

The Pythian Games
The Real Modern Olympic Games
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The modern Olympic Games are one of the great success stories of the past century. They have evolved from a *fin de siècle* curiosity of the late 19th century into a 21st century cultural spectacle of global magnitude. The first modern Olympics held in Athens in 1896 featured 311 male athletes from 13 countries and nine sports. The 2016 Rio Olympics featured 11,303 male and female athletes from 207 countries and 42 sports. The current global reach of the Games is staggering. NBC's Olympic coverage of the 15 nights of Rio's prime time competition registered a total audience delivery average of 27.5 million viewers per evening in total. Almost 200 million Americans watched the Games on television. NBC's digital coverage of the Games reached even more impressive heights featuring 3.3 billion total streaming minutes, 2.71 billion live streaming and a unique viewership of 100 million. What is perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that the modern Olympics owe their genesis largely to the efforts of one man, *le rénovateur*, the French aristocrat, Baron Pierre de Coubertin.

As Olympic anthropologist John MacAloon rightly notes, "It is impossible to understand the origins *or* the persistent "structure" of the Olympics without understanding this man, his personal drama and his milieu; how the themes of an era became the themes of a life, and were

in turn embodied in a new cultural institution.”¹ Without Coubertin’s singular vision and passion, organizational and administrative zeal and energy, not to mention his wealth, noble name, and social connections, it is unlikely that the Games would have been revived when and as they were. As a sports entrepreneur and reformer, he used whatever means possible—banquets and speeches, conferences and social gatherings—to promote his Olympic project. In 1892, he asked his audience at the Sorbonne to join him in his effort “to continue and complete, on a basis suited to the conditions of modern life, this grandiose and salutary task, the restoration of the Olympic Games.”² The restoration of the Games was so successful that, with the exception of the years of World Wars I and II, the Games have been held quadrennially ever since.³

Today, the Olympics feature both an international, mass-mediated multi-sport extravaganza as well as a multi-arts cultural Olympiad. Coubertin’s prodigious efforts to “organize the dynamic involvement of literature and the arts in the restored Olympic Games”⁴ have proven remarkably resilient and, over the past 125 years, the Olympics have blossomed into one of the greatest entertainment rituals on earth. But, while Coubertin may well have invoked the ancient Olympic Games as the ideal model for his modern sport spectacular, the Pythian Games, in fact, serve as a much more appropriate prototype, because, unlike the ancient Olympic Games, the Pythian Games included competitions in the arts, and, like the modern Olympic Games and unlike the ancient Olympics, the Pythian Games included women, even if only on a limited basis.

¹ John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. xii.

² Coubertin, *A Twenty-One Year Campaign* (Paris: Libraire Hachette, 1908), p. 90.

³ Since 1992, the summer and winter Games have been held on an alternating two-year cycle. The 2020 Tokyo Games were postponed until 2021 in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴ Pierre de Coubertin, “Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Conference on the Arts, Literature and Sports,” May 23, 1906. Published for the first time in Coubertin, *Anthology* (Aix en-Provence: P. Roubaud, 1933), p. 166.

The purpose of this paper is to account for the genesis of the modern Olympic Games, detail the nature of the Games as conceived by Coubertin, and, then, consider the nature of the Pythian Games, which, by their very nature, were much more congruent with Coubertin's thinking than the ancient Olympic Games.

Coubertin and the Modern Olympic Games

Coubertin's motivation to restore the Olympic Games was derivative of a complex amalgam of biographical influences and experiences. The product of an overly academic French educational system—a system that marginalized physical activity—he very early on in his career championed the introduction of sport and physical exercise into the French school curriculum, especially as a way to energize a nation still reeling from defeat in the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War. He became, as a consequence, deeply enamored of the English educational system, especially the public school model which embraced sport as a central component of a curriculum that emphasized the education of mind, body and spirit, what Charles Kingsley called Muscular Christianity. Having visited Oxford and Cambridge Universities, as well as several of the leading public schools in England, such as Rugby, Harrow, Eton, Marlborough, and Winchester, Coubertin became something of an Anglophile and determined that sport was a consequential ingredient in the growth and vitality of the British Empire. His visits to American universities, which, too, had embraced competitive sport, only reaffirmed his commitment to *le pédagogie sportive* and he became a great admirer of “the sporting character” of American life.⁵

While Coubertin's motives for establishing a sport ideology were initially patriotic—sport as a way to *rebronzer* a beleaguered nation—he was also drawn to a European *fin de siècle* liberal

⁵ Coubertin, *Textes, Choisis. Tome I: Revelation*. Introduction, selection, and presentation by Georges Rioux (Zurich: Wiedemann, 1986), p. 113.

internationalism that integrated “the great idea of progress” with visions of international peace. The belief in internationalism, progress and peace found its most distinct expression in the international exhibitions which emerged during the 19th century. The exhibition tradition captivated Coubertin. In a speech preceding the 1896 Athens Olympic Games, he said:

Universal expositions have collected together at one point of the globe the products of its remotest corners. In the domain of science and literature, assemblies and conferences have united the most distinguished intellectual laborers of all nations. Could it be otherwise, but that sportsmen also of diverse nationalities should begin to meet each other on common ground.⁶

Coubertin’s Olympic Games were not the first Olympics to be held during the modern era. *Jeux Olympiques* were held in 1796 in Paris and Olympic Games were organized in Ramlosa, Sweden, in 1834 and 1836. The most famous of the “pseudo-Olympics”⁷ were the Much Wenlock Olympic Games, established in Shropshire, England, in 1850 by William Penny Brookes, and held until his death in 1890, and the Greek Olympic Games, sponsored by the wealthy landowner Evangelos Zappas, and staged in Athens in 1859, 1870, 1875, and 1890. Olympic-styled events were also held in cities as far apart as Liverpool, New York, Lake Palić, and Montreal. Coubertin’s accomplishment was to take games that were essentially expressions of local folklore and give them an international form and flavor.

But, if Coubertin developed his ideas about the Olympic Games within the context of late 19th century Europe and America, he ultimately drew his inspiration from ancient Greece. In the end, Coubertin’s unwavering commitment to his Olympic project was historically,

⁶ Coubertin, “The Olympic Games of 1896,” in *The Olympic Idea: Discourses and Essays*, ed. Carl-Diem-Institut an der Deutschen Sporthochschule (Köln. Stuttgart: Carl-Diem-Institut, 1967), p. 10.

⁷ Gerald Redmond, "Prologue and Transition: The 'Pseudo-Olympics' of the Nineteenth Century," in *Olympism*, eds., Jeffrey O. Segrave and Don Chu (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1980), pp. 7-21.

ideologically and romantically rationalized in reference to the ancient Hellenic model of Olympic sport. The ancient Olympic Games provided Coubertin with the mythical framework, the *mythos*, that consecrated his version of the modern Olympics. “Nothing has given me more food for thought than Olympia,” he wrote in 1908. “This dream city,” he called Olympia. “It was not far from there to the less dazzling but more practical and fruitful project of reviving the Games, particularly since the hour had struck when international sport seemed destined once again to play its part in the world.”⁸ He construed Olympia as “the capital of ancient sport” and “a powerful symbol of this marvelous tripod which supported Hellenic civilization, constituted by sport, art, and good citizenship.”⁹ Besotted by the ancient Greeks who had divined how to “attain and maintain a balance between the individual and the city, between solidarity and personal interest,” he marveled at “the magnificent continuity” in the celebration of the Olympic Games; “The gravest events did not succeed in interrupting it,” he wrote.¹⁰ He recognized both the political as well as the cultural power, not to mention the entertainment appeal, of serialized Olympics. “The Olympic Games of ancient times,” he wrote, “brought the Greek world together every four years in the beautiful valley of Olympia, to contemplate a spectacle, the uniformity of which seems to have constituted an additional charm in the eyes of the spectators.”¹¹ By appropriating the classical past, Coubertin and his colleagues may well have misrepresented it to fit the modern circumstance, but they also recognized the powerful sociocultural homology between the ancient and modern Games and they devised the Games as a cultural expression of pan-human rather than pan-Greek unity. In one of his more whimsical moments, he wrote, “I lift my glass to the Olympic idea which has

⁸ Coubertin, *A Twenty-One Year Campaign*, op. cit., p. 89.

⁹ Coubertin, “Olympia,” in *The Olympic Idea*, op. cit., p. 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹¹ Coubertin, “The Meeting of the Olympic Games (Paris 1900),” *North American Review* CLXX (June 1900), p. 802.

traversed the mists of the ages like an all-powerful ray of sunlight and returned to illumine the threshold of the 20th century with a gleam of joyous hope.”¹²

Out of a complex stew of ancient, medieval¹³ and modern influences, Coubertin divined a philosophical-religious doctrine of sport—what he called Olympism—a *religio athletae* that drafted sport into the service of an internationalist project to promote peace and intercultural understanding. It was a fervently moralist doctrine that Sigmund Loland aptly defines as a “secular, vitalistic “humanism of the muscles.””¹⁴ To this day, Olympism serves as the ideological wellspring of the Olympic Movement.

But, Coubertin wanted the modern Olympics to be more than a celebration of athletic excellence; he wanted them to be cultural events too. And, so, he petitioned for “the dynamic involvement of literature and the arts in the restored Olympic Games.”¹⁵ He believed that the arts could ennoble modern sport in the same way that intellectual and artistic performances elevated the ancient Games. He wanted the modern games to demonstrate what he called eurythmy: “The time has come to take the next step and to restore the Olympiad to its primal beauty. At the time of Olympia’s splendor . . . the arts and literature in harmonious combination with sports made the Olympic Games great. The same must hold for the future.”¹⁶ And so, in 1906, he invited the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to an Advisory Conference to determine “to what extent and in what form the arts and literature can

¹² Coubertin, “Speech by Pierre de Coubertin at the Paris Congress 1894,” in *The Olympic Idea*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹³ Coubertin was deeply impressed with the medieval cult of chivalry which he saw as a flowering of the Olympic spirit during the middle ages. See Jeffrey O. Segrave, “Coubertin, Olympism and Chivalry.” *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, XXII (2013): pp. 1-38.

¹⁴ Sigmund Loland. “Coubertin’s Ideology of Olympism from the Perspective of the History of Ideas.” *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* IV (1995): 49-78.

¹⁵ Coubertin, “Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Conference on the Arts, Literature and Sports,” op. cit., p. 166.

¹⁶ Coubertin, “Arts, Lettres, and Sports.” *Chronique de France* 7 (1907), p. 191.

participate in the celebration of the modern Olympiads.”¹⁷ According to Coubertin, “the eurythmy of the occasion, the first ever to reunite sports, sciences, literature and the arts, left an unforgettable impression on those in attendance.”¹⁸ As a result, the first Pentathlon of the Muses was held in conjunction with the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games and included competitions in architecture, sculpture, painting, music and literature.¹⁹ Although juried arts competitions were abandoned in 1948, the [Olympic cultural program](#) has been held ever since.²⁰ In fact, in keeping with Coubertin’s ideology of Olympism, the *Olympic Charter* specifically requires organizers of the Olympic Games to include a program of cultural events, to “serve to promote harmonious relations, mutual understanding and friendship among the participants and others attending the Olympic Games.”²¹

The Pythian Games

Despite Coubertin’s passion for Olympia and the ancient Olympics Games format, the Pythian Games, in fact, were much closer in both structure and culture to the modern Games as Coubertin imagined them, primarily because, unlike the ancient Olympic Games, the Pythian

¹⁷ Coubertin, “Circular Letter to the IOC Members,” Paris, March 29, 1906, Polycopy (IOC Archives).

¹⁸ Coubertin, *A Twenty-One Year Campaign*, op. cit., p. 200.

¹⁹ There were also suggestions to include dancing, film, photography, or theatre, but none of these art forms was ever included in the Olympic Games as a medal event. Of particular interest, Coubertin, under the pseudonym of George Hohrod and Martin Eschbach, won a gold medal for his poem, *Ode to Sport*, at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.

²⁰ The arts festivals have enjoyed varying degrees of success and support. One of the most successful cultural programs, the 2012 London Cultural Olympiad showcased 500 events nationwide over a four-year period culminating in the London 2012 Festival. The events cost \$97 million and included Music 20X12, the World Shakespeare Festival and Poetry Parnassus. The 2016 Rio cultural program, on the other hand, was severely curtailed due to the trenchant economic crisis confronting Brazil at the time. There is no doubt that the sports have garnered more attention than the cultural events. Many, no doubt, would agree with Pausanias, who wrote that “Most men take no account of the competitions in the musical contests, and I think that they are not worth much trouble.” Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 10.9.2: A 60).

²¹ IOC, *The Olympic Charter* (Lausanne, Switzerland: IOC, 2020), p. 12.

Games embraced arts competitions. In many ways, the Pythian Games are the real forerunners of the modern Olympic Games.

First organized as a quadrennial festival in 586 B.C., the Pythian Games, which ranked second only to the Olympic Games among the four stephanitic games²² in chronology and importance, hosted a full program of competitions in the *gymnikos agon* and *hippikos agon*. The only significant difference in the athletic contests held at Delphi and Olympia was that the Games at Delphi omitted the four-horse chariot race and included races for boys. In general, the Delphic athletic festival developed in accord with the Olympic model. But, what set the Pythian Games apart was the inclusion of competitions in the arts, a difference immediately identifiable by the existence and dominant location of the theater at Delphi, where the *mousikos agon* were held, and the choice of Apollo, the patron of music and culture, as the central deity at Delphi. The fact that the stadium and hippodrome are located at a distance from the Peribolos, the Sanctuary of Apollo, while the theater is right next to the sacred site, further attests to the significance attached to the *mousikos agon* at Delphi.

According to Pausanias,²³ the singing of the hymn to Apollo was the oldest contest. The most venerated of the musical competitions was the *kithara*, or lyre, singing, in which the musician sang and accompanied himself on the *kithara*. The piece most often performed was, predictably, the Pythian hymn to Apollo. From the first Games of 586 B.C., *kithara* singing was joined by the playing of the *aulos*, or flute. The first Pythiad also included *aulos* singing, although it was subsequently abolished because, according to Pausanias, the “sounds” were “considered inauspicious, for the notes of the *aulos* itself were most brooding and the words sung with the *aulos* were funereal.”²⁴ The final event of the *mousikos agon* was the *kithara*

²² The four stephanitic, or crown, games were the Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean Games.

²³ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 10.7.2: A 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.7.5: A 75.

playing, which was added in 558 B.C. All of the music competitions took place in the theater and the contestants performed on a specially constructed platform. It appears that the competitors played the same piece in each event. The winner was determined by a panel of judges. According to the ancient Greek historian, Stephen Miller, “If there is a single reason for the long-term predominance of the Olympic Games, it is that the subjectivity inherent in the *mousikos agon* was not present at Olympia.”²⁵

Delphi also hosted competitions in poetry writing and prose competitions. As in the music contests, winners were selected by a panel of judges, although clearly audience reaction was an important ingredient in the judges’ decisions. Competitions in tragic acting were yet another aspect of the Pythian Games and it is likely that both individual performers as well as acting within a full-scale dramatic production were contested. Painting competitions were added in the middle of the 5th century B.C. If victory at Olympia served as the pinnacle of athletic accomplishment in the ancient Greek world, success in the music and arts competitions at Delphi served as the zenith of artistic achievement.

None of this is to say that the ancient Olympic festival eschewed music or the arts. In fact, the Olympic festival was laced with artistic and intellectual performances. Poets, painters,²⁶ and sculptors attended the Games to display their work and historians²⁷ and philosophers read aloud. Also, interestingly, the winner of the *aulos* competition at Delphi accompanied the jumping events in the pentathlon at the Olympic Games.²⁸ But, there was never any competition in the arts at Olympia. The arts were a part of the atmosphere at Olympia and a

²⁵ Stephen Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 84.

²⁶ According to Lucian in *Herodotus* (4: A 143), the painter Aëtion exhibited his *Marriage of Rozanne and Alexander* at Olympia and won both fame and notoriety as well as the hand of the daughter of a Hellanodiktes.

²⁷ Herodotus, for example, publicized his *History of the Persian Wars* by going to the back porch of the Temple of Zeus and reading to the assembled audience from the manuscript he had recently completed.

²⁸ The most famous player was Pythokrites of Sikyon who won the *aulos* at Delphi six times (574-554 B.C.). He also played at Olympia six times where he was honored with a relief statue of him holding the flute.

part of the hustle and bustle that included peddling, magic performances and other commercial activities. Athletic competitions and religious obsequies were the primary foci at Olympia. At Delphi, however, music and the arts were central ingredients in the celebration and were as important to the festival as the athletic events. In other words, the Pythian, not the Olympic, Games best represented Coubertin's attempt "to reunite the Muscles and the Mind,"²⁹ or, as he later put it, "to bring muscles and thought together."³⁰ Coubertin was right when he proclaimed that "the arts and literature harmoniously joined with sports to ensure the greatness of the Olympic Games"³¹—even if it was an idealized and romanticized summation—but he failed to recognize, or even acknowledge, that the Pythian Games, which structurally and culturally combined competitive sports and arts, were a better representation of the "legitimate marriage"³² between the body and the mind that he envisioned, and, ultimately, institutionalized in the modern Olympic panoply.

There was one further dimension of the Pythian Games that better reflected the modern Olympics—the inclusion of women in the Delphian competitions. Women competed athletically at Olympia, but at the Herean Games, not at the Olympic Games. Women, for the most part, were summarily excluded from the Olympic Games, or, at least, from the sanctuary.³³ There is no record of a woman competing in the athletic or equestrian events at Olympia, although there is evidence that three women entered winning chariots for the equestrian events. Nor among the many statues of athletic victors at Olympia which Pausanias

²⁹ Coubertin, "Une "Grand Marriage,"" *Revue Olympique* (June 1906), p. 83.

³⁰ Coubertin, "Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Conference on the Arts, Literature and Sports," op. cit., p. 166.

³¹ Coubertin, "L'Olympiade romaine," *Le Figaro* 50(218) (August 4, 1904), p. 1.

³² Coubertin, "Speech at the Opening of the Advisory Conference on the Arts, Literature and Sports," op. cit., p. 166.

³³ Only the priestesses of the goddess Demeter, the goddess of harvest and agriculture, were given access to the ancient Olympic Games. A seat was also reserved at the stadium for the representative of Demeter.

cites does he include any of women. The only surviving base that refers to a woman comes from Delphi, and an inscription that references three women, the three daughters of Hermesianax of Caesarea Tralles and Corinth, all of whom competed in various events at Delphi, Isthmia and Nemea. Of particular interest is the reference to Tryphosa who “won the stade at the Pythian Games held by the agonesthetes Antigonus and Cleomachidas, and the stade at the ensuing Isthmian Games held by the agonotheite Juventius Proclus, the first girl ever to do so.”³⁴

Not only did women compete in the athletic events, but they also competed in the arts competitions. According to Plutarch, the entrants and victors in the poetry and prose competition included women.³⁵ In other words, as Ludwig Drees notes, because they included both athletic and artistic competitions, the Pythian Games “could really be said to promote the harmony of body, mind and soul”³⁶—precisely the formula that so profoundly impressed and inspired Coubertin.

Conclusion

There are many good reasons why Coubertin chose the ancient Olympics as his model for a late 19th century international sports event. The ancient Olympics were the first to be founded and they remained the most prestigious of the stephanitic Games, dedicated to the most important deity in the pantheon of the Greek gods, Zeus. The Olympics were, as Miller colloquially notes, “the granddaddy of the Games.”³⁷ The prestige of the ancient Olympics was further enhanced throughout the early modern era as a reference point in the literary and performing arts. The

³⁴ Quoted and discussed in H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletics and Athletes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 181.

³⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia*, 674D-675B: A 77.

³⁶ Ludwig Drees, *Olympia: Gods, Artists, and Athletes* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 62.

³⁷ Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics*, op. cit., p. 87.

Games were eulogized in music, extolled in prose and verse, and celebrated in dance as a dignified, noble, and indeed honorable form of sport; they came to epitomize athletic excellence and developed an enduring mythos.³⁸ And nothing excited an audience more than the excavations at Olympia between 1875-1881 that unearthed huge swaths of the archaic site, most especially the sacred *altis*. Late 19th century Europe was immersed in Olympic references all of which provided fertile soil for Coubertin to nurture his new Olympic creation.

In his *Panegyric*, Isocrates openly lamented the lack of intellectual competitions in the Olympics.³⁹ He specifically criticized the Games administrators for placing too much emphasis on the physical attributes of the contestants. Much later, in the third century A. D., Flavius Philostratus the Elder said much the same thing:

When the visitors arrive at Pytho, they are met with flautists, entertained with music and song, honored with performances of comedies and tragedies; it is not until much later that naked combat comes to the fore. But Olympia dispenses with such things as inappropriate and worthless and, in accordance with the statutes of the famed Hercules, immediately confronts the visitor with naked athletes.⁴⁰

Like Isocrates and Philostratus, Coubertin, too, would likely have railed against a cult of the body divorced from the cult of the mind. His primary goal was always to balance the physical with the intellectual, to foster a sense of proportion, and to inculcate in both men and women

³⁸ Jeffrey O. Segrave, "The Olympic Games 393 AD – 1896 AD: The Genealogy of an Idea in Literature, Music, and Dance." *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 13 (2003): pp. 53-74

³⁹ Isocrates, *Panegyricus in Orations and Epistles*. Trans. George Norton (Vols. 1 and II) and Larne van Hook (Vols. III) (London: T. Waller, 1928-1945), 1-2.

⁴⁰ Philostratus the Elder, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Trans. J. S. Phillimore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912) VI, 10.

the Aristotelian virtue of *eutrapelia*.⁴¹ Ironically, he would have complained about the very practices institutionalized in the ancient Olympics that served as the basis for his new model of Olympism. While the ancient Olympics may well have provided Coubertin with the form for his new creation, the Pythian Games provided the substance.

⁴¹ Olympic historian John Lucas defines *eutrapelia* as “an idealized concept of vitality, versatility, and, above all, a sense of proportion.” See John A. Lucas, “The Influence of Anglo-Saxon Sport on Pierre de Coubertin—Modern Olympics Games Founder,” in Peter J. Graham and Horst Ueberhorst, eds, *The Modern Olympics* (West Point: Leisure Press, 1976), 30.