

The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions: The Story of the Olympic Art Competitions of the 20th Century by Richard, Stanton (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2000), 412 pp. Reviewed by Douglas A. Brown, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Art competitions were first included on the program of the Olympic Games in 1912. This particular Olympic Games festival took place in Stockholm, Sweden. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Modern Olympic Movement, had promoted an alliance between artistic culture and sport culture when he initiated this sport-based social reform movement in 1894. In 1906, he promoted fine art competitions (to be held within the program of the Olympic Games) as a mechanism to nurture this alliance. Though the 1912 contests among painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, and writers were only a modest success, they represented the beginning of a tradition that lasted until 1948. Over the years, host cities of Olympic Games acknowledged the precedent established by the Swedes and accepted the responsibility of sustaining historical continuity by organizing art competitions. In most cases, the art competitions did not occur without the expenditure of considerable energies of persuasion and negotiation among hosts, participating countries, and the IOC. While historical continuity may have existed, the cultural, ideological, and administrative integrity between fine art competitions and sporting festivals never evolved into a functional and meaningful alliance. As such, the history of the Olympic arts competitions seems to be, for the most part, the history of an idea rather than the history of a phenomenon. This does not diminish their importance in the overall history of this sport-based social movement. In fact, Coubertin's idea of an alliance between art and sport continues to be a provocative source of inspiration for historians of sport and cultural movements.

Richard Stanton's book, *The Forgotten Olympic Arts Competitions*, begins with a faulty premise. The Olympic Art Competitions are not forgotten! At the very least, they are not forgotten among devotees and critics of the Olympic Movement. Over the past several decades, a number of historians have pieced together interesting descriptive and analytical histories of the art competitions that began with reluctant Swedish hosts in 1912 and ended with frustrated and confused Finnish hosts in 1952.¹ Some of these histories have successfully analyzed the concept of art competitions within the broader aesthetic agenda that motivated Coubertin. Important contributions to this history include the work of Norbert Müller (1994) Andrea Peterson (1989), Susan Bandy (1988). Jean Durry (1987 and 1976), Arnd Kruger (1996), Rudolf Malter (1987), Donald W. Masterson (1987), and Douglas Brown (1997 and 1996).² Whether consideration of these art competitions is from a lay or scholarly perspective, something about their history suggests that the relationship between sport and art is innately interesting and potentially meaningful. However interesting this alliance might be in theory, histories on the topic also highlight the inherently ambivalent and disfunctional relationship that was nurtured between sport administrators and artists in the Olympic Movement. These are valid insights. Still, the desire to ally art and sport at the Olympic Games continues to beg for a valid historical and cultural context. Indeed, one could argue that this contextual void also characterizes the majority of historical research and writing on the Olympic Games in general.

Unwittingly, I suspect, Stanton demonstrates this all too clearly in *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions*. He does not consider the simple possibility that art competitions may have never had a legitimate place within the program of the Olympic Games. All of his effort to chronicle the difficult beginning, and inevitable end, of these art competitions is based on his intuitive sense that something valuable has been lost. The failed alliance between art and sport in the Olympic art competitions is lamented before its legitimacy is even considered.

The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions chronicles the correspondence, negotiations, confrontations and, ultimately, the results of the art competitions between 1912 and 1948. Stanton tells his story with primary sources. He provides the chronological order for a vast number of letters, treatises, rules, and excerpts from Olympic programs. By choosing this tactic, the book functions as a clearinghouse for historical documents related to this particular topic. As such, the book can be quite valuable to historians. Providing the content is accurately reproduced, this collection of primary sources, especially the correspondence, ought to spark a great many questions for analytical historians.³ The pitfall is, of course, the author's decision not to provide any citations and repository information.⁴ These diverse and lengthy reproductions (and translations) of primary sources are linked together by Stanton's short editorial sections. Themes that emerge from this story are familiar: endless difficulties encountered by sport administrators attempting to collect, judge, and exhibit art; irresolvable disputes over the amateur or professional status of artists; and, the overall lack of interest on the part of leading artists in the Olympic Art Competitions. Stanton's limited interpretation of the barriers that confronted organizing committees and the IOC leads to an extremely frustrating conclusion. Stanton simply takes a nostalgic turn when arguing that Coubertin's idea for Olympic Art Competitions was a fool-proof way of preserving the grandeur of modern Olympians for millennia into the future. This is based on Stanton's rather bizarre question: ". . . would the religious and sporting ceremonies staged so long ago in ancient Olympia hold much meaning or glamour for us if their masterpieces of sculpture and vase painting seen in our museums today were not there?"⁵ This is exactly the type of historical sentimentalism and intellectual snobbism that has kept the history of sport on the fringe of legitimate scholarship for most of the 20th century. Fundamentally, Stanton is arguing that the value of the Olympic Games, sport, and other forms of physical culture is contingent on intellectual or artistic mediation. In other words, he believes (and suggests that Coubertin believed) in sport-for-history-sake, rather than sport-for-sport-sake.

In the grander scheme of Coubertin's concerns, I doubt very much that he would have appreciated Stanton's assessment of the Olympic art competition experiment. More than anything, Coubertin was interested in experience, and particularly the ephemeral experience of beauty that sport and sporting celebrations produced. Not only did he put ideas into the public domain, he did what he could to transform these ideas into practice. Certainly, he was frustrated by the resistance he encountered when attempting to nurture the alliance between the arts and sport. We must not forget, however, that the art competitions were only one of many initiatives with which Coubertin experimented while he developed his aesthetic imperative for modern sport.⁶ Indeed, part of this aesthetic imperative hung on a historical discourse, but Coubertin did not set out to preserve the beauty of modern sport through artistic works that would ultimately be interpreted by generations of historians. Here, Stan-

ton has misrepresented Coubertin by drawing conclusions based on only one reference.⁷ For Coubertin, the alliance between art and sport (in art competitions, sport spectacles, choreographed pageants, etc.) was intended to enhance the grandeur of the moment, for the moment. This grandeur could be enhanced further by the participant's own historical imagination. The inclusion of visual and intellectual references to ancient history at Olympic Games, and sporting events generally, were regarded as a mechanism to stimulate the historical imagination of athletes and spectators.

Stanton's book includes a section (70 pages) entitled "Meet a Few Olympians." This section contains 21 short biographical essays on artists who participated in Olympic Art Competitions. This section further demonstrates the relatively minor significance of the Olympic Art Competitions for the Games organizers, the IOC, and most importantly the artists and athletes. In many of the biographies, Stanton is not able to comment on the artist's participation in the Olympic Art Competitions. Beyond basic references to the year, the name of the artwork, and the final placement within the contest, Stanton's mini-biographies offer little, if any, insight into humanistic experiences produced by an artist's participation at the Olympic Games. Finally, the third section of the book, "Results, Lists and Other Curiosities," provides the basic factual type of information that many historians of sport desire. Every winner from every contest is listed by art category, country of representation, and surname.

Endnotes

1. The last Olympic Art Competitions were held in 1948 at London. The host of the 1952 Olympic Games, the City of Helsinki, planned (on and off) to hold art competitions. With persuasion for the IOC leadership, the art competitions were formally replaced by art exhibitions of a national character. These exhibitions have evolved into the Art and Culture Festivals that are mandated to the organizing committees by the IOC.
3. Susan J. Bandy, "The Olympic Celebration of the Arts," *The Olympic Games in Transition* (Jeffrey Segrave and Donald Chu, Editors), Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1988, pp. 163-169; Yves-Pierre Boulongne, *La Vie et l'Oeuvre Pédagogique de Pierre de Coubertin, 1863-1937*, Ottawa: Editions Leméac, 1975; Douglas A. Brown, "Theories of Beauty and Modern Sport: Pierre de Coubertin's Aesthetic Imperative for the Modern Olympic Movement, 1894-1914," PhD dissertation. London, Ontario: Faculty of Graduate Studies, The University of Western Ontario, 1997; Douglas A. Brown, "Revisiting the Discourses of Art, Beauty and Sport from the 1906 Consultative Conference for the Arts, Literature and Sport," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, Volume V 1996, pp. 1-24; Douglas A. Brown, "The Olympic Exploration of Modernism, 1894-1920: Aesthetics, Ideology and the Spectacle," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, Vol. 67. No. 2 (June 1996), pp. 121-135; Jean Durry, "Pierre de Coubertin: l'esthétique et le sport," *The Relevance of Pierre de Coubertin Today, Report of the Symposium 18th to 20th March 1986 at the University of Lausanne* (Norbert Muller, ed.), Taurus: Schors-Verlag Niedemhausen, 1987, pp. 265-275; Jean Durry, "The Fine Arts and the Olympic Games," *International Olympic Academy, Fifteenth Session, 11-*

26 July 1975, Athens: Hellenic Olympic Committee, 1976, pp. 205-220; Arnd Krüger, "Pierre de Coubertin's Ruskianism," *Olympic Perspectives: Third International Symposium for Olympic Research, London, Ontario, October 1996* (Barney, Martyn, Brown, MacDonald, Editors), London, Ontario: Centre for Olympic Studies, The University of Western Ontario, 1996, pp. 31-42; Rudolf Malter, "L'Eurythmie, l'ideal de vie selon Pierre de Coubertin" *The Relevance of Pierre de Coubertin Today: Report of the Symposium 18th to 20th march 1986 at the University of Lausanne.* (Editor, Norbert Muller), Taunus: Schors-Verlag Niedemhausen, 1987, pp. 171-178; Donald W. Masterson, "The Relationship of Art and Sport: The Relevance of Coubertin's View Today" in *The Relevance of Pierre de Coubertin Today: Report of the Symposium 18th to 20th march 1986 at the University of Lausanne* (Norbert Müller, Editor), Taunus: Schors-Verlag Niedemhausen, 1987, pp. 277-288; Norbert Müller, *One Hundred Years of Olympic Congresses, 1894-1993* (Ingrid Sonnleiter-Hauber, trans.), Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 1994; Andrea Petersen, "The Olympic art competitions 1912-1948," *Sport Science Review*: 1989, pp. 44-51.

3. I would caution any serious scholar about the quality of these reproductions and translations. The production of the book is amateurish. Typographical errors abound and the layout of the text is flawed throughout. One is rarely certain when a quotation begins and Stanton's editorials begin. Some sentences stop abruptly on the bottom of a page and never resume at the top of the next page.
4. "I kept falling asleep attempting to write in monotone and insert all those citations, footnotes, and references that befuddle the reader's concentration." This is a quote from Stanton's "Preface." (no page number).
5. Stanton, p. 262.
6. In my own research, I argue that Coubertin's interest in art competitions extended from his idea of eurythmie. See Brown, 1997.
7. This suggests that the author did not apply the rule of perspective when evaluating his primary sources. De Coubertin's *oeuvre* is vast and his ideas evolved over time. He was also a showman who incorporated dramatic hyperbole into his speeches and essays. This, and much more must be taken into consideration when drawing conclusions about the success, or failure, of something as esoteric as the art competitions at the Olympic Games.