

What does Sport Have to do with Art (and Education)?

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Introduction: Olives and Laurels

The expression “resting on your laurels” preserves an ancient association between personal accomplishment and the laurel wreath awarded to victors at Delphi’s Pythian Games. Laurel was the plant sacred to Apollo, in whose honor those games were held. To this day, college graduates are crowned with laurels in Italy and referred to as *laureates*, like Nobel-prize winners. Meanwhile, the olive wreaths (sacred to Zeus) awarded at the ancient Olympics have all but disappeared. This seems strange since Olympia’s games were more famous than Delphi’s, but whereas the Olympic Games focused on sports, the Pythian Games also included musical contests. Indeed, most ancient Greek athletic festivals included musical contests, and featured song, dance, poetry, drama, and visual arts. Because sport and art are separate today, we tend to project that separation onto the ancient world. In doing so, we overlook important affinities between sport and art—affinities the ancient games were set up to celebrate (Reid 2012b). By examining the commonalities between athletic and artistic activities in the ancient world, we may better understand the special power of Delphi’s festival.



Figure 1. The Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, photo. Heather L. Reid.

Imitating Ideals

A visitor to the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi cannot help but be struck by its verticality (fig. 1). You climb halfway up Mount Parnassos just to get there, then you wind your way through the ornately decorated treasuries up to the temple, ascend further to reach the theater, and can practically touch the sky by the time you arrive at the stadium. No one makes it to the stadium without effort (*ponos*), pacing, and persistence. It is hard *not* to reflect on the Temple of Apollo's inscribed admonitions to "know yourself" (*gnothi seauton*) and take "nothing in excess" (*meden agan*). And yet, as you climb, you are immersed in beauty. Colors, sounds, images—both natural and human-made—conspire to inspire you to reach toward the ideal. In effect, the outdoor sanctuary functions like a cathedral or mosque, mediating between the

material reality of human existence and the ideal realm of the gods. The strenuous climb up Delphi's sacred way is a reenactment (*mimesis*) of the spiritual journey from real to ideal, human to divine; and that journey, by definition, is a struggle (*agon*), an ordeal (*athlos*).

The ancient pilgrim who arrived at the stadium would take a seat and watch athletes compete in their own *agones*, contests that re-enact the ordeals (*athloi*) of the heroes (Nagy 2013). Athletes in ancient Hellenic culture were trying to perfect themselves—to become more like gods—by imitating the feats of heroes, mortals who occupy the space between humans and gods (Reid 2019a). That this process should require extraordinary training and effort was assumed by ancient Greeks. Though descended from gods, humans believed they were the result of a longstanding generational decline (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 112-120). The earliest, golden generation lived effortlessly in peace and harmony. The generation of heroes that followed them had to struggle for peace and harmony, but did so honorably and with respect for the gods. Subsequent generations understood that struggle was key to improvement. By imitating the ancient heroes' struggles, athletes attempt to embody their virtues and values. The spectators who witness athletic struggles also gain clarification (*catharsis*) as to the nature of the ideal (Golden 1969). In a moment of athletic perfection, both athlete and spectator may have experienced *epiphany*, the presence of a god (Reid 2016).

So, the sanctuary and the games themselves are both designed to draw us up from the material realm toward the ideal. The same is true of the music, dance, sculpture, and pageantry that complete the festival program (Schiller 1882). Dancers, like athletes, exalt the material reality of human bodies by aligning them artistically with idealized sounds. In the case of chorus groups, the dancers move beautifully as they recite songs praising heroes and goddesses (Calame 2001). So, too, the singing, strumming, and flute-playing attempt to evoke the beauty of the divine. And the key to that beauty is its *impracticality*—the fact that it is an

end in itself (Stecker 2005). To be a god is to have no needs, to be a hero is to get beyond one's mortal needs, to be an artist is to transform something material or worldly into something ideal or divine. In fact, ancient athletic statues like that of Agias of Pharsalos in Delphi's museum (fig. 2), are not so much portraits of individuals as they are idealized celebrations of cultural values like excellence (*arete*) (Reid 2012a).



*Figure 2. Statue of Agias of Pharsalos - Delphi Archaeological Museum
from Joy of Museums, Wikimedia commons CC license.*

Framing the Extraordinary

Beauty links sport and art in ancient Greek culture insofar as it represents the ideal. But beauty—as the saying goes—is in the eye of the beholder. So it may be more precise to say that sport and art in the ancient festivals like Delphi’s conspired to help participants *see* the ideal by putting it inside a frame. Going back to the layout of the sanctuary itself, we can see, even today, that it is framed by awesome natural beauty: the rocky slopes of the mountain, the deep blue of the sky, the vistas of valley and sea, the birds, the trees, the water, the wind. The ancient Greeks believed that nature was infused with divinity, but sensitivity to the supernatural that dwells within the natural has to be trained. One needs to draw boundaries in space and time that separate the ordinary from the extraordinary. Greek sanctuaries were legally and often physically cordoned off from practical activities like business and farming. The natural beauty of their settings, however, was probably even more effective at getting pilgrims into the right state of mind.

Framing is an obvious aspect of arts like painting and photography. The goal is not just to represent a worldly object, like a bowl of fruit or field of flowers, but rather to take something from regular life and make the spectator look at and think about it in a different “frame of mind” (Danto 1964). Poetry employs the same words we use in conversation, negotiation, and practical persuasion, but it presents them in a way that makes us sensitive to their special sounds and meanings. As Aristotle says in *Poetics* (1451a35 f.), the poet’s job is not to tell what has happened, but what might happen; to represent universals, rather than particulars. Drama, likewise, may tell stories from ordinary life, but it tells them in a way that moves beyond the ordinary and resonates with our collective sense of the ideal. And it does this, like the other arts, by framing. It sets itself off from the ordinary with opening and closing rituals, the

boundaries of the stage, the manipulation of dramatic time. Art uses framing to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Sport, less obviously, uses similar techniques. It is marked off from “ordinary life” by boundaries of space and time (Cordner 1995). The competition-space itself is clearly marked and there are penalties for going “out of bounds.” Even before it was designated by a time-clock, the beginning and end of a race, wrestling-match, or pentathlon was clearly designated by heralds, trumpeters, rituals, or all three. Like the modern Olympic Games, ancient festivals began and ended with ceremonies that included processions, proclamations, and oaths. All of these things shift the mindset of the participants—athletes, officials, and spectators alike—drawing them out of the ordinary into the extraordinary. Indeed, it may be this “escapist” aspect of sport that makes it popular as entertainment in the modern day. In ancient times, however, its function was explicitly religious. Sport, like art, “framed” the ideal to be found within the real and allowed everyone to appreciate it.



Figure 3 Terracotta Panathenaic prize amphora attributed to the Euphiletos Painter. Attic Greek, ca. 530 BCE Metropolitan Museum of Art. CC0 Public Domain License.

Acting Beautifully

Although ideals like beauty, goodness and truth constitute ends in themselves, art and sport serve them as a form of education. In ancient Greek thought, beauty and goodness were so closely connected that the term *kalokagathia* was invented to describe their combined presence in human beings. Indeed, ethics and aesthetics seem to be functionally connected in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle (Reid 2019a, 2020). A morally good person senses the beauty of acting rightly and gains aesthetic pleasure from doing so (Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1249a18-21). Such sensitivity must be cultivated through *paideia* (cultural education), which, according to Plato's *Republic* (410b f.), includes both "music" and "gymnastics." Plato presents dance as the ideal integration of these things because the music puts beauty into the soul of the dancer, who learns to move her body in accordance with it (*Laws* 814d f.).

Kalokagathia requires action in accordance with ethical ideals, a very similar dynamic (Reid 2020). Choruses where age-mates dance and sing songs praising beauty and virtue in unison (Ducat 2006), seem like an ideal example of this educational theory.

Gymnastic training and athletic competition function educationally in a similar way, only here the athletes strain to approximate the virtues of the heroes by challenging themselves to endure fear, pain, failure, and other ordeals (Reid 2017). Educationally speaking, Plato thought that such experiences caused us to recollect our innate knowledge of the good—a process he called *anamnesis* (*Phaedo* 72e). But whether our knowledge of the good, beautiful, and true is internal or external, it needs to be activated and acted upon. This process of learning cannot be passive and it is ideally participatory. As noted at the outset, even a fan who came to Delphi just to see the boxing event had to climb up a mountain in the blazing sun (boxing events took place at noon). The games were not presented to simply be watched—they were made to be experienced, and the experience was intended to be educational.

The same can be said for art; modern controversies notwithstanding. The music, dance, drama, singing, and recitation performed at the Panhellenic games honored the gods by exalting common cultural values. Humor, social criticism, even satire were permitted at the festivals, but base or banal entertainment was not. The program was designed to engage the intellect, to put it in touch with the common cultural ideals such as beauty, goodness, and truth. This process had a bonding effect and managed to unite even warring tribes into one community (Burkert 1985). The modern Olympic Games have had some success replicating the process (Reid 2006). But, as was noted at the beginning of this essay, Delphi's games were distinctive for their emphasis on the arts. And since art and sport working together are stronger than art and sport working apart, the Pythian festival must not rest on its ancient laurels, but bring art and sport together again.

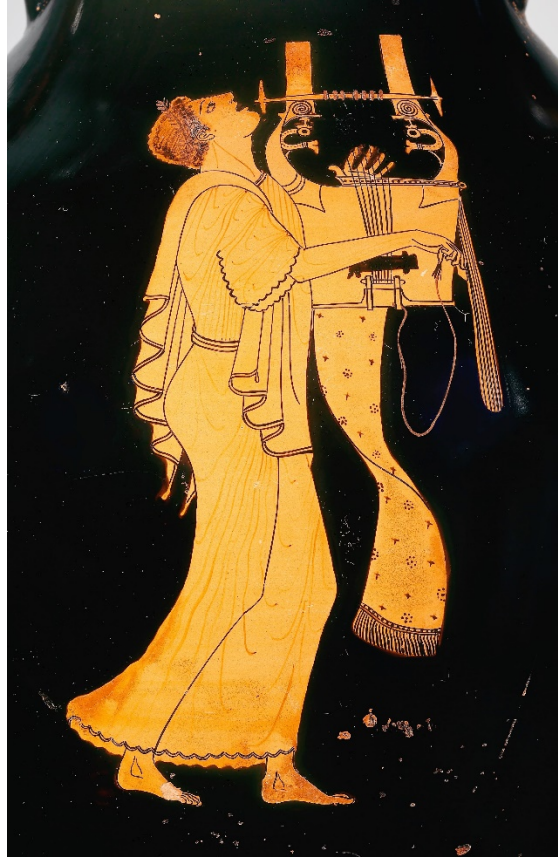


Figure 4 Terracotta amphora attributed to the Berlin Painter
Attic Greek, ca. 490 BCE Metropolitan Museum of Art
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