

The Cultural Olympiad: Pylon of the Olympic Movement

By Dr Beatriz García¹, April 2008

This paper offers a perspective on the origins and evolution of the concept of Olympic cultural program. The two initial sections present a review of the historical background of the cultural program, from the initial conception by Pierre de Coubertin up to the last implementations on occasion of the Barcelona'92, Atlanta'96 and Sydney'2000 Games. The historical review is complemented by a brief revision of the current challenges and prospects that the program, now denominated "Cultural Olympiad" or "Olympic Arts Festivals", holds within the Olympic Movement.

1. Origins: The ideal role of cultural events in the Olympic Games

The idea of holding a culture and art festival within the Olympic Games celebration is embedded in the very foundations of the Olympic Movement. Hanna (1999) describes that in the Ancient Games, "athletes, philosophers, scholars, poets, musicians, sculptors and high-profile leaders displayed their talents, in what de Coubertin called the spirit of Olympism" (p. 109). Olympism was often defined by de Coubertin as the simultaneous training of the human body and the cultivation of the intellect and spirit, together viewed as manifestations of the harmoniously educated man. Upon this basis, de Coubertin's dream was to create an environment in modern society where artists and athletes could again be mutually inspired. From this, it can be concluded that de Coubertin brought the Olympic Games back to life hoping to develop an internationally recognised marriage between art and sport. In support of this ambition, the Olympic Charter establishes that "blending sport with culture and education" is a fundamental principle of Olympism (IOC 2007: 11).

The ability of de Coubertin to coordinate and attract the attention of critical decision makers around the world led to the re-birth of the Games in 1896 –Athens- and to their continuation in 1900 –Paris- and 1904 -St Louis-. Nevertheless, none of these Games incorporated arts alongside the sporting events. In order to encourage a reflection on this situation and change the pattern, the Baron convened a 'Consultative conference on Art, Letters and Sport'² at the Comedie Française in Paris, 1906. De Coubertin invited artists,

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² See: http://www.aafra.org/SportsLibrary/Olympika/Olympika_1996/olympika0501b.pdf

writers and sports experts to discuss how the arts could be integrated into the modern Olympic Games. The invitation stated that the purpose of the meeting was to study “to what extent and in what form the arts and letters could take part in the celebration of modern Olympic Games and become associated, in general, with the practice of sports, in order to profit from them and ennoble them” (Carl Diem Institute 1966: 16). As a result of the conference and in order to ensure the association of the arts with sports, de Coubertin decided to establish an arts competition that was to be part of each Olympic Games celebration (IOC 1997: 92). This competition was called the ‘Pentathlon of Muses’ and would award medals in the categories of sculpture, painting, music, literature and architecture.

In order to prepare the first ‘Pentathlon of Muses’, a commission was set up by the Olympic Organising Committee of the host city that was going to stage the following Games, London 1908. Nevertheless, time constraints and disagreement over content restrictions provoked the cancellation of the ‘Pentathlon’ at a late stage (Burnosky 1994: 21-22). The idea of an Olympic arts competition was therefore not implemented until the Stockholm Games in 1912.

2. Evolution of the Olympic cultural program: from competitions to exhibitions

2.1. Stockholm 1912 to London 1948: Olympic Arts Competitions

From 1912 in Stockholm until 1948 in London, arts competitions were organised in parallel to the sporting competitions, and artists, like athletes, competed and won gold, silver and bronze medals (Good 1998, Stanton 2000). However, regulations and contest parameters changed considerably due to difficulties in defining the different competition sections and disagreement in defining the most appropriate subject for the works presented. Over the years, the competition’s sections changed from the five areas composing the ‘Pentathlon of Muses’ to a long list of sub-categories. Moreover, the appropriate theme for Olympic artworks was also a controversial area as it was discussed whether or not to restrict the entries to works inspired in or portraying sports activities. Initially, it was compulsory to present a sporting theme, but this proved difficult and limiting in areas other than architecture or design for sports buildings (Burnosky 1994: 23). Also problematic was the non-universal or localised nature of the arts competitions, as most judges and competitors were European and it was very rare that non-western artists were awarded a medal (Burnosky 1994, Hanna 1999, Good 1998). Other problems were related to transport difficulties, inconsistent support from respective OCOGs and many limitations resulting from the regulation of amateurism in the Olympic Movement. The latter implied that, as in the case of athletes at the time, the participation of professional artists could not be accepted. In an arts

context this was particularly problematic because all artists were considered professional in their devotion to their vocation (Hanna 1999: 108, referring to an IOC document from the 44th IOC Session in Rome, 1949).

Hanna adds that perhaps most disappointing was the poor audience participation invoked by the arts competitions. In her words,

‘Cultural celebrations based on sport were increasingly irrelevant; people watch[ed] sport in real competitions, but their interest did not extend to sport in art.’ (*ibid*: 108).

This was a remarkable failure in the context of de Coubertin’s ideals, as a major reason for holding cultural events alongside the sports competitions was the possibility to inspire discussion and the promotion of ideas among all Olympic participants and spectators. In this context, it is interesting to see that, in contrast with other host cities where Olympic arts manifestations had played a minor role, the so-called ‘Nazi Games’ of Berlin 1936 staged a cultural festival of unprecedented size and nature for which, as indicated in the Berlin Games official report, an ambitious publicity campaign was created,

‘Because of the slight interest which the general public had hitherto evidenced in the Olympic Art Competition and Exhibition, it was necessary to emphasise their cultural significance to the Olympic Games through numerous articles in the professional and daily publications as well as radio lectures.’ (The XIth Olympic Games Berlin 1936, Official Report cited in Good 1998: 19)

In this case, the Olympic art programme, which was closely linked to the implementation of new and spectacular rituals such as the first modern Olympic torch relay, was used as a propaganda tool for the German National Socialists. Large sculptures, new musical compositions and the production of the epic film masterpiece ‘Olympia’ by Leni Riefenstahl, became all memorable outcomes of the 1936 Olympic arts programme.

As stated by Burnosky (1994), the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games and related arts competitions were not held because of World War II. In any case, at the time when the Games were re-established in London 1948, the organising committee succeeded in paralleling the sports with arts competitions. Remarkably, after the cultural programme ended, the British Fine Arts Committee that had been set up on occasion of the Games compiled a ‘report of juror’s suggestions for future arts contests’ (p. 33). This was intended for use as a guide to organising future arts competitions (Good 1998: 20). Good explains that ‘the recommendations included reducing the number of arts categories’ and concluded that the ‘interest in the exhibitions would be greater if

they were more closely linked up with the Games themselves and if a more intensive press campaign had been organised" (*ibid*).

By 1950, the problems and difficulties noted above were perceived to be far greater than the benefits and achievements brought by the Olympic art competitions. To review the situation, an extended discussion process took place within the IOC from 1949 in Rome to 1952 in Helsinki. As a result of this controversial process, which involved a detailed assessment of the 'amateur' nature of Olympic contributions, it was decided that from 1952 on, the presence of the arts in the Olympics would take the form of cultural exhibitions and festivals instead of competitions.

2.2. Melbourne 1956 to Sydney 2000: Olympic Arts Festivals and Cultural Olympiads

The first official Olympic arts festival was held at the Melbourne 1956 Games. According to Hanna (1997) a Fine-Arts Subcommittee was elected in 1953 and, afterwards, a Festival Sub-Committee in 1955. The festival had two major components: one of visual arts and literature, and another one of music and drama. As Hanna describes it, "exhibitions and festivals were staged simultaneously in the weeks leading up to and during the Games and featured local, national and international artists and performers" (p. 76). A special book on Australian arts was published after the Games, entitled 'The Arts Festival: a Guide to the Exhibition with Introductory Commentaries on the Arts in Australia' (Good 1998: 29). The Official Report of the Melbourne Games concluded that "the change from a competition to a Festival was widely welcomed, since the Festival provided a significant commentary on Australia's contribution to the Arts" (*ibid*).

However, after Melbourne, successive cities had very different approaches to the cultural component of the Games either in length, organisation, objectives or themes. Moreover, despite the changes, most Olympic arts committees found similar problems to the ones found by organisers from 1912 to 1948. In this regard, Good (1998) argues that the shift from competitions to exhibitions did not increase awareness about the art festivals because it did not study or analyse the "management issues" that had been repeatedly raised in the official reports of prior Games (p. 31). Moreover, these problems might have been accentuated by the absence of an international arts organization comparable to the sports' international federations in its ability to coordinate and support Olympic arts initiatives (Masterton cited in Good 1998: 30). Arguably, the latter point could be seen as the reason why the evolution of the Games cultural programs has been so variable and unstable since its origins. Recent attempts to address this gap (see reference to the Cultural Olympiad Foundation in following paragraphs) have failed to fully materialise.

A further development in the concept of Olympic cultural programming occurred at the time of the Barcelona'92 Games. The organisers of these Games set a new precedent and established the model of the Cultural Olympiad, a program for cultural celebrations that lasted the four years separating the previous Olympic Summer Games in Seoul '88 from the Games to be hosted in the city in 1992. Guevara (1992) has explained this ambitious decision by referring to the organisers' strategic intention to use the Games to improve the city's urban landscape and assist in its international projection far beyond the Games staging period.

The four-year format has been sustained by following summer Olympic host cities, from Atlanta'96 up to London 2012. This format has provided greater opportunities for creating an impact but, notably, as discussed in the following section, it has also brought further challenges to organisers. In Athens, the concept of a Cultural Olympiad was placed at a prime position within the event hosting process as the city celebrated the contribution of Greece and Greek heritage as the cradle of European civilization and the cradle of the Olympic Games. The cultural programme was utilised as a platform to convey ancient Olympic values and claim ownership of the Games in ways not accessible to other Games hosts. This involved the promotion of the Olympic Truce as a particularly important component of the Olympiad and the establishment of a Cultural Olympiad Foundation, with the aim to become a permanent institution to coordinate Olympic cultural programming in the same way that the IOC coordinates the sporting programme. At the time of writing, eight years on from the establishment of this institution, the role of this foundation remains unclear, providing yet another indication of the persistent challenges embedded within the Olympic cultural programme tradition. The Olympic programme for Beijing 2008 and London 2012 does also incorporate a cultural Olympiad. In Beijing, this has taken the form of 'Olympic Cultural Festivals' taking place over a month each year from 2003 to 2008 – so, over a six year period.³ In London, the Cultural Olympiad will start at the end of September 2008 and will involve a nation-wide programme of activities up to 2012.

3. Current issues and projections for the Olympic Cultural Programs

3.1. Management and promotion of Olympic cultural programs

The changeable nature of the Olympic cultural programme has been studied by Guevara (1992) through a comparative analysis of the cultural component of the Olympic Games from Mexico 1968 to Barcelona 1992. In her thesis, Guevara points out the radical differences shown by respective OCOGs in their commitment towards the arts. These differences are contrasted in terms of the duration of the festivals, their management

³ See: <http://en.beijing2008.cn/culture/festivals/>

structure, their objectives, and their themes and artistic programming. This section provides an overview of these issues covering the period from 1968 to 2008.

The length of the festivals has varied throughout the years from three weeks in Moscow 1980 to four years in the summer editions of Barcelona 1992 onwards, although the duration of a Cultural Olympiad is not completely set either. While Barcelona, Sydney and Athens presented activities distributed throughout each of the four years leading to the Games, in Beijing, the Olympiad involves one week to one month of activity every year between 2003 and 2008, mainly to commemorate the day of the Games award. As a middle term, the Mexico 1968 arts festival lasted one year, the Rome 1960 festival held exhibitions during six months and the Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Arts Festival lasted ten weeks.

An additional dimension, not considered by Guevara, is the actual geographical spread of cultural activity. While most Olympic Games editions have concentrated their cultural programmes in the host city (mainly within central areas or, in some cases, within the Olympic park and related Olympic venues), since the establishment of the Cultural Olympiad, the ambition has been to involve communities beyond the host city to ensure that the Games is owned at a national level – and, sometimes, internationally. This has brought an additional challenge, as the more disperse the activity, the more difficult to ensure that the programme is widely visible, recognised and impacting on a large scale – particularly from the perspective of media coverage. The first nation-wide cultural programme took place in Mexico 1968, with various attempts at following this trend taking place in the lead to Sydney 2000, Athens 2004 and London 2012. All of these editions of the Games have also aspired to incorporate an international dimension, with artworks being presented across the five continents.

The management of the cultural programmes has varied from a central management model to shared management, state management, private management and mixed management.

- *Central management* occurs when the cultural programme is the sole responsibility of the OCOG. This has been the case in Mexico 1968, Munich 1972, Seoul 1988 and Sydney 2000.
- *Decentralised management* or *shared management* has occurred when the Olympic cultural responsibilities have been the obligation of the OCOG in partnership with other organisations either private or public. A representative case was Montreal 1976, where Canadian provinces were in charge of designing the arts programmes while the OCOG's cultural department was in charge of the logistics.
- *State management* has occurred when the control of the cultural programme has been in hands of one or various public bodies. This was the model for the management, planning and production of the

Moscow 1980 Games arts component as well as the Cultural Olympiad in Athens 2004, entirely managed via a special branch of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture.

- In stark contrast, the clearest example of *private management* has been Los Angeles '84. On that occasion, the OCOG was established as a private company and its cultural department hired co-producer agencies to organise the arts events. This was also the case in Atlanta 1996.
- Finally, there have been some cases of "*mixed management*" such as in Barcelona 1992, where a special organisation for the cultural programme was created with name *Olimpiada Cultural SA* (OCSA). OCSA was at the same time separated and dependent upon the Olympic Organising Committee (COOB): on the one hand, it had an administrative committee composed of Public Administration representatives independent of the OCOG; on the other, the OCSA Board of Directors was presided by the Major of Barcelona, who was also president of COOB.

Guevara (1992) distinguishes five major and non-exclusive categories of objectives for the cultural programmes: 1) acknowledgement of the city artistic and cultural capacities, 2) improvement of the city cultural services, 3) showcase of the country cultural diversity, 4) international projection and 5) change of image. The first objective was paramount to Munich '72 and Los Angeles '84. Both cities were already linked to important cultural circuits and counted on the appropriate budget to present a great festival of international significance. The aim to use the Games as an opportunity to *improve the city cultural services* is said to have been the major drive of the Barcelona 1992 Cultural Olympiad. The initiative to present a four year festival responded to this aim and intended the involvement of many relevant sponsors and public bodies to have a long lasting impact on both national and international audiences. The showcase of the country *folklore and cultural diversity*, was a fundamental factor in the design of the Mexico '68, Montreal '76 and Moscow '80 cultural programme. This is also the case for Beijing 2008. The aim to get an *international projection* was especially remarkable in Seoul '88, Barcelona '92, Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004. In the case of Seoul and Barcelona, the Games brought both cities the opportunity to be known world-wide and so, they combined the local expression with marked international communication strategies. Finally, the objective to achieve a *change of image* has been key in the cultural agenda of cities such as Munich, Seoul and Beijing, all of them cities within countries with a marked military past needed to transform international stereotypes.

The themes and artistic programming of Olympic cultural programmes have traditionally responded to the defined objectives. As such, they have varied from strongly rooted national festivals to international festivals, and from a focus on popular events to a focus on high arts manifestations. For example, Mexico '68 presented a year-long national and international festival while Montreal '76 presented a small scale but highly popular

spontaneous festival with a marked national character . In contrast, Los Angeles '84 was a large scale, well promoted festival focused on elite national and international events with few open-air popular manifestations . Seoul '88 also presented some international elite artists but combined them with many other popular events. Remarkably, Munich '72 was paradigmatic in the configuration and production of the arts festivals because the festival was completely integrated within the Olympic sporting events. Munich understood the Games as a cultural event in itself and presented the arts manifestations in an open and spontaneous way. This was particularly evident in the so-called 'Avenue of Entertainment' which was composed of street theatre shows, mimes, clowns and acrobats (Burnosky 1994: 47) and incorporated performances focused on the interpretation of sports through art (Kidd 1999, pers. comm.)

Finally, since the creation of the Cultural Olympiad model, a common feature has been the design of thematic festivals, one for each year of the event. In Barcelona, the themes evolved from a 'Cultural gateway' in 1988, to the 'Year of Culture and Sport' in 1989, the 'Year of the Arts' in 1990, the 'Year of the Future' in 1991 and the 'Olympic Art Festival' in 1992. Atlanta also covered a wide range of subjects during the four years of festivals, arranged into two main themes: 'Southern Connections' at a national level, and 'International Connections'. Sydney offered a taste of the many and diverse Australian cultural communities through presenting an indigenous festival in 1997, a festival dedicated to multicultural groups and the waves of immigration in 1998, and international festivals in 1999 and year 2000. Athens reflect on major philosophical and humanistic principles by exploring the notions of 'Man and Space', 'Man and the Earth', 'Man and the Spirit' and 'Man and Man'.

3.2. Challenges and potential contributions by the IOC

Presently, the IOC maintains its commitment to ensure the survival of the concept of Olympic cultural program as an event additional and complementary to the sports competitions. In 1994, this emphasis resulted in the opening of a renovated Olympic Museum in Lausanne, a venue that welcomes the display of a wide array of arts and cultural elements related to sport and the Olympic Movement. Nevertheless, the radical transformations and variable nature of Olympic Arts Competitions, subsequent Olympic Arts Festivals and the recently established Cultural Olympiad initiative, seem to have affected the ability of Olympic organisers and audiences to understand the function and purpose of a cultural program integral to the Olympic celebration.

Existing IOC regulations and guidelines emphasize that, to become an Olympic host city, it is compulsory to organise and promote a cultural program acting in parallel to the sporting competitions. These regulations currently appear in the Olympic Charter (2007, Rule 40: Cultural Programme,) and in the official

guidelines for the host city candidature (2005, Theme 17. Olympism and Culture). However, none of these regulations, guidelines and recommendations seem to clarify which is the exact function that a cultural program for the Games is expected to accomplish and how its success or failure can be evaluated or studied by the IOC after its implementation. This has led to a series of problems, difficulties and dysfunctions that are affecting the preparations of current Cultural Olympiads as much as they affected the Olympic cultural programs taking place throughout the last century.

Traditionally, there has been a large gap between the eagerness of potential host cities to propose activities for the cultural Olympic program at the bid stage and the readiness of the chosen Olympic organising committee (OCOG) to implement them. This gap might be a direct result of the ambiguous description of the cultural program in the Olympic Charter guidelines. At present, the only clear statement in the Charter is the fact that the cultural program is a compulsory element in the staging process of the Olympic Games (IOC 2007). However, the role of this program is defined in extremely broad terms and no specific performance indicators are provided for the OCOG to follow. This situation has allowed a great freedom of action and interpretation and has contributed to incite very ambitious cultural bid proposals. Nevertheless, this is also the source of remarkable discontinuities in the OCOG's commitment to realise them, especially when the question of budget and resource allocation is debated.

Further, Olympic cultural programs, whether they have been organised by an independent institution or by a department within the OCOG, have had difficulties to sustain their association with other Olympic activities and to benefit from the Games' extensive promotional opportunities (García 2001). This indicates that there may exist a conflict that prevents the integration of the cultural program within the overall Olympic Games preparations. Ultimately, this suggests that, although the Olympic Movement aims to be a humanistic project encompassing sport, culture and education, the commercial imperatives of the Olympic Games staging process have led to the absolute predominance of the competitive elite sport programme over cultural and educational activities. The prior statement is reflected in the operational structure of the OCOG, where the team in charge of the cultural program tends to be operate almost independently to the rest of the organisation. This does not only provoke an understandable separation of the cultural program from the departments in charge of sporting competitions but also from the departments in charge of Olympic ceremonies, marketing, communications, media and institutional relations. This lack of cohesion of programs and activities has led to an unnecessary duplicity of resources and to a lack of visibility for the Cultural Olympiad.

Finally, it is relevant to note the continuous and remarkable difficulties to guarantee appropriate fundraising for respective cultural programs. This may be a direct result of the way the current Olympic

marketing strategies have been designed. None of the fundamental sources of Olympic revenue –the successful worldwide Olympic sponsorship program (TOP) and the national sponsorship programs or the sales of television rights- include concrete references which favour investment in or coverage of Olympic cultural activities. In this context, considering the low status of the cultural program when compared to such activities as the sporting competitions, the ceremonies and the torch relay, it is to be expected that Olympic sponsors will almost unanimously tend to invest in the latter areas rather than in a cultural program. Further, the exclusivity principle lying behind all Olympic marketing arrangements has traditionally limited the possibility of attracting funders for cultural activity other than public entities (see García 2002, 2004).

All these considerations make a case for a better regulation of the cultural program management and production system. More specifically, it calls for the creation of a more clearly defined IOC cultural policy that can protect and enhance such an important but misunderstood dimension of the Olympic Games. This policy should not impose limits on the creative freedom of the Olympic host city, but should help guarantee its applicability. For example, the policy should guarantee the commitment of the OCOG to the Olympic cultural program or Cultural Olympiad, when promises are made at the bid stage. It should encourage a better integration (if not a fusion) of cultural, educational and sporting activities within the Olympic delivery framework, especially through a better coordinated use of Olympic communication tools and, possibly, an improved interaction between the planned Cultural Olympiad and other programs such as the ceremonies, the torch relay or the Olympic education activities. Finally, it should facilitate the task of attracting appropriate funds to realise the program. This would involve the inclusion of new clauses in the existing Olympic marketing guidelines oriented towards the support of Olympic cultural programs.

As a final and encouraging note, recent initiatives developed under the auspices of the IOC and the Olympic Museum in Lausanne indicate that there might be some opportunities for leveraging the presence and relevance of Olympic cultural programs in the near future. A good example has been the establishment of a regular 'World Forum on Sport, Olympic Education and Culture', currently in its fifth edition, and the celebration of an international Forum on 'The IOC and its Cultural Policy' in March 2000 at the Olympic Museum. The 2000 forum followed the decision to merge the previously existing Olympic Cultural Commission with the Olympic Education Commission to give birth to the current Commission for Olympic Culture and Education. This joint program is supposed to assist in the enhancement of the role and visibility of cultural matters within the Olympic Movement. The results of these actions are still to be fully realised, but they embody an interest to solve the contradictions behind the traditional "Olympic sport, culture and education" discourse and may assist in generating new regulations to protect and promote the notion of Olympic Cultural Programming. Given the ongoing challenge of global intercultural relations, and the privileged position of the

Olympic Movement to establish strong cultural bridges, this should be a priority for the principles of Olympism in the 21st Century.

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