

May-2017

Voices on Campus: Claire Culleton on Irish Art at the Olympic Games

Claire Culleton

Recommended Citation

Culleton, Claire (2017). Voices on Campus: Claire Culleton on Irish Art at the Olympic Games. *Bridgewater Review*, 36(1), 29-32.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol36/iss1/9

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

VOICES ON CAMPUS

Claire Culleton

*In January, BSU's Irish Studies Program celebrated Irish Cultural Heritage Day on campus, which included a book launch, student research and study-abroad presentations, and Irish musical and step-dancing performances. A keynote address was delivered by Professor Claire Culleton from Kent State University's Department of English, who spoke from a text entitled "Representing Irish Art at the Olympic Games," parts of which were published previously in *Estudios Irlandeses* (2014) and appear here with the editor's permission. Her lively talk is excerpted below.*

... During the early years of the modern Olympic Games, art competitions formed part of the official Olympic program. Olympic scholars refer to these as the "forgotten" art competitions because so few people know they even existed; yet from 1912 to 1948, some 1800 artists from 51 countries competed for Olympic gold, silver, and bronze medals in five creative categories: painting, architecture, literature, music, and sculpture ... Increasingly, the world's most imaginative minds vied to represent their countries at the Olympics. As impressive as the panoply of artists showing their work was during those years, the international juries for each category surpassed them in celebrity. At the 1924 Paris games, for example, art competition juries included luminaries Gabriele D'Annunzio, Paul Claudel, Edith

Wharton, Paul Valéry, and Maurice Maeterlinck for literature, Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, and Maurice Ravel for music, and John Singer Sargent and John Lavery for painting (Richard Stanton, *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions* [2000] 83). It was a veritable *Who's Who?* of creative talent ...

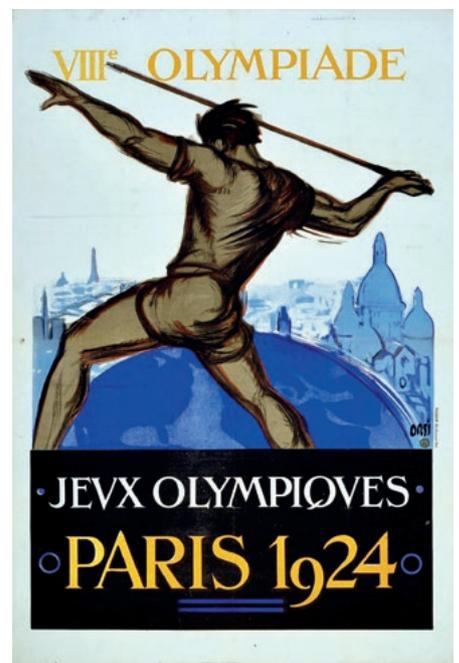
Artists competed against, and were judged by, their contemporaries and often their rivals. Not surprisingly, then, it was destined to end in disaster... From 1906, when art contests were first discussed in Paris, to 1952, when the art competitions were formally disbanded, members of the International Olympic Committee argued about the art contests. At issue for many was the questionable "amateur" status of professional artists, [the submission of already-



Claire Culleton

published and -performed works, as well as perennial infighting among judges about objectivity] ...

Though they were short-lived, the Olympic art competitions offer a fascinating narrative about international artistic culture in the first half of the 20th century, and they invite interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry into the interrelationships of art, politics, and personal as well as national ego... The Olympic contests allow us to see and subsequently test the contradictions and strategies of national artistic representation, and to analyze how well art, or sport for that matter, can assist in nation-building...



Poster. VIIIe Olympiade

One rule governing the artwork entered into the Olympic contests by each country was that the works had to be directly inspired by athletic sports.

The Paris Games of 1924 was the first time Ireland attended the Olympics competing under its own flag as a Free State. In fact, Ireland was given formal recognition as an independent nation at the games that year. Four years later, in order to describe the intensity of his win and what it meant for Ireland to win Olympic gold, hammer thrower Pat O'Callaghan said that he was proud to show the world that "Ireland has a flag, that Ireland has a national anthem, in fact, that we have a nationality" (Diarmid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* [2004] 354). Such was the occasion in 1924 when Irish competitors marched among the 45 nations present into Paris's 45,000-seat Stade Olympique de Colombes for the opening ceremony... Fifty Irish competed in sport that year, and eight competed in creativity... One newspaper headline announcing the art competitions read, "Games Foster Competition in Genius" (Bernard Kramer in *Journal of Olympic History* [2004] 33), a headline likely inspired by IOC President Pierre de Coubertin's speech at the closing of the Paris games... But what did Irish genius look like? How would the Free State advertise, project, and display a particularly Irish aesthetic to an international community whose eyes were fastened on the fledging state? What distinguished Irish art? Even better, what might distinguish Free State art from the art of colonized Ireland? ...

Ireland competed in four of the seven summer games where art contests were held. In those four Olympic Summer Games — Paris 1924, Amsterdam 1928, Los Angeles 1932 and London 1948 — a total of 31 Irish artists (21 men, 10 women, most of them members of the Royal Hibernian Academy or the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art) participated in nine separate art contests and submitted 43 works for competition. Among these were novels, poems, sculptures, paintings, drawings, and musical compositions. Irish artists competed in the Mixed

ODE

Written at the request of the Irish Government on the revival of the Tailteann (Irish Olympic) Games

EMPYREAN is the source
Of indomitable will.
God the runner to his course
Holds, and urges on until
Lips and face of blood are drained,
And the fainting limbs are numb:
Till the heart, by God sustained,
Bravely to the end is come.

By the Conflict is revealed
In a runner what is best;
By the struggle in the field,
By the speed which is the test,
By the speed that wears him down
Till the spirit alone can bear
Limbs that stagger for the crown
And the thunder in his ear.

Where are they who ran before
Under Tara's wide-eyed steep;
And the chariots that tore
Parallel the ridges deep?
Where are noble man and horse?
Ah, they both have lost the rein;
They have circled in a course
Tara shall not see again!

Aye, their hands are empty now,
And the green earth clothes their hill:
Gone the glory from the brow
And the sudden shout is still,
Blown upon the wind away
From the land that no man knows,
Folded in the earth are they,
And the grass as freshly grows.

Herald: Silence now and hear the King!

Oliver St. John Gogarty, opening lines from "Ode." Reprint in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse LVIII, V (August 1941): 233-34.

Painting category four times (three submissions in 1924, nine in 1928, nine in 1932, and five in 1948), Mixed Sculpturing three times (one in 1924, one in 1928, and three in 1948), Mixed

Literature once (four in 1924), Mixed Music/Vocals once (one in 1948), and in Drawings and Watercolours once (six submissions in 1928). By 1948, the last Olympiad to have art contests, Ireland

had won three Olympic medals: Oliver St. John Gogarty won a Bronze in 1924 in the Mixed Literature category for his “Ode to the Tailteann Games”; Jack B. Yeats won a Silver medal that same year in the Mixed Painting category for his oil painting *Natation* (now called *The Liffey Swim*); and Letitia Hamilton earned a Bronze more than two decades later in the Mixed Painting category at the 1948 games for her *Meath Hunt Point-to-Point Races*... With all of the talent available in Ireland during these decades — its finest writers, its amazing painters, the world-class musicians — one has to wonder why over the years Ireland competed in the contests for literature, drawings and watercolours, and music/vocals only once...

Competitors representing Irish art at the Olympics included Ulster-born John Lavery, who entered one of his paintings into competition for Ireland at the Paris Games, but two for Great Britain in Amsterdam, and two others again for Great Britain in Los Angeles. Lavery was a juror for the painting competition in 1924, yet he also had his own work entered in that category... Others competing for Ireland have included painters Kathleen Bridle, Christopher Campbell, George Collie, J. Humbert Craig, Lilian Lucy Davidson, Jack Hanlon, Mainie Jellett (Ireland’s youngest competitor at 31 years old), Seán Keating, Frances Josephine Kelly, Harry Kernoff, Charles Lamb, Edward Louis Lawrenson, [Florence] Vere O’Brien, Dermot O’Brien, Seán O’Sullivan,



Jack B. Yeats (1871-1957), *The Liffey Swim*, 1923. National Gallery of Ireland Collection.
Photo © National Gallery of Ireland.

Hilda Roberts, Stella Steyn, and Leo Whelan; sculptors Desmond Broe, Edmondo Gigante, May Power, and Oliver Sheppard; and writers Brinsley MacNamara, T.C. Murray, and J. Ryan in literature...

We certainly need more information on the background of these art competitions, how they were advertised and targeted to attract a specific type of Irish artist, how the internal domestic panel of judges was selected and assembled, ...and how artists were selected and why. But unfortunately, most of these written records no longer survive... We can reconstruct some of the records concerning the 1948 Games, however, and the art entries selected and sent by Ireland to London that summer, thanks to the papers of Liam

S. Gogán, at one time an assistant keeper of antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, then Art Director, and later keeper of the Art and Industrial Division there (1914-1956). Gogán chaired the Art Section of the Irish Olympic Council, and his papers (44 boxes archived at University College Dublin) have the only records... that are pertinent to the processes, rules, and regulations submitters had to follow. There are copies of letters to other committee members outlining the costs of setting up jury venues, and the costs of transporting works of art to London. There is even a short note dated April 7, 1948, from Miss Máirín Allen, Honorable Secretary, Arts Section, Irish Olympic Council, imploring Gogán to make plain the following information: “The more important artists all preface their enquiries by the same question: Who judges what is to be sent from Ireland?” Allen also noted that several artists objected to submitting their paintings to a “non-painter acting as judge of painters,” and they did not care to submit “paintings for adjudication to an art-critic who does not paint.” Allen suggested that Gogán invite painter “Maurice MacGonigal or another. Artists apparently feel very strongly

From the first Olympiad to host the art contests to the last, a total of 151 medals were awarded to artists in various categories. These medals have officially been stricken from the Olympic record.

about such things and no doubt we must conciliate their just viewpoints if we are to have their help to make the Irish contribution to the Olympic Festival a worthy one. Mr Burke might himself be asked," she continued, or "some painter to act as adjudicator... for the Painting." It is a rich and fascinating archive, and it may be all that is left on paper about Irish artists and the Olympic competitions.

One rule governing the artwork entered into the Olympic contests by each country was that the works had to be directly inspired by athletic sports. Most of the entries for architecture, for example, were stadium designs or swimming pool/natatorium designs. In the sculpture category, competing artists tended to cast real or mythical sporting heroes in clay, bronze, or plaster, while others competing in sculpture submitted sport-themed reliefs and plaques, or designs and prototypes for new Olympic medals. Oliver Sheppard, for example, did both: he submitted designs for a new series of Olympic medals and also submitted a statue called "The Bather," which, of course, begs the question whether bathing should be considered an athletic sport. In the painting contests, artists submitted work that celebrated particular sports, such as boxing, or fishing, or horse racing and jumping, or their paintings captured popular sporting events such as Yeats's *The Liffey Swim*, a popular Dublin event that takes place annually in Dublin as swimmers race from Guinness's Brewery to Butt Bridge. In the literature category, poetry, plays, short-story collections, and novels dealing with sports qualified as entries, while in the music competitions, so long as composers alluded to sport in the titles of their works, the composition qualified as a suitable entry: *Inno Olimpionico (Olympic Anthem)*, is an obvious example...

Not surprisingly, there are some curiosities among the art selections submitted by Ireland. Ina Boyle's *Lament for Bion (from the Greek)* has nothing to do with sport: Bion was a Greek bucolic poet. In 1924, Gogarty won for his lyric poem "Ode to the Tailteann Games," written at the request of the Irish Government on the revival of the Tailteann Games, printed in the official programme of the Aonach Tailteann Games, and sung by a choir during the opening festivities that August in Dublin. At the



Liam S. Gogán, Chair, Art Section of the Irish Olympic Council, 1948. Reproduced by kind permission of the University College Dublin Archives. Papers of Liam S. Gogán (1891-1979), IE UCDA LA 27/52.

Tailteann, Gogarty would pick up a second medal for literature for his slim book, *An Offering of Swans and Other Poems*. So what about the amateur status of the artist and the work? The ode was commissioned; it was paid work for Gogarty. Not only that, but by 1924, Gogarty had published eight books already—nothing amateur about that record. Equally suspicious, and it would be hilarious if it weren't so troubling, is the play submitted by Abbey Theatre playwright T.C.

Murray entitled *Birthright*, where one brother kills another by beating him to death with a hurley stick. *Birthright* is hardly a play about sports... [Nor was it new]... *Birthright* was published in 1910 but submitted nonetheless to the 1924 literature competition...

It is important to point out that the Irish Olympic Council had been formed hastily just one year before the Paris Games. The Irish Olympic Council had only months to do what other nations were given to accomplish in four years. Ireland's first president of the Olympic Council, J.J. Keane, noted in a letter to IOC President de Coubertin that history had taken its toll on the new state. "We have already remarked to you about the disarray caused to our teams and athletic organisations by the political events of recent years," he wrote (in Kevin McCarthy, *Gold, Silver and Green* [2010] 309). It is something of a miracle, then, that the Irish council pulled it off in time.

...From the first Olympiad to host the art contests to the last, a total of 151 medals were awarded to artists in various categories. These medals have officially been stricken from the Olympic record, though, according to a 2012 article by Joseph Stromberg in *Smithsonian Magazine* titled, "When the Olympics Gave Out Medals for Art." No wonder, then, that the Olympic art competitions are codified as the "forgotten" art competitions. For 1924 Ireland, there are no official photographs of the team, no art submission forms, no insurance or freight or customs receipts, no photographs of the artwork, no works entered into museums or in private collections under the titles on record... Because of this, it is easy to fear that the half-life of the art contests threatens to decay what little we know about them to date, which is a shame...