art exhibit of the 1996 Games would simplistically focus on works that depict sport, as past Olympic art exhibits did, such as that of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. There were a few direct references to sport—the Panathenaic Prize amphora, Thomas Eakins’ depiction of prizefighting, “Salutat,” and a Greek bronze athlete—but only these specific few. Any kind of correlation of the “Rings” exhibit to the Games was accomplished through text and official commentary, not through the actual displays. Most predominantly, the tie to the Olympic Games of “Baron Pierre de Coubertin’s five rings” (Michael E. Shapiro, ed., *Rings: Five Passions in World Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996, p. 41) was made in brochures, the catalogue of the exhibition and in news releases; I heard it whispered in the gallery also.

The Games and the art were marked as signifiers of the coming togetherness of nations, the oneness of the human race, and the striving for excellence and achievement. Sport and art were noted for arousing strong passions (Shapiro, p. 24). As scholars of sport, we know all of this discourse well—it is, paradoxically, rhetoric, myth, and truth. It was also, in my opinion, artificially attached to the “Rings” exhibit. These great works should have been able to stand alone, without being prefaced with sport, rings, or Olympism. And indeed, if one viewed the works without reading any of the commentary, one could be immersed in an

experience that never touched on sport: for instance, the cross-cultural depiction of mothers with dead young touched my children in a way that their Olympic Games experience never did (they literally slept through track and field finals, but still speak of the High Museum art show).

Although the “Rings” production will be closed at this review’s printing, the exhibit catalogue is gorgeous and its commentary worthwhile. Sport historians will be interested in the “Forward” by Ned Rifkin and the “Introduction” by J. Carter Brown, in which both mull over the Olympic Games and their vast experience as art museum curators.