

Sam the Eagle vs The Mariachis: Visual Symbolism of the 1984 Olympic Games

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The modern Olympic Movement from its inception has experienced a tension between the competing concepts of nationalism and internationalism. This tension manifests itself in a variety of ways both on and off the field of athletic competition. The pageantry and design elements of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games represent a case in point. The visual symbols conveyed by the pageantry and design of the 1984 Games sent a conflicting set of messages reflecting the perennial tension between nationalism and internationalism.

The 1984 mascot and logo, the first two designs approved by the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC), were unabashedly nationalistic, featuring stars and stripes-obvious allusions to Uncle Sam-and red, white and blue colors. The opening ceremonies, while acknowledging the international character of the Olympic Movement, essentially celebrated

Americana featuring a thirty-minute “Music of America” segment and horse-drawn covered wagons of the American frontier.

By contrast, the environmental design of the Games—or what the LAOOC staff called the *look*—was decidedly unchauvinistic. Venues, street decorations, publications, and staff uniforms all were imbued with the look. The look was conceived by two design firms that consciously sought to develop a design with an “international” sensibility that deliberately eschewed “red, white and blue.” The result was a palate consisting of magenta, vermilion, lavender, chrome yellow and other vibrant colors. The colors were displayed on a range of unusual geometric objects constructed with cardboard, fabric, wire, and scaffolding at all Olympic venues. Initially dubbed “Mariachi Federal Style” by its originators, the look ultimately was called “Festive Federalism.”

The contradictory visual symbols of the 1984 Games were the result of competing aesthetic points of view within the LAOOC. The debate was not an esoteric disagreement between designers, but rather one that attracted the attention of top officials of the organizing committee, who were well aware of the symbolic implications. Some committee members argued against abandoning the aesthetic represented by the logo. Others maintained that the logo was “overly patriotic” and “imperialistic” and the committee needed to take a much different approach to design.

Given the competing messages conveyed by the LAOOC’s designs, an obvious question arises, Which message was more effectively transmitted—the internationalist theme or the more nationalistic one?

A review of commentaries by both popular and academic writers during and after the Games suggests that for most observers the message of nationalism came through more strongly than that of internationalism. Further contributing to the perception of the Games as an expression of nationalist values were factors beyond the control of the designers and LAOOC, specifically—the American public’s reaction to the Soviet led boycott and ABC Sports’ televised Olympic coverage, which emphasized the accomplishments of U.S. athletes.