

Artists & Athletes:

A Perspective on the 2002 Olympic Arts Festivalⁱ

Raymond T. Grant

It is right and proper that cultural programs are a required part of the Olympic Games. History has, to a certain extent, driven the integration of cultural programs into the Olympic Games. And, just as we highlight, in both the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, the accomplishments of athletes, so too is it noble and right that we celebrate the achievements of artists in Cultural Olympiads.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of archaeologists and anthropologists, we have come to appreciate the significance of the Ancient Games and their role in merging sport and culture. Surely this had influenced, in the late 19th century, Baron Pierre de Coubertin in his interest in the integration of art, principally through competitions, as an element in the re-establishment of the modern Olympic Games. Today, Conrado Durantez, President of the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee, keeps interest in de Coubertin and his Olympic legacy thriving.

David Gilman Romano, Ph.D., the gifted classical archaeologist from the University of Pennsylvania, in an essay I had the privilege of commissioning, said “cultural programs as required elements of the modern Olympic Games are totally in keeping with the origins and history of the ancient festival where sculpture, poetry, music, and political idealism were bound together with athletic competition and religious celebration.” Romano reminds us that the Delphi festival originated as a musical tribute to Apollo Pythios. Contests in singing to the flute appeared in the sixth century B.C. and it was only later that athletic contests were added. I find it both compelling and fitting that the very earliest text in the entire Greek world is scratched into the shoulder of a terracotta vase found buried in an Athenian grave. It is a hexameter poem that describes the winner of a dancing contest from c.a. 740 B.C. It reads “he who dances most nimbly of all take this (the vase) as your prize.” For me, this suggests not only a substantive chronicling of the Olympics, but the influential role artists have had over the centuries on the

Olympic Movement. The Olympic motto "Citius - Altius - Fortius invites artists to excel.

In his work *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions*, Richard Stanton details the program for a conference in Paris in April of 1906 called by de Coubertin where choreography, letters, music, painting, sculpture, and other disciplines were detailed and discussed. The inclusion of arts and letters in the modern Olympics was underway.

Today, the Olympic Charter binds organizing committees to "promote harmonious relations, mutual understanding and friendship among the participants and others attending the Olympic Games" through the establishment of a cultural program. With proper latitude for local customs and traditions combined with the oversight of the IOC Commission on Culture and Olympic Education, today's organizing committees can, through a well curated Olympic Arts Festival, impact the Games and leave a cultural legacy for them.

These few examples of ancient and contemporary history have helped define the role of the 2002 Cultural Olympiad, the Olympic Arts Festival surrounding the Olympic Winter Games and Paralympic Games of 2002. Essays on the ancient Games, the role of artists who live with disabilities, the connection of

human rights within the context of the Olympic ideals have all helped provide a perspective and point of view to my selection of programming for the XIX Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City. So too has a commissioned poem by the 39th poet laureate of the United States, Robert Pinsky. In this poem, Pinsky calls on the ancient Greek poet Pindar.

The ancient Olympic practice of chariot racing and the forgotten Olympic Art Competitions of the 20th Century have suggested to me the legitimate placement of ice sculpting and the cultural experience of rodeo as a part of the 2002 festival with concomitant cultural participation medals.

With all of this, however, the *raison d'être* of the 2002 Cultural Olympiad is the commissioning of new work by contemporary artists. Singularly, this will define a cultural legacy for these Games. My programming includes a new modern dance work choreographed by Judith Jaimison for the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, world cultural ambassador of black heritage. With music by America's jazz great Wynton Marsalis, the inspiration behind this new work is the life of the gifted Olympian Florence Griffith Joyner. It seems to me a fine way to merge sport plus art. Another example will be the commissioned work of the Pilobolus Dance Theatre that will combine humor with athleticism.

In his work *One Hundred Years of Olympic Congresses 1894-1994*, Norbert Muller reports that the aforementioned 1906 Paris Conference recommended, in point of fact, demanded, that dance be returned to a "more athletic way of expression." I suggest that these Ailey and Pilobolus works will fulfill the 1906 mandate.

The monumental glass sculptures of Dale Chihuly resist categorization. Yet, if sculpture were an Olympic sport today, Chihuly would be an Olympian.

Similar examples in theatre, poetry, music, and the visual arts abound in this 2002 Cultural Olympiad.

It is fitting, as well, that the Olympic Arts Festival was called upon to produce the Opening Ceremony of the 113th IOC Session. This program of protocol, pageantry, and culture will reflect the vision of the 2002 Olympic Arts Festival - to highlight the achievements of athletes alongside the accomplishments of artists. This is what we aspire to. To get there, the Olympic Arts Festival established a mission to highlight America's contribution to the arts and humanities; to celebrate Utah and its heritage; and to embrace the West and its Cultures.

Artists live and work in community and have the singular

ability to find the uncommon in the commonplace. As such, the 2002 Olympic Arts Festival is artist driven. For, like athletes, artists live on the verge of peril.

The indigenous peoples of America - the American Indians, play a significant and contemporary role in the arts festival. All the tribes of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau will gather together to curate an exhibition whose message is durability. The monumental sculptures of Allan Houser, a descendent of Chiricahua Apache Indians, and one of America's most influential and respected artists, will be on view throughout the Games.

While athletes inspire the world through peaceful competition at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games and Paralympic Winter Games, I have invited the 13th Reebok Human Rights Awards to the Olympic Arts Festival to recognize activists who have made significant contributions to human rights through nonviolent means.

Norwegian photographer Karin Beate Nosterun will celebrate the work of Olympic Aid in an exhibition. Nosterun's vivid photographs document Olympic Aid's work with refugee children in Africa.

Icon American ensembles and soloists with international careers like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Itzhak Perlman, Frederica

von Stade, and many others will be featured.

For perhaps the first time, we celebrate, as well, the culinary arts. Following select cultural experiences, I've called upon the James Beard Foundation to have celebrity chefs compliment our artistic offerings. Some fifty chefs will celebrate The Art of the Table!

Historical subjects are addressed in the light of current research, as well.

The 1936 Berlin Games are explored in an exhibition curated by the National Holocaust Museum. *Homeland in the West*, an exhibition, traces the history of Jews in Utah. *And, Athletes in Antiquity*, Works from the J. Paul Getty Museum, showcases art and artifacts illustrating Greece's cultural legacy.

In all, some 15 exhibitions, 60 signature performances and special events, and 15 community

celebrations will welcome world visitors along with 3,500 athletes from 80 countries.

These audiences, in an important way, are assured a place in the Olympic Movement. Their participation in the 2002 Olympic Arts Festival helps define the atmosphere of the Games. If history is any judge, it will be an atmosphere fondly remembered.

About the Author

Raymond T. Grant is artistic director of the 2002 Olympic Arts Festival. Prior to joining the Salt Lake Olympic Committee, he headed the performing arts and film area of a division of the Walt Disney Company – The Disney Institute. He previously served as general manager of the American Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall in New York City. He is a graduate of the University of Kansas and holds a Master of Arts degree in Arts Administration from New York University.

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