

Contrast, Culture, and Courage:

A Cultural Administrator's tribute to Pierre de Coubertinⁱ

Raymond T. Grant

The recently completed XIX Olympic Winter Games and their integrated 2002 Olympic Arts Festival warrants reflection brought about by the cultural legacy of Pierre de Coubertin. The very public challenges surrounding the Salt Lake Games, the recent reforms of the IOC and the significance of the Games returning to Athens in 2004 suggests, to some commentators, that this contemporary period in the Olympic Movement has elements of the historic.

As I have come to know it, the magic of the Olympic Movement – its power, if you will, is in how individual communities who are invited to host the Games reinvigorate the Movement. From a cultural perspective, the gifted research and scholarly work of Professor Norbert Muller of the University of Mainz (Germany) aid my reflection. In Dr. Muller's opus *Olympism*, we have the wonderful benefit of the selected writings of Pierre de Coubertin.

To any cultural administrator of the Games, the historical event of the Olympic Movement in Paris in May of 1906 is singularly defining. The festivities in the great amphitheater of the Sorbonne, which ended the 1906 Advisory Conference in Paris (the Conference itself was held in the historic foyer of the Comedie Francaise) on the inclusion of the arts and humanities in the modern Olympics, is, for all intents and purposes, the birth right for those of us who use the arts to help define the atmosphere of the Modern Games.

In a circular letter to the IOC dated April 2, 1906, de Coubertin invites members to an Advisory Conference to determine "to what extent and in what form the arts and literature can participate in the celebration of the modern Olympiads." Thanks to the vision of de Coubertin, his question is as applicable today for the organizing committees of Athens, Torino, and Beijing, as it was for the nascent Olympic Movement of 1906.

The announcement of the 1906 Advisory Conference was

attached to the invitation to IOC members to attend the Games in Athens. As completely as de Coubertin believed in the merger of sport and art, the summoning of this "Consultative Conference on Art, Letters, and Sport" was not completely altruistic. In his Olympic Memoirs, de Coubertin said "I would be able to use this (the conference) as an excuse for not going to Athens, a journey I particularly wished to avoid."

Excuses aside, de Coubertin, I believe, understood that artists provide communities with a sense of place and the Olympic Movement of 1906 was missing a vital link to this sense of place. A distinct challenge remains today as arts and culture programs within the context of host organizing committees fight for survival, respect, and presence. de Coubertin's vision of Olympism – what the Olympic Movement aspires to be – is inextricably linked to the arts and humanities "harmoniously joined with sports."

So powerful and current is this ideal that celebrating the achievements of athletes alongside the accomplishments of artists became the vision of the 2002 Olympic Arts Festival. I will leave it to greater minds to decide if the 2002 Olympic Arts Festival,

in any substantive way, realized this vision. However, in the years of preparation required to deliver a credible Olympic Cultural program, I have found that de Coubertin's unflagging belief in the power of music, dance, and words was sustaining. So too is the work of the gifted artists, poets, playwrights, and essayists I commissioned to leave a cultural legacy for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games.

Twenty-five years after the 1906 Advisory Conference, de Coubertin reflected "I have already repeated – so often that I am a trifle ashamed of doing so once again, but so many people still do not seem to have understood – that the Olympic

Games are not just ordinary world championships but a four-yearly festival of universal youth, "the spring of mankind", a festival of supreme efforts, multiple ambitions and all forms of youthful activity celebrated by each succeeding generation as it arrives on the threshold of life. It was no mere matter of chance that in ancient times, writers and artists gathered together at Olympia to celebrate the Games, thus creating the inestimable prestige the Games have enjoyed for so long."

Today, the Olympic Games have as compelling an obligation and

the Olympic Games have an obligation and opportunity to gather writers and artists together

opportunity to gather writers and artists together as they did in 1906. If “this was how the reunion of the muscles and the mind, once divorced, was celebrated in the year of grace 1906”, let us hope and pray that the year of grace 2002 extends to Athens, Torino, Beijing, and beyond.

About the Author:

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