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Caroline Vout and Christopher Young, eds. *Paris 1924: Sport, Art and the Body*. Cambridge: The Fitzwilliam Museum in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2024. 207 pp. Illustrations and notes. $40.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-1-913645601.

Review by Corry Cropper, Brigham Young University.

This richly illustrated volume, published to accompany an exhibition of the same title at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, offers a deep dive into the games of the VIIIth Olympiad, a retrospective with one eye on the past and one looking to the Olympics' return to Paris in 2024. As the editors note in their introduction, the 1924 Olympics featured an art category, with medals awarded in painting, sculpture, literature, and architecture. They also had strong ties to Cambridge (Cambridge athletes won medals, inspiring the film *Chariots of Fire*, and organizer Pierre de Coubertin had visited--and been inspired by--the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1886). Consequently, a book and exhibit in Cambridge about the 1924 Olympics is a natural fit. What's more, the 1924 Olympics were notable because they were the last that Coubertin organized, the first to carve out space for an Olympic Village, innovative in their use of media (including radio, cinema, and design), and they famously launched Johnny Weissmuller to fame and confirmed Paavo Nurmi as a star.

The book is organized into four sections: the first examines the spatial challenges and opportunities posed by Paris itself; the second digs into the competition; the third explores the games' ties to social issues such as public health, gender, and nationalism; the final chapters study the arts. The book concludes with a catalogue of all the artworks displayed at the 2024 exhibition in Cambridge. The figures (110 of them, not counting the additional illustrations in the catalogue) include incredibly helpful glosses that provide analysis and contextualization.

Philip Dine's opening essay sets the geographic landscape for the essays that follow. Dine explains that the 1924 Olympics were primarily a suburban affair, with only a few venues in Paris proper. The sporting spaces *intra-muros* were built on the success of horse racing, which "served to lay the ground for the practical organisation and cultural reception of the socially prestigious athletic sports that followed" (p. 31); cycling, and its commercially successful Vélodrome d'hiver used by the 1924 organizers for boxing, wrestling, fencing, and weightlifting; and boxing, a new sport that, though commercially successful, did not have any spaces dedicated to its practice since most bouts were staged, literally, in theaters.[1] Dine argues that the lack of a geographic hub combined with the difficulties of travel in the suburbs meant that events were sparsely attended, and the games a financial failure (exceptions included a new swimming

stadium near the Porte des Lilas and the football final in Colombes). Dine's chapter is followed by a study of Paris as a city of art, Bernard Vere providing an overview of avant-garde movements (Cubism, Fauvism, Purism, Futurism) and their intersection with the 1924 Olympics, with special attention given to the work of Robert Delaunay and his piece *Coureurs*.

The section on "The Games" studies the athletes from the UK, and particularly those from Cambridge (Richard Holt); the exploits--both athletic and commercial--of team USA and their male and female superstars (Mike Cronin); and the shocking success of the Uruguay football team (Will Huddleston). I learned a great deal from each of these chapters, though I admit that the chapter on Uruguay was the most eye-opening. I had been under the false assumption that Uruguay's win at the first ever FIFA World Cup in 1930 could be chalked up to the fact that they were the host nation. The IOC was even less informed, initially assuming that Uruguay was "a province of Argentina" and therefore ineligible to compete (p. 82). Huddleston shows how their success in the World Cup (following gold medals in both Paris [1924] and Amsterdam [1928]) grew out of a sustained period of economic and political development: Uruguay was "among the 15 richest nations on the planet, with the highest purchasing power per capita and life expectancy in South America" (p. 83). Their tactical and technical brilliance overwhelmed the competition and inspired the paying public. "The football tournament alone accounted for more than a third of the spectators to the Games…with the final alone bringing in 516,575 francs" (p. 86). In short, Uruguay's team was "undoubtedly the best international team in probably the most important decade in the expansion of world football" (p. 91).

Chapters by Vanessa Heggie, Caroline Vout, and Daphné Bolz examine the 1924 games through the lenses of public health, gender, and nationalism, respectively. Heggie sees the Paris Olympics as a watershed moment for public health, sports medicine, and the use of new technologies, notably photography, for improving athletic performance. Vout examines ideas of beauty in the 1920s, showing how they conform to a certain Hellenistic ideal that emphasized whiteness (the pigment from Greek statues having disappeared), muscular elegance, and a healthy measure of gender ambiguity and negotiation. Bolz's essay shows how host cities integrated both national and international elements into their publicity campaigns while also using the Olympics and other sporting events to promote their ideologies (fascism, anti-bourgeois Marxism, imperialism, etc.). Bolz outlines the story of the 1924 Olympic rugby tournament, won by the Americans in a hotly disputed final against France. Bolz uses this example to underscore the connection between sport and political ideology: "In the aftermath of the war, France and the US had already clashed over the terms of the peace treaty. The Americans' victory in a sport that was not really their own signaled something bigger than sport itself…a long and influential [American] presence on the global stage" (p. 124).

The section titled "The Arts" begins with Miles Osgood's contribution on the Olympic arts competition, in which he outlines ideological tensions between the competition's judges: some primarily valued idiosyncratic and eccentric works, while others promoted more conservative and classical submissions. In the end, the medals tended to be awarded "for conservative content and narrow form" (p. 138). Christopher Young examines art inspired by the enigmatic Paavo Nurmi. The copy of one large-scale sculpture of the Finnish runner by Wäinö Aaltonen currently stands outside the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. Pantelis Michelakis's essay concludes the section by studying the use of film at the Paris games. In addition to films like *Metropolis*, *Ways*

to Strength and Beauty, or *Barnyard Olympics* that were inspired by the 1924 Olympics, Jean de Rovéra's company produced three films about them: a three-hour film on the Summer Olympics in Paris, a thirty-five-minute film on the Winter Olympics in Chamonix, and an eight-minute short that artistically tied the modern games to their ancient counterparts. Rovéra's innovative use of slow motion, Michelakis argues, allowed the filmmaker both to present the sporting figure as standing outside of time and to freeze the emotion surrounding athletic achievement.

There is one cliché that I wish would go away and that is unfortunately repeated in the introduction. The editors, following Allen Guttmann, note that Coubertin was "driven by powerful motives…to promote sport as a means of strengthening his home country France after its humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71)" (p. 12). I can find no evidence that Coubertin was motivated by a spirit of revenge. He was opposed to the militaristic gymnastic exercises that Jules Ferry made obligatory in French schools beginning in 1880, going so far as to lament in *La Revue de Paris* in 1894 that this sort of utilitarian exercise "will always manage to sprout in places where there are vast national ambitions to satisfy, revenge [*revanche*] to take, or some sort of bondage to break."[2] And when, during a meeting to consider organizing the first Olympics, members of the French delegation threatened to withdraw if any Germans were in attendance, Coubertin exclaimed, "This perpetual 'protest' directed toward the victor of 1870 exasperated me. In reality, what was less French, less chivalrous…than to angrily shake one's fist while remaining seated?...I cannot say how often during my adolescence I suffered from this attitude that a false and petty conception of nationalism imposed upon my generation. Even though I grew up in the shadow of Sedan [the defeat of 1870], I never felt like a conquered soul."[3] Rather than buying into France's *revanchisme*, Coubertin sought to strengthen the elite of Europe and bring them together in an international, aristocratic brotherhood. What's more, if Coubertin had been motivated by *revanchisme*, why would Germany have been allowed to participate in the inaugural games in Athens in 1896? Dine understands this, writing: "both the amateur ethos and the spirit of pacific internationalism championed by the new athletic sports had to compete for public recognition…with the performative patriotism of military gymnastics" (p. 31). And Bolz's chapter emphasizes that Coubertin's project was "characterized by a marked universalism" that reflected his "status as a member of a privileged European elite" (p. 119).

This minor quibble aside, *Paris 1924* is a gold-medal book. The figures and essays combine to create a lively, compelling analysis of the 1924 Summer Games and the short chapters illuminate important issues that still resonate in the world of international sport today.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Luke Syson, "Director's Foreword"

Caroline Vout and Christopher Young, "Introduction"

Part One, Paris

Philip Dine, "City of Sport"

Bernard Vere, “City of Art”

Part Two, The Games

Richard Holt, “Cambridge, Britain and the 1924 Olympics”

Mike Cronin, “The USA, the Sporting Superpower”

Will Huddleston, “Uruguay, Football and Global Stardom”

Part Three, Society

Vanessa Heggie, “Sport, Science, Public Health”

Caroline Vout, “Sex, Gender, Body Image”

Daphné Bolz, “The Olympics, Nationhood and the Rise of Fascism”

Part Four, The Arts

Miles Osgood, “Paris and the Olympic Arts Competition”

Christopher Young, “Paavo Nurmi in Prose, Poetry and Sculpture”

Pantelis Michelakis, “Cinema and the Sporting Body”

Part Five, Catalogue

Rebecca Virág and Caroline Vout, “Catalogue"

NOTES

[1] Sylvain Ville, *Le Théâtre de la boxe: Naissance d’un spectacle sportif (Paris-Londres, 1880–1930)*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2022).

[2] Pierre de Coubertin, “Le Rétablissement des Jeux Olympiques,” (*La Revue de Paris*, 15 June 1894), 173.

[3] Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires olympiques* (Paris: Archives et Mémoire de l'Éducation Physique et du Sport, 1996), 17.

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