

Putting On the Glitz: Los Angeles Unwittingly Discovers the Sport and Art Connection That Had Alluded Pierre de Coubertin

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This paper is an experiment in historical methodology and an historical analysis of the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. It examines the significance of cultural artifacts from the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles in articulating the Olympic Games into a singular cultural phenomenon. Sport was generally considered outside the realm of culture in 1932. Officially, the organizing committee for the Los Angeles Games took a conservative approach to articulating the relationship between sport and culture. An art competition and exhibition was hosted concurrently with the Olympic Games. Out of contractual obligation, the Tenth Olympiad Committee coordinated these two events. While the exhibitions at the Los Angeles Museum in Exposition Park were described as

cultural territory by interpreting and embellishing the prescribed festive and ceremonial elements of the Olympic Games. The conflation of Olympic sport and public festival into a homogenous form of culture production demonstrates that the Olympic Games had found an orientation that was distinctly different than their progenitor had envisioned. The visual artifacts of the 1932 Olympic Games are more emblematic of emerging popular culture in the United States than the elite salon culture of Pierre de Coubertin. This international sport festival effectively communicated values and beliefs of the host community, the United States, and the era.

The Olympic Games can be intense visual and ephemeral experiences for the participants and spectators. Using postmodern cultural studies terminology, this paper employs a method of deconstruction and reconstruction. By analyzing the cultural artifacts from the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles it elucidates the function of images in the creation of an international sport festival and the ephemeral experience that they generate. Visual artifacts provide a unique type of text from which events can be analyzed. While the emphasis of this paper is on visual (primarily pictorial) artifacts, written impressions of the 1932 Olympic Games are included in this interpretation. These written impressions are contextualized within the sensual, ephemeral experiences of the Olympic Games. For example, the image from the cover of daily programs is juxtaposed with the prescribed function of the program itself which is articulated in writing by the organizing committee. Newspaper photographs, official photographs, film coverage, official reports, official bulletins, ticket stubs, medals and posters provide most of the images for this study. The limited availability of visual artifacts from these Olympic Games is, in itself, significant from a cultural studies perspective.