Reviving the panegyrics: cities and the staging of the Olympic arts and cultural festivals, 1896 to 2000

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While much has been written about the physical and economic transformation of cities occasioned by staging the Olympic Games, less attention has been paid to the cultural festivals that accompany the Games. In fact from the start of the Olympic revival in 1896, cultural festivals have been an integral part of the Olympic Games. Moreover in recent years, the cultural elements of the Olympics have begun to mesh with the cultural agendas of cities and governments keen to develop culture-based urban regeneration strategies.

Sporting and artistic contests were an essential part of religious ritual and ceremonial in classical Greece. For Pierre de Coubertin, the ‘renovateur’ of the modern Olympics, the aim was to revive not only the sporting competitions of ancient Greece but also the cultural and festival character of the original Games. In so doing, Coubertin highlighted three areas in which art and culture could contribute to this goal. The first was the introduction of artistic competitions as an integral part of the Olympics, taking its place alongside the sporting events. The second was to devise ceremonies to lend dignity to the Games, making use of stirring music, colourfully dressed athletes and participants, and conscious use of symbolism and ritual. The third was to instigate significant programmes of arts and cultural activities to accompany the Games and provide entertainment for participants, officials, visiting spectators and the local population. Some suggested activities — for example, drama, choreography, concerts and oratory — were distinctly high brow. Others, such as processions, parades, street decorations and night festivals (including fireworks), would have a more popular appeal. To these would be added formal banquets and receptions, exhibitions, artistic performances and less formal gatherings that might enhance.

This paper examines the evolution of the cultural dimension of the games from their inauguration in 1896 to the Millennium Games of 2000 in Sydney. During this time, the cultural festival has been used by both cities and national governments to address political, economic and urban planning goals. This has been helped by the flexibility of the cultural event, for while the length of the sporting festival itself is strictly limited to sixteen days by the Olympic Charter, the Cultural Festival is required to be staged for a minimum of five weeks. The temptation to stage ever longer festivals became hard to resist. In 1968 Mexico City staged a year-long festival and Barcelona the first four-year Cultural Olympiad culminating in the 1992 Games. At the same time the content of such festivals evolved away from narrow connections with sport to embrace national and international cultural forms. Olympic cities have become increasingly keen to present themselves as centres of culture with a cultural infrastructure that can benefit their residents, create desirable environments to live, work and spend leisure time as well as attract tourists. The Olympic Games provides a wonderful opportunity to attract artists and cultural investment that will leave a tangible cult.
INTRODUCTION

While much has been written about the physical and economic transformation of cities occasioned by staging the Olympic Games, less attention has been paid to the cultural festivals that accompany the Games. In fact from the start of the Olympic revival in 1896, cultural festivals have been an integral part of the Olympic Games. Moreover in recent years, the cultural elements of the Olympics have begun to mesh with the cultural agendas of cities and governments keen to develop culture-based urban regeneration strategies.

The Olympic Charter (rule 44, 2001 p65) requires cities to host a ‘programme of cultural events’ to be approved by the IOC with the aim to ‘promote harmonious relations, mutual understanding and friendship among the participants and others attending the Olympic Games’. The charter stipulates two components of this – events in the Olympic Village ‘symbolising the universality and the diversity of human culture’ and events ‘with the same purpose’ in the host city itself. While the sporting festival itself is tightly constrained by the Olympic charter to 16 days of competition (rule 36, p56), the cultural festival is not. There has been a tendency for the cultural festival to grow in scale well beyond the five-week minimum laid down by the IOC (rule 44, 65). 1968 saw the first year-long festival and Barcelona inaugurated the 4-year Cultural Olympiad.

This paper, which will be fully illustrated, examines the evolution of the cultural dimension of the Summer Olympics and their settings from their inauguration in 1896 to the Millennium Games of 2000 in Sydney. First, it discusses the reasons for the prominence given to the cultural dimension by the founders of the modern Olympic movement and how this was expressed in the early games through festivities, ceremonies and artistic competitions. Second, it examines the abandonment of artistic competition in favour of exhibitions after 1948. Finally it analyses the growing status of the cultural festivals and changes in the cultural agenda as host cities embraced the opportunities that the festival provides.

REVIVING THE PANEGYRIS

Sporting and artistic contests were an integral part of religious ritual and ceremonial in classical Greece. The festival calendar was dominated by four regular cycles of pan-Hellenic Games - the Pythian Games, the Isthmian Games, the Nemean Games and the Olympic Games. The Olympic Games held at Olympia, about 90 miles (150 km) west of Athens, honoured Zeus emerged as the most important of these games. Already a sacred site by 1000BC, the Games were well established before the first written record (a victors’ list) is available in 776BC. They were a panegyris or ‘a festive assembly of the entire people’ (Sinn, 2000, 24). As such they attracted athletes, artists, scholars, and speakers from throughout the Greek world. The historian Herodotus for example came to Olympia to recite his narratives as this was, in his opinion, the ‘quickest and least troublesome path’ to secure fame (ibid, 27).

The inauguration of the modern Olympics in 1896 was intended to revive not only the sporting competitions of ancient Greece but also the cultural and festive character of the original Games. For Pierre de Coubertin, the ‘renovateur’ of the modern Olympics, the Games were to be more than a sporting competition. To this end he played an important role in crafting and supporting a durable, shared agenda, underpinned by the notion of ‘Olympism’, around which this sporting festival crystallised. Notions of Olympism found initial expression in the Olympic Charter and were then further articulated and embellished by the practices of subsequent Games. The central philosophy of ‘Olympism’
reflected Coubertin’s interpretations of the ancient Greek and was defined initially in the Olympic Charter (1908; revised 2002) as:

a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.

Subsequent refinements of the term sought to capture the essence of Hellenism and the ancient Games and translate them into a modern context and idiom. Coubertin recognised that reviving the outward form of the Games was comparatively easy, since it only involved restarting the four-year cycle of Olympiads with their schedule of sporting competitions. Restoring their deeper meanings was much more difficult (Müller, 2000, 569). For the ancient Greeks, these meanings centred on the power of religious observance and athleticism to honour the gods (ibid, 566). Coubertin believed in the importance of athleticism, but recognised that giving the modern Games a spiritual component was difficult in a world of competing religions:

The primary, fundamental characteristic of ancient Olympism, and of modern Olympism as well, is that it is a *religion*. By chiselling his body through exercise as a sculptor does a statue, the ancient athlete honoured the gods. In doing likewise, the modern athlete honours his country, his race, and his flag. Therefore, I believe that I was right to explore, from the very beginning of modern Olympism, a religious sentiment transformed and expanded by the internationalism and democracy that are distinguishing features of our day. Yet this is the same religious sentiment that led the young Hellenes, eager for the victory of their muscles, to the foot of the altars of Zeus.

From this sentiment derive all the cultural expressions that constitute the ceremonies of the modern Games. I had to impose them one after another on a public that was opposed to them for a long time, seeing them merely as theatrical displays, useless spectacles incompatible with the seriousness and dignity of international athletic competitions.

(quoted in Müller, 2000, 550)

Central to those ceremonies was the idea of ‘modern patriotism’, symbolised by the national flag ‘being raised on the pole of victory to honour the winning athlete ? that was what would keep the faith alive at the newly rekindled hearth’ (ibid, 573). Athletes swearing an oath to honour their country at the outset of the Games would echo the practice of the ancient Games where their counterparts swore an oath to Zeus.

Olympism would also imbue the nascent Games with notions of harmony. Coubertin used the word ‘eurhythmy’ to describe the harmonious marriage of sport and culture, athletics and art, muscle and mind. He believed that the fusion of art and sport lay at the heart of the classical Games and no revival would be complete without reuniting them. This would be difficult since ‘the masses’, as he disparagingly called them, had lost all sense of eurhythmy and would need re-educating before they might properly appreciate the relationship between sport, sculpture, music and architecture. Only then would they be capable of recognising and experiencing the harmony and beauty in performance and setting intrinsic to his vision for Olympism (ibid, 612).

Coubertin highlighted three areas in which art and culture could help to achieve this goal. The first was the introduction of artistic competitions as an integral part of the Olympics, taking its place alongside the sporting events. The second was to devise ceremonies to lend dignity to the Games, making use of stirring music, colourfully dressed athletes and participants, and conscious use of symbolism and ritual. Of particular significance were distribution of awards to
the victors, administration of the athletic oath, and the proclamation that the Games were open (usually performed by the head of state of the host nation). The third was to instigate significant programmes of arts and cultural activities to accompany the Games and provide entertainment for participants, officials, visiting spectators and the local population. Some suggested activities – for example, drama, choreography, concerts and oratory – were distinctly highbrow. Others, such as processions, parades, street decorations and night festivals (including fireworks), would have a more popular appeal. To these would be added formal banquets and receptions, exhibitions, artistic performances and less formal gatherings that might enhance the impact of the Olympic festival.

THE ARTISTIC COMPETITIONS

Pierre de Coubertin organised an Advisory Conference on the Arts, Literature and Sport at the Comedie Francaise Paris in May 1906 to discuss the introduction of artistic competition into the Olympic Games and the role for the arts in local athletic events. The Conference agreed to establish five arts competitions in the fields of architecture, sculpture, painting, literature and music. The art was to have a sporting theme and be judged by panels of international judges with the winning works being performed or exhibited during the Olympic Games. The conference also recommended that all sporting competitions should have an artistic component:

through the addition of poetry competitions or appropriate drama productions, and above all outdoor choral music – stressing, moreover, the numerous advantages that sports clubs would enjoy by creating choral sections within them. (Circular outlining the wishes of the Conference sent to heads of universities, sports federations and clubs Oct 1906, cited Müller, 2000, 619)

While the vision for art to permeate sport at all levels was never achieved, artistic competitions were introduced at the Stockholm Games of 1912 but only with considerable difficulty. The Swedish Royal Academy of Arts and the Swedish art societies were not in sympathy with the competitions and did not wish to co-operate in their organisation. The Swedish Organising Committee was ill equipped to run the competitions and even considered removing them from the Programme altogether in February 1912. They relented but the competitions were taken over by the IOC in the person of Pierre de Coubertin who received the entries and organised the judging. How or on what basis this was done is unclear (SOC, 1913, 808). The winning entries went on display in Stockholm. Among the gold medal winners was Coubertin himself with an ‘Ode to Sport’ submitted under the pseudonym of Georges Hohrod and M. Eschbach.

ARTS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Athens set the standard for cultural festivity at the Games of 1896. The celebrations took over the entire city. The authorities decorated the streets and illuminated the Acropolis. The programme included torchlight processions, parades, fireworks, an orchestral concert by the Athens Philharmonic Orchestra and a performance of Sophocles’s ‘Antigone’ (Mallon and Widland, 1998). There were banquets and receptions for the athletes, organisers and IOC members, culminating in a luncheon given by the King in the palace ballroom. The scale of the event, the size of the crowds and the engagement of what seemed the entire population
overwhelmed many foreign visitors and competitors, who pronounced themselves left speechless by the ‘indescribable’ sight of the first modern Games (MacAlloon, 1981).

The fact that the 1900, 1904 and 1908 Games were staged as appendages to World’s Fairs, in the case of Paris and St. Louis, and the Franco-British Exhibition of Science, Arts, and Industry, in the case of London in 1908, meant that little effort was made to provide events for the Olympic Games themselves. A pattern of arts and cultural events was re-established at the Stockholm Games of 1912.

By the Amsterdam Games of 1928 concern was being expressed at the growing size of the Games, although this time the target was the associated activities. The Official Report of the 1928 Games suggests that the IOC was concerned about ‘excessive festivities’ being organised during the Games and that there should be reforms to allow only those that ‘the reception of authorities and officials demanded’ (Organising Committee, 1928, 957). This came to nothing, however, as the staging of the Games assumed greater economic and political significance. For Los Angeles in 1932 the desire to stage the Games fitted the classic American boosterist agenda with Hollywood studios and stars enlisted in the provision of entertainment and hospitality for athletes and visitors (TOC 1933, 329). By contrast, the Berlin Games of 1936 used the cultural dimension as a powerful medium to address domestic and foreign policy aims.

However, the Berlin Olympics introduced a number of innovations that presaged the post-war cultural pattern for the Games. An extensive exhibition programme leading up to the Games and during the Games was on an altogether new scale. Touring exhibitions illustrating the origin of the ancient games, its revival and modules for the 1936 sporting facilities toured rural Germany and the cities (Rürup, 1996). During the summer of 1936, seventy thousand visitors saw the exhibition of entries to the Olympic Art competition (15 July-23 August 1936), containing over 700 contributions from 23 countries. Other exhibitions included ‘Sport in Hellenic Times’ at the Pergamon Museum, ‘Great Germans in contemporary Portraits’, and ‘Masterpieces of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century German Art’. The largest was the ‘Deutschland’ exhibition, a propaganda exercise aimed primarily at the 1.3 million German visitors who attended. This, in the words of Goebbels, was intended to show ‘a reawakened, reborn nation, pulsating with the desire to create... the eternal Germany’. It contained items such as the Gutenberg Bible, the manuscript of ‘Mein Kampf’ and the television phone.

There was an extensive season of musical, operatic and dance performances. The International Dance Competition had entries from 14 countries. The German Opera House offered a Wagner Festival, with regular concerts at the Schloss Niederschonhausen, Concerts Philharmonie, Berlin Schloss, Monbijou Palace and Charlottenberg Palace. The Dietrich-Eckhart Theatre staged performances of Handel’s ‘Heracles’, with 2500 performers, and ‘Das Frankenthaler Wurfspeier’, a choral dance play by Wolfgang Eberhard Moller. An epic-scale performance of Hamlet saw the Prince of Denmark accorded ‘a first class Party funeral’, with marching soldiers, trumpets and displays of weapons (Rürup, 1996). The winning entries from the music competition were also performed in the Dietrich-Eckhart Theatre. The Olympic stadium staged spectacular performances during the period of the Games, including the Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy) movement presenting ‘Music and Dance of the Peoples’ (10 August), a military concert involving over 2000 musicians (13 August), and the showpiece Festival Play ‘Olympic Youth’ organised by Carl Diem.

Performed in the stadium after the Opening Ceremony and again two days later as a para-Olympic event, ‘Olympic Youth’ presaged the cultural content of contemporary Opening Ceremonies. It was conceived as ‘an artistically constructed echo of the opening ceremony... a spiritual happening that (the onlooker) would have to explain to himself’ (Organising Committee, 1936, 577). Diem used massed performers, international celebrities, light, sound, and a musical score written by Carl Orff and Werner Egk to create an imposing spectacle. It
involved around 10 000 performers, each of whom had signed a declaration claiming their Aryan descent, and presented a series of tableaux weaving Olympic and medieval and modern themes: ‘Children at play’, ‘Maidenly grace’, ‘Youth at Play in a Serious Mood’ and ‘Heroic Struggle and Death Lament’. The last of these contained a celebration of sacrificial death for the fatherland, ending with the ‘Ode to Joy’ from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, at which point searchlights created a dome of light above the arena and flames of fire leapt up around the edge of the stadium.

Two innovations - the Olympic Bell and torch relay - acted as the focus for cultural events. The Olympic Bell, nine-foot in diameter and over fourteen feet high was designed to hang in a specially constructed tower on the Maifeld, featuring in the opening and closing ceremonies and some of the pageants held in the stadium during the Olympic festival. It was cast in Bochum, leaving on 16 January 1935 for its journey to Berlin by trailer. As it passed through the countryside, it provided a focus for orchestrated celebrations, with the proceedings broadcast on national radio as part of the promotion of the Games (Organising Committee, 1936, 113-4).

The Torch Relay was of wider and more enduring significance. Devised by Carl Diem, as noted above, it married together the idea of distance running with the torch ceremony. He suggested that the stadium flame would be lit by a torch brought to Berlin from the site of the original Greek Games at Olympia rather than simply being lit at the stadium as at the 1932 Games. The torch would then be timed to enter the stadium during the Opening Ceremony. The IOC approved the plan in May 1934. Just over 3000 relay runners carried the torch on a route passing through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia and finally Germany.

FROM ART COMPETITIONS TO EXHIBITIONS

Art competitions were run as part of the Summer Olympics from 1912 to the London Games of 1948. Even once the competitions became as established part of the Games there were a number of issues that were of concern. The issue of amateurism, which was a fundamental principle of the athletic competition, was more difficult to apply to the art competitions were many of the entrants were professionals (composers, architects). There were also concerns about the quality of the work submitted, which was variable and more importantly for the organisers, the competitions were notoriously expensive to organise. The insurance bill alone for the Los Angeles Organising Committee in 1932 was £400,000. The British Fine Arts Committee considering the 1948 art competitions felt that there were problems with the categories of art, difficulties in judging the literature competition given the range of languages, and a need for exhibits ‘to be linked up with the games themselves’. This would for example mean sculpture being judged before the games and displayed at the Games themselves, or the music competition producing pieces that could be performed at the Games. The competitions also required an ‘intensive press campaign’ to raise interest in the art. (Official Report, 1948, 198). The truth of the matter was that the public were more interested in the sporting competitions than the art competitions. In fact the art competitions were discontinued after the London Games of 1948, despite opposition from those wanting to maintain the Coubertin ideal. They were replaced by exhibitions of art and culture, which were initially to be national rather than international in outlook (Findling and Pelle, 1996, 122).
EVOLUTION OF ARTS AND CULTURAL FESTIVALS

In purely economic terms it makes sense to hold festivals for longer periods to maximise visitor numbers and income, to avoid competition from Olympic events and the difficulties of tempting sports fans into artistic venues during the sporting competitions and to spread costs of staging the games over a longer run. More importantly, culture has become a matter of urban prestige. Cities are keen to present themselves as centres of culture with a cultural infrastructure that will serve their populations, create desirable environments to live, work and spend leisure time as well as to attract tourists. The Olympic Games provides a wonderful opportunity to attract artists and cultural investment with a tangible cultural legacy on which to build in the future. One may also observe that the cultural Olympiad plays a political role in providing opportunities to appease critics of the games by providing something for non-sports fans or by giving a voice to disadvantaged or marginal groups.

Mexico City in 1968 was the first city to stage a year-long festival referring to it as a cultural programme or a cultural Olympiad. Moscow (1980) hosted a 16-month festival. But it was Barcelona that inaugurated a true Cultural Olympiad lasting four years. This has now become the norm. It is interesting to note that in 1997 three of the cities bidding for the 2004 Games – Lille, Rome and Seville – offered to stage cultural festivals across two Olympiads starting from the point of selection to the Olympics themselves 1997-2004. Thus cities have proved willing to embark on ambitious arts projects, which, despite the growth in sponsorship, do not have the potential of raising funds on the scale of the sporting festival itself. Even sponsorship has limits with IOC insisting on ‘clean venue’ policies, which limit the exposure that sponsors would normally expect. Cultural budgets are often seen as expendable when finance is tight as in the case of Atlanta ($40m to $25m) and Sydney where the reduction in funding led to the resignation of the Cultural Olympiad’s director in 1996 (Good, 1999, 165-6)

CONCLUSION

Cultural festivals have evolved dramatically since the 1960s. Each city sets its own cultural goals so that considerable variety exists between the post war Olympiads. The close connection between art and sport has been difficult to sustain throughout these programmes. What this paper aims to show is that the cultural agenda has taken on a momentum of its own, addressing issues that go beyond Olympism and desiring to create cultural legacies that will serve the host cities and nations in the longer term.
REFERENCES


