

# THE MODERN OLYMPIC RITUAL

## IDEALS AND COMMERCE

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Every 4 years one of the most watched sports events flickers onto the TV screens in millions of homes around the globe: the Olympic Games. Above all, the Games are a festival celebrating athletic performance and friendly competition. Spectators experience emotional moments of winning and losing; when heroes are born and stars stumble. While these characteristics can be found in many of the other major sports events, the Olympics distinguish themselves from these spectacles through their ceremonies and symbols - transforming the Games into a life experience, a ritual which all of us eagerly await every 4 years.

Since the 1896 Athens Games, the Olympic symbols and ceremonies have continually developed and today they play a central role. As they also establish a value system for educational purposes, the Olympics have become an event to promote so-called “Olympism” or Olympic philosophy. For this very reason, sponsors have developed an interest in the Olympic

Games. They pay a lot of money to place Olympic symbols and messages on their products, which in turn become infused with the same values as the Olympics that represent ideals that transcend profit and commerce. A look at the history of the ceremonies and symbols traces this phenomenon of the Olympic values that fluctuates between ideal and commerce.

### COUBERTIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES

Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin was one of the driving forces of the re-establishment of the Olympic Games, and he wanted to create an international sport event that went beyond athletic performance. An event that brought forward model athletes to serve as role models for the youth of the world; an event that promoted internationalism and peace. He resorted to religion to achieve this depth:

*“The first essential characteristic of the Modern Olympics is that, like the Olympics*

*of Ancient Greece, they constitute a religion. Through exercise, the athlete of classical times sculpted his physique much as an artist chisels a statue, and, in doing so, he was honouring his gods. In modern times, the athlete in his achievement honours his country, his race and his national flag. I think, therefore, that I was right to restore the religious sentiment as one of the fundamental principles of the nascent Olympics; a religious sentiment transformed and widened by the Internationalism and the spirit of Democracy which distinguish the present age [...]. It is in this principle that all the religious observances which go to make up the ceremonial of the Modern Games have their origin.”*

Coubertin's religious notion to create something out of the ordinary - something spiritual that is above daily life - reflects his idealism and romanticism. It ignores the fact that since 1896 Coubertin and the Olympic Games have always been faced with political, economic and social issues



**Image:** Poster of the 1924 Winter Olympic Games by Auguste Matisse (Public Domain).

recommended that the Samaras-Palamas hymn be used as a prototype for all later Olympic hymns. However, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) did not follow this recommendation until the Olympic Congress of Tokyo in 1958. Therefore, the hymn was first officially played in the 1960 Squaw Valley Winter Olympics and in the Summer Olympics in Rome that same year.

From the 1980's onward contemporary pop songs have accompanied the Olympic Games as modern anthems added appeal to a younger audience. At the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Whitney Houston performed her song 'One Moment in Time' during the opening ceremony. 'Barcelona' sung by Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballe was never performed during the 1992 Barcelona Olympics because of Mercury's death in 1991. Despite of this, the song remains one of the most memorable in Olympic history. Other unforgettable performances include Gloria Estefan's 'Reach' at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and Tina Arena's 'Flame' at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. These songs add an emotional, festive dimension, and cater to the commercial interests of the music industry to use the Olympic Games as a platform to promote their stars and boost sales.

ranging from nationalism, financial re-compensation of the athletes and financing the Games. The history of the ceremonies and symbols illustrates this as described below:

#### *The Olympic anthem - Athens 1896*

Coubertin believed that music made the Olympic Games 'noble and complete'. Therefore, the Olympic hymn plays an important role at the ceremonies of the Olympic Games. In the opening ceremony the Olympic hymn is performed when the flag is brought in and hoisted in the

Olympic Stadium. In the closing ceremony it is performed when the flag is lowered.

For the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 the Greek poet, Kostis Palamas, was commissioned to write a text for an Olympic cantata. Palamas' poem praises an eternal father and creator spirit. This spirit should accompany all the Olympic athletes. The well-known Greek composer, Spiridon Samaras, composed the music to the text. The audience and the Greek King were so enthusiastic about the performance that the hymn was repeated on the spot. In 1906 Coubertin

**“Pop songs as modern anthems add appeal to a younger audience”**

*Gold, silver and bronze medals - Saint-Louis 1904*

It was only in the 1904 Olympic Games in Saint-Louis that the winners received gold, silver and bronze medals. Before that, the winners received a silver medal, second placed athletes a bronze medal and the competitors in third place received nothing.

The design of the medals has been regulated by the IOC since 1927. The requirements have been valid until present times with some slight changes. On the obverse, the representation of the Greek Goddess of Victory, Nike - holding a palm in her left hand and a winner's crown in the right hand - has to appear. On the reverse, a champion carried by the crowd can be found. Since Munich 1972, the design of the reverse has been left to each Olympic Games Organising Committee to express the cultural identity of the host city.

*Parade of participants - Athens 1906*

After the success of the first Olympic Games in Athens 1896, the Greek Olympic Committee wanted to host the Games permanently in the city of Athens. As this was going against Coubertin's ideal of International Games with alternating host cities, this idea was never realised. However, against Coubertin's wishes, but with the support of the majority of the IOC members, Athens organised the 'Second International Olympic Games in Athens 1906' to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the re-establishment of the modern Olympic Games. Those Games were a big success and they are still often called the 'Olympic Interim Games', even though they have never been officially recognised as Olympic Games.

The parade of participants took place on Sunday, April 22, 1906. At around 3 pm the stadium was packed with 50,000 spectators, when the authorities entered the stadium. After that, it was the participants' turn to march in. Organised in rows of four and in alphabetical order of the participating countries, the participants entered led by a flag bearer carrying the national flag, and marched until they reached the opposite side of the King's box. This ritual is one of the most beautiful legacies of the 1906 Games and was later included in the opening ceremony of the official Olympic Games. It has evolved into a major part of the opening ceremony, providing an emotional moment

of uniting the diverse delegations in one location.

At the 2012 London Olympics, 205 delegations marched into the stadium, each preceded by a board bearing its country's name and by its flag, which was carried by an athlete representing her or his country. Protocol makes Greece the first delegation to enter followed by the other delegations in alphabetical order in the language of the

host country, while the host nation brings up the rear.

*Pigeons symbolising peace - Antwerp 1920*

The Olympic Charter represents the Fundamental Principles of Olympism and states that the goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of people, looking for the promotion of a peaceful society. While in the 1896 Athens Olympics pigeons with



ribbons representing the Greek national colours were released during the victory ceremony, the release of pigeons as a symbol of peace has been included in the opening ceremony since the 1920 Antwerp Olympics. Until Seoul 1988, the release of the pigeons took place before the arrival of the Olympic flame. However, during these Olympics, several pigeons died because they were sitting on the edge of the Olympic cauldron when it was lit. Since then, the protocol was adjusted to include a 'symbolic release' of doves, which follows the lighting of the Olympic cauldron.

#### *The Olympic Oath - Antwerp 1920*

The Olympic Charter states that the practice of sport is a human right. It underscores that every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.

Pierre de Coubertin, inspired by the Ancient Olympics in Greece, suggested the idea to include an Olympic oath in the opening ceremony. At the 1920 Antwerp Olympics, the Belgian fencer Victor Boin was the first to swear the Olympic oath. The oath text was originally written by Coubertin, and has been modified over time to reflect the changing nature of the sporting competition.

Currently, a selected athlete from the team of the organising host country holds a corner of the Olympic flag while reciting the following:

*"In the name of all the competitors I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, committing ourselves to a sport without doping and without drugs, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honour of our teams."*

Since Munich 1972 a representative for the judges, and since 2012 a representative for the coaches, have to swear similar oaths as well.

#### *The Olympic flag and its rings - Antwerp 1920*

The Olympic rings are globally recognised as a brand for the Olympics. Additionally, they stand for the values of the Olympic Movement. The five rings represent the five continents, while the blue, black, red, yellow and green colours of the rings, and



***Faster, higher, stronger  
– giving one's best  
and striving for  
personal excellence is a  
worthwhile goal***



the white background of the Olympic flag were chosen because at least one of these colours is included in the flag of every nation. The rings are interlaced to represent the universality of the Olympic Movement and the meeting of the athletes from all over the world in the Olympic Games.

In 1914 Coubertin officially presented his design of the Olympic flag and the rings to the IOC at the Olympic Congress in Paris. At the next Olympic Games in Berlin 1916, the flag featuring the Olympic rings would have been hoisted for the first time, if World War I had not prevented it. Consequently, it was the privilege of the 1920 Antwerp Olympics to fly the symbolic flag for the first time.

In 1932 the American entrepreneur Paul H. Helms – and not the IOC – was the first to recognise the commercial value of the Olympic symbols and officially register the Olympic rings, the motto and the word "Olympic". The Helms Bakeries of Los Angeles supplied bread and pastry products to the Olympic Summer Games from 1932 until 1948 and used the symbols to promote their products. Helms's use of the Olympic symbols inevitably resulted in a conflict with the IOC. He generously surrendered all his licences to use the Olympic symbols to the IOC in 1950.

#### *The Olympic motto - Paris 1924*

The official Olympic motto '*Citius, Altius, Fortius*' is a Latin phrase meaning 'Faster, Higher, Stronger'. It encourages the athletes to give their best during competition and

'represents an ideal that Coubertin believed in and promoted as an important life lesson that could be gained from participation in sport and the Olympic Games: that giving one's best and striving for personal excellence was a worthwhile goal.'

Coubertin borrowed this motto from Reverend Father Henri Martin Didon of Paris, the headmaster of Arcueil College. Didon used this motto to describe the athletic accomplishments of his students. Coubertin had previously been at Albert Le Grand School, where these Latin words were carved in stone above the main entrance. Coubertin used the motto in the very first issue of the *Revue Olympique* and introduced it in the first Olympic Congress in Paris in 1894. The motto was first introduced as part of the Games at the 1924 Paris Olympics. At that time, the Olympic Creed also became popular, and can be seen as an alternative motto. The Olympic Creed reads as follows:

*"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well"*.

Even though these values are still promoted to the present day, they have eroded as winning at all cost has become the ultimate paradigm. For almost 40 years after World War II, the world was divided by political systems into the 'East' led by the Soviet Union and the 'West' led by the USA. This schism was manifested at every

Olympic Games when these two nations met in the arena. Winning at all cost became the highest priority since victory on the field was viewed as a political victory of one ideological system over the other. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, politics, as the driving force of this paradigm, has been replaced by economic factors. Winning an Olympic medal potentially means increased income and endorsements from sponsors.

To win a gold medal and the status of Olympic champion can be profitable for athletes. At the 2012 London Olympics, Singapore promised its champions US\$800,000 for winning a gold medal, while Kazakhstan paid triple jump Olympic gold medallist Olga Rypakova US\$250,000. Russia paid US\$135,000, China an estimated US\$51,000, while athletes from the USA had to be satisfied with a mere US\$10,000. However, for some athletes, lucrative endorsement deals sweeten their efforts. African-American gymnast and two time gold medallist in London 2012, Gabby Douglas, had - and still has - multi-million dollar endorsement deals coming her way. She was endorsed by Procter & Gamble shortly before the Games began in 2012.

#### *The Olympic flame - Amsterdam 1928*

There is no doubt that fire has played a very important role in the life of humankind. Its control and use figures amongst the most important achievements of humanity. In the Ancient Olympics a fire was permanently burning on an altar in Olympia related to old fertility rituals.

The symbolism of fire was brought to the modern Olympics in Amsterdam 1928. The Amsterdam Stadium boasted a tower 42,195 m high (representing the marathon distance), on top of which a fire was continuously burning as symbol of moral purity. There was no special ritual to ignite the fire. The architect of the Amsterdam Olympic Stadium, Jan Wils, had won the building contract because of his idea to construct a tower for the Olympic fire.

#### *The winners' rostrum - Lake Placid 1932 and Los Angeles 1932*

From the first Modern Olympic Games in Athens 1896 until Amsterdam 1928, the award ceremony for the winners reflected society's hierarchy as the athletes, when receiving their medals, were physically on a lower level than the authorities awarding

the medals. This changed in 1932 when the organisers of the Olympic Winter Games in Lake Placid and the Olympic Summer Games in Los Angeles received instructions from the President of the International Olympic Committee, Count Henri Baillet-Latour, in which he emphasised as the necessity of three 'pedestal' to award the winners: "The centre pedestal higher than the other two, the first place winner standing on the centre pedestal, the second on his right, the third on his left". Consequently, a podium was installed in the main stadium, where the winners of the track and field events received their medals shortly after their competitions. The winners from any individual or team events outside of the stadium received their medals in the stadium one day after their competition.

#### *The torch relay - Berlin 1936*

Nowadays, one of the most expected moments in every opening ceremony is when the last torch bearer enters the stadium to light the Olympic cauldron with the Olympic flame. The choice of who will be the last torch bearer is usually kept a secret until the last minute.



This tradition represents a connection between the past and the present and was invented for the Olympics in Berlin in 1936. At that time, the fire was lit in Greece in front of the temple of Hera by the 'original method' using a concave mirror to capture the sun to light the torch. In that way the 'purity' of the flame was guaranteed. The first relay intended to connect the sportsmen and the nations along its route, with many national celebrations in the relay's stopover. However, Germany's National-Socialist regime clearly abused this ritual for its political propaganda.

After this first edition, the Olympic torch relay became one of the strongest symbols of the Olympic movement to transmit its ideals of peace and multiculturalism. For example, at the 2004 Athens Olympics a torch bearing the message 'Pass the flame, unite the world' was carried through all five continents.

However, the torch relay also became a source of revenue for the organisers. The President of the Organising Committee of the 1984 Los Angeles Games, Peter Ueberroth, sold the privilege of carrying the Olympic torch for US\$3,000 per km.

#### FINAL REMARKS

The Olympic ceremonies and symbols add emotion and depth to the Olympic Games that transcend the mere athletic performance, promoting excellence, friendship and respect. In some instances this is contradicted by the fact that the Olympic Games have become an economic and commercialised enterprise. The ceremonies and symbols support this as they infuse the Olympics with positive ideals and values and turn athletes into impeccable role models. Both the Olympics and the Olympic athletes are therefore targets of corporate sponsorships and endorsements. To be associated with the Olympic values creates an added value to commercial products offering the potential buyers to be part of the Olympic movement through the Olympic symbols placed on the products. This creates a tension to Coubertin's original ideal of the Olympic Games and is often a source of criticism. Whichever way the ceremonies and symbols contribute - be it to educational programmes, the festive character of the Olympics or commercial interest, they have proven to be pivotal in turning the Olympic Games into one of the biggest sports events around the globe.

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