

The Marriage of Sport and Art: The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions (1912-1948)

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ABSTRACT

Since their inception, the Olympic Movement and the arts have always gone hand in hand and complemented each other. In the early years of the modern Olympic movement (1912-1948), the Muse Pentathlon was an official event of the Olympic Games. However, the question of how to organize such an artistic event in sport and how to evaluate artistic competitions in artistic events of the same period remains a question of great significance. Using historical research, case studies and comparative studies, this paper explores the interaction between the Olympics and the arts and the IOC's understanding of Olympic culture by focusing on the IOC's official practice of organizing art competitions and planning exhibitions, and by combining it with the historical background of art competitions held in the first half of the twentieth century and art salon events of the same period. The research resources are based on official IOC reports, conference documents, newspapers, art exhibition brochures, Coubertin's own works and memoirs, and other primary documents and images.

Keywords: The Olympic Movement; Sports art; Olympic Art competitions; Fine Art Salon; Pierre de Coubertin

1 Introduction

Since the first Olympic Games in ancient Greece in 776 BC, sport and art have been closely intertwined: "The arena became a school for artists" and "the art of the Olympia Shrine represented a hall of fame for athletes". Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympics, who was deeply educated in the classical way, yearned for this tradition, believing that "the Olympic idea is based partly on chivalry, that is, fair competition, and partly on aesthetic ideas, that is, the worship of beauty and elegance"(Müller&Coubertin,2000). In 1906 Coubertin convened the "Consultative Conference on Art, Literature and Sport" at the French Academy of Drama, with the participation of five IOC members and more than 30 artists, to examine "the extent and manner in which art and literature are incorporated into the celebrations of the modern Olympic Games, and are linked to the practice of sport in general, and to what extent are they incorporated into the celebration of the modern Olympic Games? In order to benefit from it and to be noble."(Brown,1996). At the opening of the conference, Coubertin repeatedly referred to "the formal marriage of flesh and spirit, the long-divorced couple, to be reunited."(Coubertin &John,1967)This meeting, as an important moment in the intersection of sport and art in the modern Olympic history, decided to establish five literary and artistic competitions (Muse Pentathlon) in architecture, literature,

music, painting and sculpture in the Olympic Games.

The art competitions, originally scheduled for the 1908 Rome Olympics, ran into financial difficulties during the preparation process, and the venue was temporarily moved to London in 1906. Although the British organizing committee carefully formulated the rules and procedures of the competition, the art competitions had to be postponed again due to the limited time. In order to ensure the smooth holding of the art competitions and the active participation of the art world, the International Olympic Committee organized an international architectural competition in 1910 and gave it a lot of publicity in the official magazine Olympic Review. However, the journey of art competition into the Olympic Games is still full of twists and turns. In 1912, the Stockholm Art Competition was rejected and questioned by Swedish artists, who indicated that when the evaluation criteria of art works were not only "art for art's sake", but also limited by theme and inspiration, such a competition would be meaningless. Coubertin insisted that while in ancient times art glorified the gods of ancient Greece, modern art should also glorify the modern secular religion of sport and make sport more noble. In the end, the then president of the International Olympic Committee, Pierre de Coubertin, personally organized the first art event and issued the rules for the competition through the Swedish Olympic Committee. Coubertin's ideal of combining "spirit" and "flesh" has finally taken a difficult first step.

From 1912 to 1948, a total of seven Olympic art competitions were held in the history of the Olympic Games, including literature, painting, architecture, sculpture and music, for all artistic works directly inspired by the idea of sports. Over 36 years, it has attracted thousands of entrants from 28 countries to submit artwork and has won 147 Medals and 100 honorary awards. After 1948, art competitions were discontinued and replaced with art exhibitions and Olympic cultural events. However, as part of the official plan of the modern Olympic Games, the art competition has a unique historical value and spiritual connotation.

2 Olympic art competitions in academic research

Since the 1980s, with the promotion of the members of the International Olympic Academy Forum and the International Association for the History of Sports, the forgotten “Olympic Art Competition” has begun to be included in the vision of researchers, and there have been studies in the fields of historical context, participating countries, participating artists and works. Richard Stanton published the first book on the theme of modern Olympic art competitions, which comprehensively sorted out the historical development process of art competitions through official reports, conference minutes, letters, newspapers and other historical materials(Stanton,2000) Some scholars have conducted in-depth research on the topic of the withdrawal of art competitions. Donald William Masterson pointed out a series of problems such as insufficient publicity of the event by the International Olympic Committee, lack of support from national art organizations, and disputes over the theme and standards of the entries. The prevailing view is that the key reason for the failure lies in the conflict between professional artists and the “amateurism” of the IOC. In recent years, Andrew Edgar proposed that the root cause of the failure of art competitions lies in the contradiction between the conservative nature of competitions and the critical nature of modern art, which provides some inspiration for this paper(Edgar,2012).From a rhetorical point of view, Chris Ingraham believes that the change of artistic projects from “competition” to “exhibition” is a key policy shift, which reflects the thinking and adjustment of the International Olympic Committee on the relationship between sports and art, making the Olympic Games more prominent as a sports event(Chris,2018).From the perspective of biographical research, some scholars continue to excavate the information of silent participating artists and artistic works.

Some Chinese scholars have also learned about this

historical event. Wang Jun briefly discussed the historical evolution, development characteristics and future trend of Olympic cultural activities from a macro perspective(Wang,2018).With the background of the Olympic art competition, Pei Dongguang, an Olympic educator, introduced Coubertin’s Olympic aestheticism and further explored the relationship between Olympism, aesthetics and art(Pei,2011).However, most of the researches of domestic scholars are from the perspective of overall description, and regard art competition as a part of Olympic cultural activities. As the largest event in the sports world, why should the art competition be introduced, and how does the sports world organize such a unique art event? The answers to these questions have not been fully discussed by scholars at home and abroad.

Therefore, this paper adopts the historical research, case study and comparative research methods, combined with the historical background of art competitions held in the first half of the 20th century, focuses on the International Olympic Committee’s official practice dimension of organizing art competitions and planning exhibitions, and discusses the interaction between the Olympic Games and art in the first half of the 20th century, as well as the IOC’s understanding of Olympic culture.

3 The organization of the Olympic Art Competitions from the Paris Fine Art Salon

As an official event of the modern Olympic Games, how does the art competition adapt to the development of the Olympic movement? In his research, Wilant pointed out that the Olympic Art Competition fully draws on the Paris Salon of Fine Arts, an important art selection mechanism in French society in the 19th century, which is mainly reflected in three aspects: jury, award system and exhibition(Wilant,2018).It is of great reference value for this paper to think about the organization and operation of the Olympic art competition from the perspective of the art system, but the research on the art competition is superficial. On this basis, this study deeply digs into the official reports of the International Olympic Committee, the minutes of meetings, art exhibition albums and Coubertin’s memoirs to further explore the complex interwoven relationship between the two.

The Paris Salon des Beaux-Arts was a national art exhibition held in France from the 17th to the 19th centuries. The original salon was the statute of the Royal French Academy of Painting and Sculpture, which stipulated that students regularly submit their works for public exhibition. In 1737, Louis XV’s finance minister Oli institutionalized the Academy exhibition,

stipulated that the exhibition was held once a year, and in 1752 it was changed to a biennial session, and the latest representative works of the academy painters were selected for display. The time of the art salon is fixed for August 25, the exhibition period is about one month, and the location is fixed in the square salon hall of the Louvre, so it is called “Salon exhibition”. With the increasing development of the Salon, the jury mechanism was introduced in 1748, as a permanent body for judging the eligibility of works to participate in the exhibition, composed of the most authoritative experts of the academy. In the 18th century, the Salon became the most important art selection mechanism in France. Research has found that Coubertin’s father, Charles, had several works exhibited at the Salon des Beaux Arts in Paris.

The Paris Salon of Fine Arts is backed by the academy system, and the jury includes artists, members of the Academy of Fine Arts, officials of the national government, and some art collectors, all of whom have close ties to art. The composition of the judges determined Sharon’s taste, favoring traditional academic painting techniques and classical subjects. With the increase in the number of works exhibited in the Paris Art Salon, whether the works meet the standards taught by the academy has become the premise of whether the works can be exhibited. In 1863, the Paris Salon jury of “great men” rejected two-thirds of all the paintings submitted, including works by Manet, Cezanne, Pissarro, Whistler and others. Coubertin seems to have drawn inspiration from the selection of selected and awarded works. The 1924 Games in France received 283 entries from 23 countries, of which only 189 were accepted by the final jury. The jury of the art competition was susceptible to the influence and intervention of the International Olympic Committee and the national government. In 1912, 33 artists from 5 countries submitted their works in the first art competition. It seems that Coubertin himself decided the ranking of the art works, and Coubertin’s work “Ode to Sport” won the gold medal. There was little information about the jury of the 1920 Antwerp Art Competition, but six of the eleven winners were from Belgium, and no gold Medal was awarded in the architecture and painting categories. The 1924 Paris Olympics formalized the art competition, with separate international juries for each art category, including the most famous artists of the day. The jury decided not to award artistic Medal, but at Coubertin’s appeal, the jury reconsidered and awarded silver and bronze Medals. After 1928, the IOC appointed International art competition juries from among its members to safeguard the sporting ideals of the entries. In order to facilitate the selection of international juries and the participation of artists, the number of art subcategories was introduced at the 1928

Amsterdam Olympics, and the number of art projects has fluctuated since then according to the preferences of the host. In 1932, the Los Angeles Art Competition began to introduce honorary awards, and there were 30 honorary nominations between 1932 and 1948.

Like the Salon des Beaux-Arts in Paris, in addition to the “competition” element of the art competition, each Art Council also curates an art “exhibition”. The seven art competitions are hosted by different countries, and the location, time and duration of art exhibitions are also different (Table 1). The first Stockholm Art Exhibition in 1912 remains controversial, with research suggesting that works from the first art competition were displayed in a hall near the Olympic Stadium, although no further details of the exhibition have been found. For the Antwerp Olympics after World War I, official reports indicate that two exhibitions were held, including Belgian art from 1830 and contemporary Belgian artists. One of the exhibitions would have provided a room for Olympic works, and it is doubtful whether the competition had an art exhibition. In 1924 the Paris Art Competition officially became a major artistic event, and the Grand Palace of the Champs-Elysees in Paris provided four rooms for the exhibition. The 1928 Art exhibition was held at the Amsterdam Municipal Museum, where artists from different categories and many countries took part in the competition, and the public responded with more than 10,000 visitors. The 1932 Art event opened on July 30 at the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art. A total of 31 countries participated, with more than 1,100 items on display. The exhibition was open for a month and attracted large crowds from the opening day. The average daily audience was 15,000, rising to 24,000 on Sunday, and the art event ended with more than 384,000 visitors. On record, Los Angeles appears to have the highest number of visitors to art exhibitions. After the 1936 Berlin Art Competition, due to ideological differences, the United Kingdom and other countries refused to participate, and only half of the previous entries were submitted. In the 1948 London Art Competition after the two World Wars, Germany and Japan were banned from participating, the National Olympic Committees of the Americas and Oceania did not send major artists to participate, and the high price of admission to museums discouraged visitors. Due to the large number of works exhibited in the art salon, the exhibition is usually arranged in a hanging way, that is, the paintings are hung from the floor to the ceiling, one piece of work is higher than the other. The hanging position of the paintings is mostly decided by the judging committee, and the judging committee often places the paintings that meet their own aesthetic taste in a position that is easy for the audience to see. Compared with the

style of traditional salon exhibitions, the exhibition design of the Olympic art exhibition seems to be more modern. According to pictures in the official report, Olympic art exhibitions are usually displayed in national units, with paintings and sculptures placed side by side in specific exhibition halls, and paintings suspended at a considerable distance from the ground, basically at eye level. The paintings of the 1932 Art Exhibition are arranged in order from left to right, and the sculptures are placed in the middle of the paintings. In 1936, the Berlin Art Council provided the floor plan of the exhibition hall in the exhibition booklet, and it can be clearly found that the exhibition space of different countries is divided by physical exhibition walls, and Germany occupies a room on the left, the middle and the right of the exhibition hall. The 1936 exhibition seems to have more spatial guidance, placing the most important works in the middle and surrounding them with other works, so as to form a visual center that conveys the aesthetic preferences of the organizing committee. In 1948, the art exhibition gave up the display mode of the country as a unit, and exhibited according to the categories of sculpture, painting and architecture. However, the relationship between the basic logical relationship and visual intention of the paintings presented in previous art exhibitions and the theme connotation conveyed by the exhibitions needs more research.

In 1928, the organizing committee of the Art Competition began to print art posters and art exhibition books to

increase the publicity and promotion of Olympic art activities. As scholar Cheng Xiaomu wrote: “Since the Salon exhibition in 1737, in order to let the audience know more about the exhibits and artists, the academy began to print exhibition manuals, and the organizers tried to highlight the rules and order of the academy through the arrangement of the guide manuals”(Cheng,2023). Through the study of the exhibition catalogues of the four art competitions from 1928 to 1948, it is found that the exhibition catalogues mostly take the country as the basic unit, displaying all the information of the entries and exhibitions in the categories of sculpture, architecture and painting of each country. In 1948, two editions of the exhibition booklet were designed, an unillustrated catalogue, which introduced the art committee personnel of the art competition, the composition of the jury, the entry requirements, the catalogue of exhibits and the winning works in each category, while the other edition of the illustrated booklet contained nearly 100 black and white photos of the exhibits, but only provided basic information about the authors and works. It is worth noting that the catalogue of exhibits in 1948 is different from the arrangement of the previous years by country, but based on the order of the exhibition hall, which seems to be more in line with a standardized art exhibition process. Whether the works displayed in the guidebook and the order in which they are arranged are carefully designed by the Arts Council is still worth further investigation.

Table 1 Olympic Art Exhibitions information sheet 1912-1948

Year	1912	1920	1924	1928	1932	1936	1948
Period	-	-	5.15-6.30	6.12-8.12	7.30-8.31	7.15-8.16	7.15-8.14
Place	Karlavägen 10, Stockholm	-	Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, Paris	Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam	Museum of History, Science and Art, Los Angeles, California	Ausstellungsgelände Halle VI, Kaiserdamm, Berlin	Victoria & Albert Museum, London
NOCs	5	18	23	18	31	23	17
Works	-	-	158	1150	1100	740	388

4 1924 Paris Olympic Art Competition and other artistic events of the same period (1922-1924)

The 2024 Olympic Games are about to open in Paris, and 100 years ago, the 1924 Olympic Games were also held in Paris. How does the organizing committee of Paris, as the art capital, organize the art competition? This part of the study takes the art competition of 1924 Paris Olympic

Games as a case, compares it with other art activities of the same period, and tries to further explore the status of art competition in the art world at that time and the reasons for its withdrawal from the Olympic Games.

In honor of Baron de Coubertin’s vision to bring the Olympic movement to French soil before his retirement, France hosted the 1924 Olympic Games. An Arts Council was established in Paris in 1922 under the chairmanship

of Marquis Melchior de Polignac, then a member of the International Olympic Committee and a member of the French National Olympic Committee. The newly formed Arts Council actively sought the assistance of the French Academy of Fine Arts and other arts organizations to draw on the experience of the art world in organizing competitions. However, the art community at the time had little hope for the prospects of the competition, which only served as a platform to discover new artists and new forms of artistic expression(Charles,1924).However, the initiative of the organizing committee to invite the art world to participate in the organization of the event has ensured the interest and participation of artists in the event. For the first time, the competition was recognized as an important art event. In 1923, the rules for entries in architecture, painting, sculpture, literature and music were drawn up by renowned artists from various disciplines and sent to all foreign newspapers and publications in the form of pamphlets. The entry requirements stipulate that artists can only be inspired by “sporting ideas” and that their work cannot be exhibited at previous Games. In addition, to increase participation, the Arts Council nominated an international jury for each art category, including the most renowned artists of the time in France and abroad. During the judging process, the jury decided that there were no truly worthy works, but many well-known artists such as Fraise, Guiraud Riviere and Bouchard were also not favored. An analysis of the theme and composition of the winning artworks (Table 2) reveals that they are mainly inspired by ancient Greek archetypal norms, such as discus throwers and boxers. The three works submitted by Jean Jacoby, considered the outstanding Olympic artist, all convey the movement and praise of sport. Newspapers at the time declared that “the winning works are full of academicism and lack aesthetic value”(Raymond,1994). The art competition is part of the Paris Art Season, a period in which the main artistic activities of French society also exhibit sports themed works. For example, the Independent Salon, which opened in February 1924 and attracted the attention of domestic and foreign media, exhibited athletes with cubism and futurism styles, emphasizing speed and dynamics in sports(Guillain,2004). The Olympic art competitions strictly followed the organizational model of the Paris Art Salon, while the official salon was weak in the first half of the 20th century and became a symbol of backwardness and conservatism. With the takeover of the Salon by the Society of French Artists in 1881 and the emergence of

other art salons, especially the Salon of Independence and the Salon de l ‘Autumn, the Paris Salon gradually lost its influence. In 1884, the more open “Independent Salon” was favored by artists, and there was no jury in the independent Salon, which became an important platform for artists to show themselves. We can explain this by using The classic paradigm of social art history, The Period Eye(Michael,2023).Art historian Barksand believes that “the eye of The Times” is a viewing mode formed by social norms and cultural customs in a specific time and space. People of a certain age share certain knowledge, skills, and habits that they use to view and critique works of art. Using the art history method of “the eye of The Times”, we can find the differences between Coubertin and society on the concept of “beauty” at that time. Coubertin’s aesthetics is rooted in the aesthetic taste of the 18th century, advocating the aesthetic ideal of the harmonious development of the classical male body and mind. The first half of the 20th century was the period of radical evolution of modern art. Western artists broke through the shackles of traditional artistic concepts, boldly explored and experimented with artistic language and expression techniques, and emphasized the expression of subjective spirit. Especially after World War I, the mainstream art schools of the time (Dada, Expressionism, Surrealism) held a pessimistic view of the mechanization of sports and strongly opposed the optimistic ideal of the Olympics.

The Olympic art competitions draw on the organizational model of the official art salon, and the aesthetic taste of this official art competition tends to “classicism”, while the salons of various professional artists of the same period have tended to a certain “modernity”. Inevitably, although the art competition was first recognized as an important artistic activity in 1924, the gap between the ideals of education, amateurism and social development upheld by the Olympic Games and the ideals of artistic free expression was widening, which also doomed the art competitions to withdraw from the Olympic Games in the near future. From the multi-dimensional perspective of social cultural system and even the construction of social cognitive style, the analysis of the visual presentation of art and the multi-dimensional interaction of social culture can clarify the evaluation criteria and mainstream taste of artists and audiences for sports themed works in the first half of the 20th century, and serve as an important historical background for the withdrawal of Olympic art competitions from the Olympic Games.

Table 2 Awards at the 1924 Paris Art Competition

Categories	Participants	NOCs	Gold	Title	Silver	Title	Bronze	Title
Architecture	21	7	-	-	Dezö Lauber and Alfréd Hajós	Plan of stadium	Julien Médecin	Stadium for Monte Carlo
Literature	32	10	Geo Charles	The Olympic Games	Joseph Petersen	Euryale	Oliver Gogarty	Ode to the Tailteann Games
					Margaret Stuart	Fencers' Song	Charles Anthoine Gonnet	Face to Face with Olympia's God
Music	8	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
Painting	64	10	Jean Jacoby	Rugby	Jack Butler Yeats	Swimming	Johannes van Hell	Skating
Sculpture	68	15	Konstantinos Dimitriadis	Finnish Discus Thrower	Francois Heldenstein	Toward the Olympic Games	Claude-Léon Mascaux	Seven Sport Medals
							Jean Rene Gauguin	Boxer

5 History and present: revisiting the significance of Olympic art Competitions

The Olympic Games are not only a global sporting event, but also a social and cultural phenomenon. The setting of the modern Olympic program requires strict selection criteria and procedures, and the 1912-1948 Art Competition, as an essential part of the modern Olympic program, embodies the classical ideals of Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympics. This is despite the fact that art competitions were discontinued at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics in favor of cultural exhibitions and cultural festivals. However, this brief “marriage” between sport and art in the history of the modern Olympics has laid a deep foundation for the continued development of the current Olympic art exhibition system and cultural activities. Art competitions and exhibitions have made the greatest contribution to the free expression of art and literature, allowing athletes, artists and spectators to meet directly or indirectly through works of art. Modern

sport provides models for painters and sculptors, while works of art in turn contribute to the cultural literacy and personality development of young athletes.

In recent decades, Olympism and art have existed in a generally accepted culture of expression of human creativity and freedom, with Article 39 of the Olympic Charter stating: “The Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games must organize a cultural programme covering at least the entire period during which the Olympic Village is open.” The plan shall be submitted to the IOC Executive Board for prior approval “(IOC,2021). While the IOC is committed to ensuring the continuation of the Olympic Cultural Programme at the Games, it promotes mutual understanding and solidarity among the participants and spectators of the Olympic Games. However, the Charter only explicitly emphasizes that cultural projects are a mandatory task of the Organizing Committee and lacks a more explicit cultural policy orientation. In practice, cultural activities, as a supplement to Olympic sports events, have a low status and always

face severe challenges(Beatriz,2008). Sports-based cultural celebrations are often overlooked by the media, the public and even the athletes, and the “muscle” and “spirit” are often in a situation where they are not familiar with each other.

In order to implement the IOC’s recommendation 26 of Olympic Agenda 2020 “to further strengthen the integration of sport and Culture”, the Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage, OFCH launched the Olympian artists-in-residence program at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Promote dialogue between sport and culture by providing opportunities for athletes with artistic interests to produce and display new works of art during the Olympic Games. The “Olympic Art Project” not only dates back to the spirit of harmony in ancient Greece, but also pays homage to Coubertin’s idea of the Olympics. On March 12, 2021, the IOC unanimously adopted the new Olympic reform roadmap - Olympic Agenda 2020+5, in which Recommendation 1 further refers to “launching activities related to the Olympic Movement before and during the Olympic Games to provide people with the opportunity to actively participate in the Olympic Games” (IOC,2021). For the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games (2021), the “Olympic Agora project” will be held for the first time, which will integrate various cultural and artistic exhibitions with the daily life of local people in the host city by recreating the common form of the ancient Greek market, and form a connection between the Olympic community.Beijing 2022 has invited seven Olympian Artists around the world, whose original works of art are inspired by the Olympic values and the charm of sport. Some of these Olympic artists have said that their athletic careers have a lot in common with their artistic creations. This provides an opportunity for future Olympic host countries to integrate the Olympic movement and cultural activities, cultivate public awareness of art, and enhance value education.

The Olympic Games in Paris 100 years ago made the art competition a major artistic event, and 100 years later, the 2024 Olympic Games will also be held in Paris. From 2021 until the closing ceremony of the Paralympic Games on 8 September 2024, thousands of events and performances in all art forms will take place in all French territories, exploring the links between art and sport and the shared values that will build the cultural profile of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

6 Conclusion

The fact that the “Art Competition” was once an official competition of the modern Olympic Games demonstrates the cultural meaning and value that the

International Olympic Committee (IOC) places on the Olympic Movement. This paper focuses on how the art competition absorbs the organizational experience of the art system and integrates it into the Olympic Movement, which plays an important role in restoring the face of the art competition. It is worth paying attention to the fact that the modern Olympic art competition team has also appeared in the figure of Chinese artists. In the 1948 London Olympics, five Chinese artists, Sun Zongyi, Chen Xiaonan, Fei Chengwu, Zhang Anzhi, and Zhang Sallying, competed in the painting event, in which Chen Xiaonan’s watercolor Riding won an honorable mention in the painting event. In addition, the Republic of China diplomat Chen Talisman served as a member of the jury for the 1924 Literature Competition. Although the entire Olympic Art Competition was discontinued in 1948, contemporary artists continue to participate in Olympic cultural events in a “non-competitive” way, perpetuating Coubertin’s ideal of the marriage of “muscle” and “spirit”. But contemporary artists continue to participate in Olympic cultural activities in a “non-competitive” way, continuing Coubertin’s ideal of the marriage of “muscle” and “spirit. This history is an important inspiration for re-examining the relationship between “sport” and “art” in the context of Olympic history, as well as how to carry out Olympic cultural activities nowadays.

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