

The Olympic Artworks in Athens

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Abstract

Athens, the capital of Greece, has had the opportunity of hosting the Olympic Games twice: in 1896 and in 2004. Selecting Athens to host the Games has had beneficial effects for the city in many areas, including culture. Indeed, investments made in this area have led to the creation of works of art of exceptional quality in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Promoting cultural projects and activities in the cities hosting Olympic Games has been one of the top priorities of the International Olympic Committee and in particular of Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games. The blending of sport and culture has always been one of the fundamental principles of the Olympic Movement. The first modern Olympic Games held in Athens (1896) implemented the first great sports project, the Panathenaic Stadium, which was at the same time a cultural project of particular significance. The monument's high aesthetics, its considerable historical significance, and the rare beauty of its morphology have made it the most important cultural legacy in the history of the Olympic Games. In 2004, Athens acquired a new Olympic Stadium, with an amazing architectural composition as a roof, a unique masterpiece designed by architect Santiago Calatrava. In the meantime, on the occasion of the Olympic Games, other artists, painters and sculptors, have created works of art which, for specific reasons, could be included in the category of "Olympic Art", a category having its own features and characteristics.

Key words: Olympic Games, Athens 1896 and 2004, Panathenaic Stadium, Olympic Stadium, Sport and culture, Cultural Olympiad, Santiago Calatrava, Olympic art.

Introduction

The origins of the modern Olympic Games can be found in the ancient Olympic Games which, according to historical sources, date back to 776 BC and were held at the Sanctuary of Olympia, in a rather isolated part of Western Peloponnese. The genesis of the Olympic Games is lost in the depths of mythology and, according to various versions, the Games were founded by gods, heroes, or kings.

The ancient Olympic Games are linked to the history of human culture and they used to have a religious, athletic, and artistic character. Olympiads have been continuously held in Antiquity until the year 393 AD, whereupon they were abolished by Roman Emperor Theodosius I.

The West was rather well prepared to accept the revival of an important athletic and cultural event of Antiquity. Indeed, in the 19th century, some attempts to revive the ancient Olympic Games had already been made, for example by Evaggelos Zappas in 1859, before the successful endeavour by French philosopher and educator Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Baron de Coubertin took the initiative to organise an international congress on June 16, 1894 at the Sorbonne University, in Paris, where the revival of the Olympic Games was decided. Greek author Dimitrios Vikelas also participated in this endeavour, even becoming the first President of the newly established International Olympic Committee. During the congress, it was proposed and accepted that the first Olympic Games of the modern era be held in Athens in 1896. It was also decided that the Games would be held every four years in various capital cities of the world (Coubertin et al., 1897: 8).

The endeavour to have the first modern times Olympic Games held in Athens was not an easy one. It was the first time that the newly founded Greek State would organise such a big and internationally significant event.

According to the Secretary General of the Olympic Games, Timoleon Philimon, the idea was flattering to the Greeks and a large part of the press supported the effort. However, politicians were divided. The public rhetoric following the relevant decision adopted in Paris highlighted the global significance of Olympia as well as the noble and peaceful objectives of the revival of the Olympic Games (Athens 1896. Olympic Games. Official Report, Georgiadis, 2003).

To organise the Olympic Games in Athens resources were needed, which were gathered through fundraising, while Georgios Averoff undertook to sponsor the refurbishment of the “Kallimarmaro Panathenaic Stadium”, a great achievement from an architectural, aesthetic, and historical point of view, where the first modern times Olympic Games were held on March 25, 1896, the day commemorating the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire.

Athens was selected mostly for historical reasons and this choice primarily served humanitarian values aiming at transmitting to the new generations “love for harmony and respect for life”, according to Baron de Coubertin (Coubertin et al., 1897: 8).

Nevertheless, this whole endeavour was both a difficult and a fascinating challenge, as ascertained in an interesting article wrote by an eyewitness of this great event (Richardson, 1896: 45): “It seemed a hazardous experiment to institute a series of international athletic contests under the name of Olympic Games. The sun of Homer, to be sure, still smiles upon Greece, and the vale of Olympia is still beautiful. But no magician’s wand and no millionaire’s money can ever charm back into material existence the setting in which the Olympic Games took place. It is only in thought that we can build again the imposing temples and porches, set up the thousands of statues, make the groves live again, bring back the artists, musicians, poets, philosophers, and historians, who came both to gaze and to contribute to the charm of the occasion. Never again will athletes move in such an athletic atmosphere, winning eternal glory in a few brief moments. The full moon of the summer evening with Pindar’s music and wreaths upon the victor’s brow belong to the days that are no more, to the childhood of the world free and joyous. We are those ‘upon whom the ends of the world are come’”.

In 2004, 108 years later, Athens became for the second time the host city of the Olympic Games. In 2004, the Olympic Games returned to the place where they were born, where they were re-established, and where they were revived (ATHOC, 2004: 31). As pointed out by Margaret Gold (M. Gold, 2011: 315), Greece’s relationship to the Olympic Games was not the same as that of other countries and the choice of Athens, for the second time, was considered to be a return of the Games to their homeland. Athens had great expectations as well as great hopes for a positive impact on its future course.

For Athens, the outcome of such a large activity was, generally speaking, spectacular. One of the most impressive works undertaken was the Olympic Park in Marousi, where the Olympic Stadium is also located, bearing the signature of the great Spanish architect, Santiago Calatrava. The Olympic Games have enhanced the reputation of Greece and reinforced the meaning of the Olympic spirit, a truly Greek legacy, at the global level. The successful organisation of the Games has filled Greeks with national pride. The necessary know-how was acquired. The quality of life for the residents of Athens improved, the feeling of security was reinforced, and the promotion of cultural heritage underlined the citizens’ national identity (Papanikolaou, 2017).

Athens 1896:

a) The Panathenaic Stadium and the great sponsor Georgios Averoff



Fig. 1

The refurbishment of the *Panathenaic Stadium* (Fig. 1) was the most important cultural intervention in Athens at that time and, possibly, throughout the history of Olympic culture. The costs for refurbishing the stadium amounted to 585,000 golden drachmae and they were entirely paid for by Georgios Averoff, whose statue was erected in front of the stadium with the approval of the International Olympic Committee before the official opening ceremony of the Olympic Games (Cashman, 1998: 107). Georgios Averoff was a wealthy Egypt-born Greek businessman dealing in trade and banking. He is considered a “great

benefactor” to Greece because of his many donations to his homeland to satisfy various national and educational needs.

The statue of the great benefactor **Georgios Averoff** (1837-1915) (**Fig. 2**) is the work of a distinguished Greek sculptor of that time, **Georgios VROUTOS** (1843-1909). VROUTOS had studied in Athens and Rome, he was a professor at the Athens School of Fine Arts, and has mostly served the classicist style (Lydakis, 1981, Mykoniatis, 1996). He was familiar with making monumental statues in marble, since he had recently made the statues of famous Greek personalities, such as *Konstantinos Zappas* (1888) and *Adamantios Korais* (circa 1885), and of the British politician *Gladstone* (circa 1880). The *Georgios Averoff* statue shows a neo-baroque tendency leading the sculptor to somewhat more realistic compositions. The work is impressive. It has a rather elevated socle on which the magnificent statue of Georgios Averoff stands. The white marble shines under the strong sun and appears to perfectly fit with the nearby Kallimarmaro marble stadium.



The Panathenaic Stadium is a rectangular construction made of marble from Mount Penteli, the same kind of marble used in Antiquity, and it owes its name to the “*stadion*”, “the length of a sports stadium in Antiquity” (Aspioti-Magra, 2005: 25). It was built in the 4th century BC by the Athenian orator Lykourgos and, until its refurbishment, the ancient ruins of the stadium, discovered as part of archaeological excavations, had been preserved. The stadium was built on the shores of the Ilisos River and was used for the first time in 330 BC to hold games in which athletes competed in the nude. The white marble from Mount Penteli was used in the stadium to replace the earthen seats in the Roman years by Herodes Atticus in the 139-144 AD period (Kristensen-Papanikolaou, 2003). The ruins of the ancient stadium had been drawn in 1835 by an amateur Bavarian painter, Ferdinand Stademann (1791-1873). Stademann included these drawings (currently kept at a national gallery in Munich) in the lithography edition under the title *Das Panorama von Athen*, published in Munich in 1841, where one may see *in situ* a large part of the ancient stadium (Papanikolaou, 2007).

b) A French monument of history and art in Olympic Athens

Another noteworthy event that occurred in Athens in 1896 was the presentation, in front of the Kallimarmaro Stadium, of the “*Panorama of the Siege of Paris*” by the Prussians in 1870, the work of French painter Henri Félix Philippoteaux (1815- 1884) in collaboration with his son, Paul Philippoteaux (1846-1923). The work was exhibited for the first time in Paris in 1872 and its success led to the creation of two more copies to be exhibited in other countries. In Athens, the painters’ composition was placed in a special rotunda erected next to the Panathenaic Stadium, to the left of the entrance (**Fig. 3**). It is still not known whether the permission of the International Olympic Committee had been requested. The work remained there until 1915. Since then, every trace of the “Panorama” has been lost. Part of the Philippoteaux’s “Panorama”, including 10 paintings, has been preserved and is kept at the Teloglion Fine Arts Foundation in Thessaloniki. The works were exhibited for the first time in 2016, i.e. 120 years later (Voutyra and Tsagakalia, 2016). According to the study by Christina Tsagakalia and Sylvie Le Ray-Burimi (2016), the “Panorama of the siege of Paris” was linked to Greece on the occasion of the first modern times Olympic Games due to the participation of Greek voluntary corps in the Franco-Prussian War at that time (1870-1871), which even caused a diplomatic incident between Greece and Germany.



Fig. 3

The Panoramas aimed at the “spectacularisation of war”, as well as others themes, such as cities or exotic destinations, and they aspired at providing mass entertainment, even at times when cinema had created more adequate conditions for such themes. The technique was based on the display of paintings, hung on the walls of a rotunda and watched by the spectators from an elevated point (*ibid.*). Undoubtedly, the “Panorama of the siege of Paris” is an artistic monument with multiple meanings.

However, it remains unclear whether the International Olympic Committee, which has a say in anything directly or indirectly related to the Games and the Olympic stadiums, had expressed its opinion on the relationship between this “Panorama” and the purposes of the Olympic Movement.

Sport and Culture

The idea of organising art and culture festivals is closely linked to the foundations themselves of the Olympic Movement (Garcia, 2002: 5).

The idea of organising artistic events as part of the Olympic Games had already taken shape and been discussed during the first modern Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens. The inclusion of the arts in the Games was applauded by the International Olympic Committee, which adopted the relevant decision at the conference held in Paris in 1906. From then on, the arts were included in the Olympic programme in the form of contests (M. Gold & Revill, 2011: 84-85, Good, 1999: 161, Inglis, 2011: 466).

Besides, Baron de Coubertin’s dream had been to create an environment in modern society where artists and athletes could interact, a point of view that finally materialised and was captured in the Olympic Charter. To support this aspiration, the Olympic Charter defines the three components of the Olympic Movement as follows: Sport, Culture, and Education (Garcia, 2002).

Thus, “Culture” became an integral part of the Olympic Games, and the International Olympic Committee undertook to ensure the survival of the Cultural Olympiad, an institution that has gone through many phases from 1896 to this day (Papanikolaou, 2013).

However, the “blending of sports and culture” occurred a little later, after the third Olympiad. More specifically, during the first “Advisory Conference on Art, Science and Sport”, held in Paris in May 1906, Baron de Coubertin introduced the idea of organising a competitive artistic programme, which he named “Pentathlon of the Muses”. This was to be part of the Olympic Games, and medals were to be awarded in the following five art categories: *Painting, Sculpture, Music, Literature, and Architecture*. Initially, it was decided to include the competitive artistic programme in the programme of the London 1908 Olympic Games. However, the question that was raised was how to evaluate artistic creation in athletic terms.

Thus, followed the second phase that lasted from 1952 (Helsinki, actually from the Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games) until the Seoul Olympic Games (1988), whereupon the Olympic Cultural Programme entered a new phase. It was called “Olympic Arts Festival”, and emphasis was placed on national and international art, as well as on large-scale cultural festivals, abandoning the competition procedure.

However, from the Barcelona Olympic Games (1992) on and up to the more recent Olympic Games (Rio de Janeiro 2016), the “Arts Festival” was renamed “Cultural Olympiad” thus creating the most important cultural institution existing to this day, having greater weight, significance, and importance, and also lasting for a four-year period.

The Cultural Olympiad has been the most ambitious programme ever implemented in Greece and it may be compared to the sport infrastructure projects carried out for the athletic Olympic Games. This grandiose programme aimed at leaving behind a great legacy in terms of infrastructure and cultural actions that would improve the image of both Athens and other regions of Greece. It was undoubtedly an unprecedented institution and it was carried out in close collaboration with the International Olympic Committee, UNESCO and the United Nations, as well as with the countries that participated in actions having both national and international character (OECD, Territorial Review, 2004: 190, Papanikolaou, 2015).

a) Olympic champion Konstantinos Dimitriadis

It is worth noting that Greece earned an important distinction at the Paris 1924 Olympic Games, in the competition segment of the “Pentathlon of the Muses”. More specifically, sculptor **Konstantinos Dimitriadis** (1881-1943) won the gold medal in the category of sculpture for his work “*Discobole Finlandais*” (**Fig. 4**). From that moment on he was dubbed “Olympic champion”. A copy of the work has been standing since 1927 in the



Fig. 4

Zappeion Gardens facing the Panathenaic Stadium.

The “*Disc Thrower*” is a big sculpture (220 cm) made of copper that has gone one to follow an international path (the original is in New York, a copy is in Athens, and another copy is in Dijon, France). The work adheres to ancient models, such as the “*Discobolus*” of Myron, and is considered one of the best participations in the Olympic “Pentathlon of the Muses”. The “*Disc Thrower*” has been praised by critics and has been considered an expression of the “Greek ideal”, i.e. the balanced development of body and spirit (Mykoniatis, 1996: 195). It is no exaggeration to say that Dimitriadis’ “*Disc Thrower*” is the perfect embodiment, in visual art terms, of the spirit and ideas of Olympism and it has greatly influenced the so-called “Olympic Art”, meaning the art that draws its inspiration from the Olympic Games and their history.

It should be noted that this was also the spirit (based on the motto *citius, altius, fortius*) that animated the initiative of the Chinese Olympic Committee in 2008 to organise a Sculpture Symposium, where more than 2,400 works were presented and competed (BOCOG, 2008). On that occasion, a young Greek sculptor, **Antonis Myrodis** (1963), was awarded a prize for his work “*Visioning 5 Nikes*”.

Athens 2004

a) The works of Santiago Calatrava



Fig. 5

The Olympic buildings are the most prominent constructions that represent special occasions to experiment with new technologies and implement innovative projects by the most famous architects. This is a phenomenon that has developed after World War II during the summer Olympiads (Cresciani, 2008: 1, Erten & Ozfiliz, 2006: 539). Following a successful professional and artistic career in designing and constructing monumental works, Spanish architect **Santiago Calatrava** (1951) was invited in Athens for a series of works, which have also been deemed particularly successful. Calatrava has left his mark in Athens, as an architect and designer/artist, at the central Olympic Park, in Marousi (**Fig.**

5). In particular, aside from the overall design of the space, his work focused on the following aspects: first of all, the roof of the Olympic Stadium, his most important work and a real symbol of contemporary Athens. “This is one of the most important monuments in Athens, after the Acropolis. The Olympic Park is in the district of Marousi, ten kilometres south of the centre of Athens. It is a gigantic architectural complex, where the Spanish architect has brought out his skills and his creativity. The park was designed to be the home of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games and the architect created on this occasion unprecedentedly spectacular plans, full of imagination” (Athens, Olympic Park, 2004).

Other works by the Spanish architect in the Olympic Sports Complex in Marousi include the roof of the Velodrome and four entrances to the plazas and other spaces of the Olympic Sports Complex, as well as the “*Nations Wall*”, a monumental sculpture made of tubular steel leading to the “*Plaza of the Nations*”. Facing the “*Nations Wall*” is the “*Olympic Agora*”, a pedestrian crossing with a hundred arches made of steel placed so as to form a long tunnel. “This is a real work of art and a modern version of the ancient agora in Athens” (Athens, Olympic Park, 2004).

Another noteworthy work of Santiago Calatrava, donated by the architect to the city of Athens, is the “Footbridge” on Katechaki Street, at the homonymous subway station at the entrance of the city of Athens. The work is made of steel, it stands at a height of fifty metres above ground, and it was inspired from ancient Greece, from the ancient vases and from the ancient triremes (Athens, Olympic Park, 2004, Athens 21st Century, 2004).

Calatrava’s works in Athens are demonstrations of two aspects of his art. There is, on the one hand, a combination of his artistic interventions, with the structuring and engineering of grandiose and voluminous buildings, such as the Olympic Stadium and the Velodrome in Marousi. On the other hand, one can see the absolute dominance of high aesthetics in works such as the plazas and the footbridges.

The Olympic Sports Complex in Marousi, and in particular the amazing – and now famous all over the world, because of its innovative construction and its artistic appearance – roof of the Olympic Stadium, has become a reference in the new city of Athens, the element of the city’s “national identity”, a true “cultural flagship”, as has also happened in many cities around the world that have taken advantage of the innovative design and the celebrity of emblematic works (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004: 191).

b) Olympic Art works

The intertemporal values of Olympism are the foundation on which the entire construction of the Olympic Games, and in particular the Cultural Olympiad, has been based, as may be seen from the history of this institution. This has been a course over which Olympic values became standards of artistic expression and sources of inspiration for artists from all over the world. These are the values that were adopted by creators, that became a legacy of sorts for contemporary art, and that make up, in an idealistic manner, the intellectual character of the Olympic Games.

It should be noted that the Olympic values, so clearly described by the International Olympic Academy, make up the main body of the rhetoric of the people in the Olympic Movement. However, there exist several others, such as beauty, courtesy, balance, eurythmy, harmony, achievement, morals, excellence, which refer to art and, more specifically, to artistic expression.

From the point of view of art history, the end of the 19th century marked the end of a heroic era, during which artistic movements, such as classicism and romanticism, ran their course, casting a heavy shadow on the artistic quests in the Old Continent. Classicism, in particular, became the most adequate vehicle to put forward the ideals and values of Olympism in the world of art, as well as in the dominant rhetoric of the people in the Olympic Movement. The ancient standards had been idealised and had become the measure by which to evaluate almost every artistic endeavour, even in periods of outbreaks of modernity and modernism. A single look at the works of artists that were awarded prizes (particularly in painting and sculpture) shows that the preferences of juries leaned towards the classicist and figurative style. Not only style, but also the choice of the theme, had to refer to Antiquity and to characters from the Greek mythology. Little by little these tendencies have started to change.

It is a fact that the Olympic Games generate culture. Such culture has many aspects. From exhibitions of all sorts and artistic and cultural festivals to urban regeneration and Olympic education, a positive climate is taking shape making references to human behaviour in ordinary and less ordinary matters, such as peace, excellence, equality before the law, good sportsmanship, non-discrimination, and respect of human rights.

However, there also exist purely visual art actions, involving the participation of artists in the production of works of arts of all kinds. Thus, during the Olympic Games we may see a multitude of artistic endeavours relating to painting, sculpture, and architecture. Such endeavours have their origin in mainly three reasons making up the so-called “**Olympic Art**”: (a) creating works of art on the occasion of the Olympic Games (for example, architectural compositions, Olympic Art parks, special features to honour institutions and persons), (b) creating works of art whose theme is related to the contents of the Games (for example, athletes and sports), and (c) generating works of art capturing the well-established Olympic values.

As part of the climate referred to above, with regard to the concept of “Olympic Art”, some interesting efforts have been made in Greece to create collections of works of contemporary art having a symbolic relationship with the spirit of the Olympic Games. The relevant initiatives can primarily be identified in the world of exhibitions, such as the National Gallery exhibition in 1989 with the telling title “Spirit and Body. The revival of the Olympic Idea. 19th -20th centuries” (including more than 200 works). A similar exhibition was organised on the same year at the Zappeion Hall entitled “Spirit and Body. Athleticism and Movement in Contemporary Greek Art”. This exhibition featured 63 works of contemporary Greek artists.

Lastly, the organisers of the exhibition entitled “The Modern Olympic Games 1894-2012. The Greek Contribution to Olympic Memorabilia”, held at the Zappeion Hall (May 2012), gathered more than 400 works of art from all categories and tendencies.

Historically, the basic standards for this art have been: (a) the “Nike” (Victory) (421 BC) of sculptor Paionios from Ancient Olympia, and (b) the famous “Nike of Samothrace” (circa 190 BC), which has been at the Louvre since 1884. The work from Ancient Olympia (found there in 1875 by the German Archaeological Institute) is the symbol-work of the Olympic Games and it has inspired artists from all over the Western world through the times. The many variations of this work have been displayed in official documentation of the International Olympic Committee, and in particular on medals, stamps, and coins, whereas Nike has been a favourite theme of many artists. The concept of Nike is exciting to artists, because it expresses the human effort which has to do with the struggle of both the body and the mind. The artists’ choices with regard to this theme are, indeed, numerous allowing the most talented to express themselves freely and in a creative manner.



Fig. 6

Here are some examples that come to mind: “Nike” was one of **Kyriakos Kampadakis’** (1938-2007) favourite themes, which he represented in various manners (*Fig. 6*) based on the relationship between the classic and the modern. **Theodoros’** (1931) “Nikes” do maintain some elements from the ancient Nikes (such as the wings), but their aspect is ultimately abstractionist and the Olympic symbols, together with their symbolisms, are apparent



Fig. 7

The “Nikes” of sculptor **Pavlos Angelos Kougioumtzis** (1945) are closely related to the ancient Nike and to the spirit of the Olympic Games.

Kougioumtzis has made several sculptures having as their theme this intertemporal symbol of Victory, some of which decorate public spaces in well-known Olympic cities, such as Athens, London, Atlanta, Vancouver, following a donation by the Municipality of Ancient Olympia (*Fig. 8*).



Fig. 8

One of the most emblematic sculptures in this category is the “**Runner**”, a work made of glass by sculptor **Kostas Varotsos** (1955). The starting point of the work’s concept is athleticism, exalting in particular a runner’s superhuman effort. It is made in such a way that it appears to symbolise the speed by which the athlete “defeats” time (*Fig. 9*).

In any event, the most important Greek painters and sculptors have left behind small and big masterpieces as time has gone by from the 19th to the 21st century. However, there also exist instances where contemporary everyday behaviour and concerns (such as doping, the athletes' anxiety and emotions, etc.) intrude, albeit in an undoubtedly poetic manner, so as to enhance the pluralistic nature of the Olympic Games.

This kind of modern Greek art is indeed a great legacy of the Olympic Games forming a part of the most brilliant “poetic and lyric Olympic legacy”.



Conclusion

The Olympic Games have through times provided rich material and inspired many artists in every artistic category. Linking the Games with Culture has been an inspirational idea of Baron de Coubertin. This vision of his became a value for all of humanity accepted as such through time by the international community. The idea has been enhanced by certain interventions in building infrastructure, such as the Panathenaic Stadium and the Olympic Stadium in Athens, which stand out for their high aesthetic value. Both represent a most important legacy. On the occasion of the Games, the concept of Culture has expanded to include many aspects of human behaviour. The cities that have hosted the Olympic Games have witnessed considerable improvements in all areas, in particular in terms of cultural development, which has become an important element of the Olympic legacy. However, aside from highlighting Culture on this level, one should not disregard the immense production of works of arts from artists linked in one way or another to the Games. We are referring to the so-called “Olympic Art”, which has certain specific characteristics. The relevant works are either linked to the Olympic values or have been created on the occasion of the historic event of the Games or refer to Olympic events. Generally speaking, works of art falling in this category represent a part of the Olympic legacy which could be called “poetic (artistic) legacy”.

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