

# “Aesthetics and Sport: Search for Arcadia”

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(John R. Betts Lecture)

In the preface to his final work John R. Betts referred to the “outdoor sports of Brueghel,” and to a plan to show how “sports have penetrated our language, literature, arts, educational philosophy, etc.” In the years since the initial NASSH a modest number of papers have focused on sport art topics. One purpose of this presentation was to expand our image of the positive term “aesthetic.” Berenson describes most of us as “aesthetic spectators” as contrasted with bonafide artists. It is our challenge to reflect for our students a sense of the aesthetic dimension in sport. After all, as Hans Keller reminds us, “If we did not find sport beautiful, we would not be involved in it.”

Attempts to enrich daily existence in the past have been referred to as a search for Arcadia – a place of rural peace and simplicity. It has come to mean a place for regeneration of one’s professional “soul.” Where is our personal Arcadia? From what wellspring does our individual energy emerge? Following the lead of the 16th century Herodotus of art, Giorgio Vasari, the paper examined the lives of a few who sought their Arcadias in various ways, as they tried to gain freshness and authenticity to their artistic works. The analysis ranged from the watercolours of Sameul de Champlain. Stuart’s Mr. Grant, New England cemetery art, the Hudson River School, the Amerind subjects of Seymour, Catlin, Miller and Kane, to the Homer. Eakins. Bellows, McKenzie era.

When Thomas Cole painted “The Dream of Arcadia,” he represented the dream of a century of travel of North American artists and writers. Young artists felt it a duty to go to Europe for their training and inspiration. From Benjamin West to Mark Twain and Samuel F. B. Morse, all sought Arcadia on trips abroad. Most found solace and/or inspiration in the shadows of the ancients and in the company of fellow artists. Some like Homer who preferred Prout’s Neck, Maine, or William Mount with his bucolic Long Island vistas. were relatively untouched by the classical age of travel. R. Tait McKenzie, late in life. found his special place beside the Indian River in Ontario. The legacy we inherit as a profession from McKenzie is to be cherished. Would that we could each leave as distinctive and proud a contribution.

One lesson we must consider as we seek our own Arcady – in the poetic sense – is not to delay. A special group of artists were discussed from the standpoint of their major role, date of eternity and cause of death. These special few ranged chronologically from Menander (291bc) to Repentigy (1959) and included Rindesbacher, Cole, Woodville, Ranney, Tavernier. Remington, Morris, Thomson, Bellows. and Wood. Each died before age 50. John R. Betts died at 54. The potential creations to society of this talented group. cut down in the prime of creative energy, is limitless. While dates of eternity for each of us are symbols we would just as soon ignore. the message is clear.

NASSH is people – diverse, interesting, creative, argumentative, productive, scholarly, humane. In Amsterdam, 1928, in a paper on the relation of art and athletics, Tait McKenzie stated:

“We bring away from conventions such as these much more than we bring . . . it is a dull mind that fails to carry away something of value from contact with the best minds in his own field and this informal education can be of greater value and more service than the formal lecture and the reading of a textbook by yourself.”

In our personal search for Arcadia we are traveling with interesting companions. The beauty around us, the ideas and fellowship should be sampled. It may well be that our special Arcadia is, in part, found at sites such as Banff, Manhattan, and Mont Alto. When NASSH celebrates its 20th anniversary let us be sure we have used our full measure of talent, energy and friendship to make it ever more meaningful, successful, scholarly. The beauty of the encounter may enrich and invigorate us through the years. Let us hope we can say we have matured together secure in the adage of Tennyson that, “The Best is Yet to Be.”



Hal Ray