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# Competing Concepts of Culture: Irish Art at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Art Competitions formed part of the modern Olympic Games during its early years. From 1912-1948, art contests were featured in Summer Games in Stockholm (1912), Antwerp (1920), Paris (1924), Amsterdam (1928), Los Angeles (1932), Berlin (1936) and London (1948), where artists competed for medals in the categories of painting, architecture, literature, music, and sculpting. Ireland competed in four of those summer games, and a total of thirty-one Irish artists (twenty-one men/ten 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 forty-three works for competition.

**Key Words.** Olympic Art Competitions, Irish artists, Paris 1924, Olympic Games, Royal Hibernian Academy, Liam Gogàn.

**Resumen.** Los Certámenes de Arte formaron parte de los Juegos Olímpicos modernos durante los primeros años. De 1912 a 1948, hubo concursos de arte en los Juegos de Verano de Estocolmo (1912), Amberes (1920), París (1924), Ámsterdam (1928), Los Ángeles (1932), Berlín (1936) y Londres (1948), en los que artistas competían para la obtención de medallas en las categorías de pintura, arquitectura, literatura, música y escultura. Irlanda compitió en cuatro de esos juegos de verano, y un total de treinta y un artistas irlandeses (veintiún hombres / diez mujeres, la mayoría de ellos miembros de la Royal Hibernian Academy o la Dublin Metropolitan School of Art) participaron en nueve concursos de arte distintos y presentaron cuarenta y tres obras a competición.

**Palabras Clave.** Concursos de arte, artistas irlandeses, Paris 1924, Juegos Olímpicos, Royal Hibernian Academy, Liam Gogàn.

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 eighteen hundred artists from fifty-one countries

competed for Olympic gold, silver, and bronze medals in five creative categories: painting, architecture, literature, music, and sculpture. Art contests featured in the summer games in Stockholm (1912), Antwerp (1920), Paris (1924), Amsterdam (1928), Los Angeles (1932), Berlin (1936), and London (1948). Increasingly, the world’s most imaginative minds vied to represent their countries at the Olympics, and as impressive as the panoply of artists showing their work had been during those years, the international juries for each category surpassed them in celebrity. At the

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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 (Stanton 2000: 83).<sup>2</sup> It was a veritable *Who's Who?* of creative talent. It was a celebration of the twentieth century's imaginative genius. It was artists competing against, and being judged by, their contemporaries. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was destined to end in disaster.

The history of the Olympic art competitions is short. Art competitions ended with the 1948 London Olympic Games, though they were included in plans for the upcoming Helsinki games in 1952. From 1906, when art contests were first discussed at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Consultative Conference in Paris, to 1952, when the art competitions were formally disbanded and replaced by staged art exhibitions, members of the IOC argued about the art contests. At issue for many was the questionable "amateur" status of professional artists. "Practically all Art competition contestants are professionals," it said in the IOC Report of a tense meeting in 1949 in Rome (quoted in Stanton 2000: 211). Although official rules (articulated as early as 1912) clearly stated that the jury could only consider works not previously published, exhibited, or performed, several entries did not comply with these rules, further making the notion of "amateur" status a hotly debated point and the one most responsible for ending art competitions at the Olympic Games.

Another issue raised by IOC members to challenge the continuation of the art competitions was their doubt about the objectivity of the juries when assigning awards.

When runners or Alpine skiers come in first, second, and third, they argued, the outcome is unquestionable: the photo finish proves it (introduced in 1912) or Swiss Timing proves it (introduced at the 1936 games). But there is no such objectivity when judging art. Matters of taste invade what is supposed to be impartial decision making. Complicating matters, the nature of art itself was changing so rapidly in the first decades of the twentieth century that the IOC found it more and more impossible to find a jury of like-minded artists not only to judge the various competitions but also to agree, even if informally, about what constituted great art. During the 1924 Games when the IOC gathered to hold their annual meeting, Chairman of the Art Competitions committee, Marquis Melchior de Polignac, raised another problem concerning the juries – "the reluctance of the artists to be judged by their own rivals" (quoted in Stanton 2000: 91). While national and international art competitions are today held annually and normally prompt little dispute, the number of judges comprising the jury is usually limited. The Pulitzer Prize for fiction, for example, enlists a jury of three that makes recommendations to a Board of nineteen; the Man Booker Prize for Fiction is usually decided, after only a few rounds of negotiations, by a jury of four. At the Paris games, however, a total of one hundred fifty-six jurors judged the five art contests. Years later, IOC President Avery Brundage would write, "In painting we have a hundred different schools which arouse bitter argument whenever their merits are discussed. To prevent endless controversy, competitions would probably have to be held in every school from the classical to the most extreme" (quoted in Stanton 2000: 244). Brundage saw similar problems in the other categories, and wrote in his 1953 Circular Letter No. 14:

Consider the scope of architecture and the scores of different types of edifices that can be designed and constructed. Even if the competition is limited to sport buildings, how can you compare the design for a stadium with that of a metropolitan athletic club, or a boathouse, or a swimming pool? . . . In music there are songs, choruses; compositions for one or more instruments, operas, orchestral works, etc., etc.

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2. The three richest though still imperfect sources for finding information on the contests and the artists in the art competitions are Stanton's *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions. The Story of the Olympic Art Competitions of the 20th Century* (2000), an independently-published book, the sports reference website at <http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics>, and the research database of the LA84 Foundation at <http://www.la84.org>.

How can one compare folk songs with symphonies? How can one compare Oriental or Arabic music with music of the Western World, or for that matter the bagpipe with the violin? (quoted in Stanton 2000: 244).

By 1932, when Brundage himself competed in the art competitions and earned an honourable mention in literature, juries had been trimmed significantly. In the Los Angeles games, only twenty-four judges comprised the juries of the various art disciplines, and only four judged the literature segment – André Maurois, Thornton Wilder, Hugh Walpole, and William Lyons Phelps (Stanton 2006: 41-42).

There were problems, too, with the other competitions. In the Music competitions, the juries often had trouble judging the pieces, which were submitted and entered on paper only. Literature competitions also were particularly troublesome, since foreign language fluency was a problem that plagued juries. To address this point, a flabbergasted Brundage suggested the committee create juries for every living language, *including Esperanto* (emphasis mine; Stanton 2000: 253). Other council members, such as Pierre Jeannerat, writing in the Official Review of the 1948 Games, grew dispirited by the growing lack of interest in the competitions among the world's most famous artists “like Matisse and Braque,” and he “deplore[d] the absence of most of the best known living artists” (quoted in Stanton 2000: 201). Others remained unimpressed by the art that *had* been submitted: “We . . . discovered in the United States,” one wrote, “that it was impossible to find works of art that would be acceptable for an Olympic competition, given that the works of art were themselves 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> rate” (quoted in Stanton 2000: 255). Time would change things. In 1953, for example, after the competitions had been replaced by large exhibitions of art, Carleton Smith reported to the Chancellor of the Olympic Committee that “Matisse, Chagall, and Picasso have told the director of the Louvre that, if invited, they would gladly participate in 1956” (quoted in Stanton 2000: 247-48).

Naysayers hoping to end the art contests alleged wrongdoing and under-the-table deals in the Art competitions, as in the case where artist R. Tait McKenzie, already dead for a decade, submitted to the 1948 sculpturing competition his plaster bust of Lord Burghley

running the 400 metres . That year, Lord Burghley himself chaired the Organizing Committee. A similar oddity occurred in the Los Angeles art competitions of 1932. American painter Thomas Eakins, who had been dead for sixteen years, submitted three paintings. Homer Winslow, another of America's finest painters who would have been ninety-six at the time (except he was dead) also submitted a painting to the competition. In all three cases, the artists were judged *hors concours* – ineligible to compete because they were unrivalled – a ruling that seems to have been introduced with the 1928 Art Competitions. Despite the fact that both American painters had been dead for more than a dozen years, their inclusion in the competition raises once more the unsettling question of “amateur status.” How can one seriously claim that Winslow Homer was an “amateur?” Or Eakins, for that matter? Or, as we shall see, someone like Jack B. Yeats? Or even Oliver St. John Gogarty, so well-published at the time he won his award? Other well-established artists competed for their countries, as well. In 1924, for example, Robert Graves competed in the literature contest for Great Britain and George Grosz for painting in 1928 for Germany. These are hardly amateur artists. Grosz, for example, was already showing in galleries across Europe. Two months before the 1928 Olympics, his work hung in the Prussian Academy of Arts and eight of his paintings were being negotiated over and brokered into a deal for a show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City (Cohan 2011).

But surprisingly, the list of entrants to the various art competitions over the years has more newbies and wannabes than has been or well established artists, architects, writers, and musicians. The more established artists shied away from, perhaps even eschewed the competitions. Insistence upon the amateur status of the artists wasn't always the case; many professionals made it into the competitions. But when it was insisted upon, Ashley Fetters wrote in *The Atlantic*, “the amateurism decree severely undermined the quality of the entrant pools – and the entries themselves. Creating an engaging piece of Olympics-inspired art is a notoriously difficult task, and taking away professionals' right to try their hands at it didn't help” (2012: 3). In an

attempt to understand the (sometimes) mediocrity of the entry pools, several Olympic Council members asserted that the artists must have felt limited by the stipulation that the work entered had to have been executed within the last four years. Certainly abstract and avant-garde artists did not participate – probably because the art contests were so “academic,” so tied to classic form and figurative representation, so “traditional.” In this sense, then, the Olympic art contests do not accurately reflect developments or even trends in the art and design world. This is probably why artists like Matisse and Braque ignored the calls to submit work, as did the twentieth-century’s most imaginative architects: Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius. Perhaps instead of being mere entrants who would be at the mercy of a jury, they preferred to be invited to judge.

Aside from the continuing arguments about amateurism and one’s ineligibility to compete, still others on the IOC questioned whether art competitions were in fact part of the 444 B.C. Olympics anyway, where Herodotus ‘supposedly’ was garlanded for his prose work on the Persian Wars. Despite this back story of bitter arguments among Council members (and perhaps even in spite of it) though they were short-lived, the Olympic art competitions offer a fascinating narrative about international artistic culture in the first half of the twentieth century, and they invite interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry into the interrelationships of art, politics, and personal as well as national ego. That is, when Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus left Ireland to forge, he said, “in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (1993: 276), he was suggesting that a nation doesn’t *have* a conscience until it is given one by its writers and artists. Hence, the Olympic contests allow us to see and subsequently test the contradictions and strategies of national artistic representation, and to analyse the freighted costs of assuming art, or sport for that matter, can assist in nation-building or further Irish identity and nationalism.

Once the four- to fifteen-day period for jury evaluations and deliberations was over, artists and their National Olympic Committees often were confounded by or moved to challenge jury

decisions.

Frequently, for example, no Olympic medals at all were awarded in an event category, even when there had been a pool of strong competing entries. The judges constantly fought, and because the judges themselves were imposing personalities in their own rights, their elitism could sometimes be overwhelming. In Paris in 1924, for example, no medals at all were awarded in the music competitions because the jurors found none of the entries deserving. According to the Official Report on the games: “DECISION DU JURY. – Le Jury n’ayant décerné aucune récompense, il n’y a pas lieu d’établir de classement” (*Rapport Officiel* n.d.: 606). The 1924 judges for the music competitions included Stravinsky, Bartók, Ravel, and thirty-nine others who made up this apparently hard to please jury; theirs was the largest of the art juries that year (Stanton 2000: 83), and their decision not to award any medals came even after each entry had already been juried and vetted by the artist’s home-based National Olympic Committee. What’s worse, juries sometimes decided to award no *gold* medal but silver and bronze medals only. In the 1948 competition, for example, only a bronze medal was awarded in the vocal music category. Fetters notes that, “Juries were known to withhold as many as 13 art medals in a single Olympics, and it’s not hard to imagine that each ‘no prize awarded’ was in itself a tiny, spiteful act of protest by these elite clusters of art critics and professors” (2012: 3). It is hard to imagine such an irregularity occurring at an Olympic athletic event. That is, in sports, whether an athlete breaks a record or not, if he comes in first, he comes in first and gets the gold. He is not held to special standards, yet this seems precisely what was happening in the art competitions, and what was responsible, again, for their quick demise.

Issues such as these confounded and infuriated competitors as well as National Olympic Committees. Committee presidents and boards had created and sorted through mountains of paperwork and spent hundreds of working hours advertising the competitions and gathering and cataloguing the voluminous entries. They then had to find a suitable and large enough venue to hang and display the

entries for judging, then carefully move all of the entries into that space and put together an art commission of judges who would narrow down and select the pieces to send as national entries. Once the final decisions were made, the Committees spent inordinate amounts of money shipping and insuring their artists' pieces, which surely included large sculptures, ornately framed paintings, and large and delicate architectural models. Then they likely crossed their fingers, hoping that the lot would clear Customs and clear it quickly and without any, especially any expensive, fees.

When I first learned about the Olympic art competitions I was fascinated, and I immediately became interested in the Paris Games of 1924, since that would have been 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. Even 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" (quoted in Ferriter 2004: 354). Such was the occasion in 1924 when Irish competitors marched among the forty-five nations present into Paris's 45,000-seat Stade Olympique de Colombes for the opening ceremony – painters amid shot putters, composers beside boxers, writers alongside decathletes. Fifty competed in sport (water polo, football, boxing, discus throw, triple jump, shot put, cross country, high jump, steeplechase, sprinting), and eight in creativity.

What specific works, then, and whose, did the newly formed Irish Olympic Council (later renamed the Irish Olympic Committee) send to Paris to represent Irish art? Who was asked to jury the national art competitions and propose final selections? What criteria were used to judge the submissions and select the entries that the council would ship to Paris? I saw in these questions and in others like them a story about a nation's self-conception emerge. After centuries of oppressive, backbreaking colonial rule, Ireland had to project a politically expedient sense of self and represent it across national aesthetic boundaries. One newspaper

headline announcing the art competitions read, "Games Foster Competition in Genius" (Kramer 2004: 33), a headline likely inspired by IOC President Pierre de Coubertin's speech at the closing of the Paris games. In support of continuing the Art Competitions in subsequent Olympiads, he argued, "There is need for something else besides athleticism and sport, we want the presence of national genius" (quoted in Stanton 2000: 82). What did Irish genius *look* like, and what were the problematics of representing it? How would the Free State advertise, project, and display a particularly Irish aesthetic to an international community with its eyes fastened on the fledgling state? When we consider all the arguments about modern art that occurred in Ireland during the Hugh Lane/Municipal Gallery debates, we must ask, was there, yet, an Irish School of Art that could be represented in Paris? What distinguished Irish art? Even better, what might distinguish Free State art from the art of colonized Ireland? As Fionna Barber suggests in her recent book *Art in Ireland since 1910*, "although there were contradictory forces at work in the emergent nation," there were artists at the ready to unravel the "entrenched concepts of Irish identity" (2013: 9).

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 thirty-one Irish artists (twenty-one men/ten 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 forty-three works for competition. Among these were novels, poems, sculptures, paintings, drawings, and musical compositions. Irish artists competed in the Mixed Painting category four times (three submissions in 1924, nine in 1928, nine in 1932, and five in and 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”; 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” (“Swimming”, 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”. Also in 1948, the Irish team won the following Fine Art awards: Bronze medallist Letitia Hamilton won a Diploma of Honour for her oil painting, “Meath Hunt Point-to-Point Races”; Stanislaus Lynch won a Diploma of Honour for his creative essays, *Echoes of the Hunting Horn*; and Ina Boyle won a Diploma of Honour for her arrangement for tenor voice, piano and strings, “Lament for Bion (from the Greek)”. With all of the talent available in Ireland during these decades – its finest writers, its amazing painters, the world-class musicians – one wonders why over the years Ireland competed in the contests for mixed literature, drawings and watercolours, and music/vocals only once. Unfortunately, no answer to that question has emerged over the course of my research.

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. In 1928, although he did not compete for Ireland but for Great Britain, Dublin Royal Hibernian Academy teacher and renowned Irish painter William Orpen was also a juror. He, too, had works entered in that year’s Mixed Painting competition but he was judged *hors concours*: “*Poule de neige morte*” (“Dead Snow Goose”) and “*Sergeant Murphy and Things*” (Grand National Winner, 1923). 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 thirty-one years old), Seán Keating, Frances Josephine

Kelly, Harry Kernoff, Charles Lamb, Edward Louis Lawrenson, [Florence] Vere O’Brien, Dermot O’Brien, Seán O’Sullivan, 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.

Irish artists Seán Keating, Sir John Lavery (knighted in 1918), and Jack B. Yeats were elected members of the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts in Dublin. Their work now hangs in the National Gallery of Ireland and in museums around the world. They were the “three artists who would become household names in the history of early twentieth-century Irish art,” Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch notes (2007:136). After “*The Liffey Swim*” competed in Paris, it was “put into the Royal Hibernian Academy, and shown in London and Liverpool the following year” (Arnold 1998: 277). A writer in *The Sunday Independent* that year (17 May 1925) described Yeats’s work as “exhilarating,” and added, “If you had one [of his paintings] in your room you would never wish you were dead; you’d look at it and give life another chance” (quoted in Arnold 1998: 277). Dermot O’Brien was quite accomplished, as well. He was president of the RHA from 1910 until his death in 1945 and was also president of the United Arts Club. He was an honorary member of several prestigious academies, including the Royal Academy (1912), the Royal Scottish Academy (1914), and the Royal Society of British Artists, the Belfast Art Society, and the Ulster Academy of Arts (1919). Three of the four Irish writers who competed – Brinsley MacNamara, T. C. Murray, and Oliver St. John Gogarty – were important figures during the early period of Irish state formation. MacNamara, Murray, and Gogarty wrote for the Abbey Theatre during the Irish Literary Revival, and Gogarty, a celebrated poet, novelist, memoirist, and travel writer, went on to become a Free State senator (1922-1936). Sheppard’s work, such as his 1911 plaster, “*The Death of Cuchulainn*” (GPO, Dublin), was exhibited at the RHA in 1914 and subsequently cast in bronze at de Valera’s commissioning. His 1905 “*The Wexford Pikeman*”, as well as his bust of James Clarence Mangan, adorn public squares

throughout Ireland. The Mangan bust, in fact, graces St. Stephen's Green. He, too, was a member of the RHA. Mainie Jellet, with another Irish Olympic artist Jack Hanlon, would go on to found one of the most important art collectives in twentieth-century Ireland: the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, which began as a sort of *Salon des Refusées* (Hartigan 1987: 38), and Seán Keating would go on to become one of the most celebrated painters at the RHA, where more than three hundred of his works have been shown, and whose body of work was the subject of two large retrospectives at the RHA in Dublin and The Crawford Art Gallery in Cork in 2012. Given the surprising number of celebrated entrants to these art contests, it is hard to believe that so very little has been written about the art contests and Ireland's participation in them. Even recently published and celebrated tomes about twentieth-century Irish history or about Ireland's participation in the Olympic Games give scant attention to the art competitions. I am thinking here of Ferriter's *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* and McCarthy's *Gold, Silver, and Green: The Irish Olympic Journey, 1896-1924*. We certainly need more information, more research on the art competitions, 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, as well as some knowledge as to what went on in those discussions. That is, finding out how artists were selected and why, as well as finding out who submitted work but didn't make the cut and why, is just as tantalizing and important to this story. But unfortunately, these written records no longer survive.

Mr. Dermot J. Sherlock, past Secretary General of the Olympic Council of Ireland, explained in a 2012 interview that the records of the IOC were likely shuffled around so many times during the many, many relocations of Irish Olympic Council headquarters, that these records, and the documents and records of most goings on at the IOC, are quite simply gone. Unfortunately, there are no documents on or about the contests or the entries in the RHA Archives, either, nor any ephemera relating to Irish art and the Olympic Art Contests in the National Library of Ireland's copious Ephemera

Collection, and no papers or documents deposited in the National Archives of Ireland pertaining to the art and artists of the Olympic Games.

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 Mr. Liam S. Gogán, at one time 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 (forty-four boxes archived at University College Dublin) have records 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 noted in a subsequent letter to J. F. Chisholm, Honorary Secretary of the Irish Olympic Council, that 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 [McGreevy] who does not paint". Allen suggested that Chisholm and Gogán invite painter "Maurice MacGonigal or another. Artists apparently feel very strongly 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 in conjunction with Mr Sleator for the Painting" (Gogan Papers UCD LA27/1093).<sup>3</sup> It is a rich and fascinating archive, and it may be all that is left on paper about Irish artists and the Olympic competitions.

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3. The author is grateful to Dr Louis de Paor (NUIG) for recommending the Gogán archive.

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, but the sport-inspired theme was sometimes stretched, as in the 1936 Berlin Games when American Roy Harris submitted a symphony that transformed and expanded the Civil War classic, “When Johnny Comes Marching Home”. Was it moving? Yes. Olympic? Doubtful.

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”, a poem 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 choir during the opening festivities that August in Dublin. At the 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 IOC imperative 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 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 – yes, one brother is a hurling champ (which is how he gets access to the murder weapon); but other than fratricide, it is a play about emigration and land ownership, two pressing and undying concerns for the Irish. So how or why did it qualify for the Olympics as a sports-inspired work? Moreover, how does this example of Irish writing assert the new Free State’s health and its culture? One might argue that Murray’s story of brother against brother is a fitting allegory for the recent civil war in Ireland. Indeed, it would be gutsy for the IOC to submit a drama enacting the recent Irish history that had exhausted Ireland and pitched brother against brother; but Murray does not allegorize the Irish Civil War in his play if only because it had not occurred yet. This leads us to two other problems with the Murray entry: the play had already been published when it was submitted by Ireland to the Paris Olympics, so it must have masqueraded not only as an amateur work but as a new work written within the past four years. Murray’s *Birthright* was published in 1910 but submitted nonetheless to the 1924 literature competition. The play, in fact, was a “standard in the Abbey repertoire for twenty-two years,” Murray’s biographer Albert DeGiacomo (2002: 45) tells us. Joseph Holloway even attended its premiere in 1910 and remarked on the event in his diary:

I may say at once that T. C. Murray scored with his lurid melodrama *Birthright* at the Abbey on its first production. . . . Of late, the Abbey has earned for itself [the nickname] “the house of the drama of bad language,” and *Birthright* caps all previous efforts in this direction: it was studded with oaths (in Hogan and O’Neill 2009: 144).

We must, then, wonder how a fourteen-year-old

play “studded with oaths” and dealing with Irish fratricide served the new Irish nation or advertised to the rest of the world the Free State’s healthiness or its national aesthetic? Was there no better literary work in the pool of entries that the Council could submit to the Mixed Literature competition other than Murray’s fourteen-year-old play about Irish fratricide? No other work of literature that dealt squarely with sport and indicated, manifestly, the national well being of Free State Irish culture? Equally important, it is tempting to try and imagine what other plays and what other Irish playwrights may have had to concede defeat to Murray’s *Birthright* that year. It might be that Irish theatre had ventured too far into political territory by 1923-1924. Just one year before the Paris games, for example, O’Casey’s *Shadow of the Gunman* premiered at the Abbey, part one of what Sanford V. Sternlicht calls “the magnificent tragic-comic historical trilogy of the birth trauma of the Irish Free State: *The Shadow of the Gunman, Juno and the Paycock, Plough and the Stars*” (1998: 22). While O’Casey’s plays weren’t inspired by athletic sport, perhaps W. B. Yeats could have submitted one of his plays to argue the case, or Augusta Gregory, for that matter. If they did, and even if they didn’t, we may never know.

Yeats, who had just won the Nobel Prize the year before, had been busy in 1924 with the Aonach Tailteann Games, scheduled to open in Dublin one month after the Paris Olympics. With Gogarty, he co-chaired the Distinguished Visitors Committee responsible for identifying and inviting more than two hundred prominent figures to the Tailteann, and he also judged several of the arts competitions, which included literature, music, painting, dancing, and theatre. Gogarty’s Cuala Press volume, *An Offering of Swans and Other Poems*, published in 1923 by the Yeats sisters, received first prize in literature. W. B. Yeats had written the Preface, and in it he praised Gogarty’s “new sense of English lyric tradition” (Yeats 1990:154). First prize in painting went to the poet’s brother, Jack. Yeats’s involvement in the Tailteann, however, was not enthusiastically endorsed. The newspaper *The Leader*, for example, in an article reporting on the festival’s opening banquet, stated: “the West Briton – Yeats – presided. Why was not a *real* Gael chosen?”

Someone who could speak for the historic Irish nation?” (quoted in Cronin 2003: 401). Peter McBrien, a columnist in *The Irish Review* and another opponent of the involvement of the Anglo-Irish elite in the Tailteann’s literary and artistic events, noted that the traditional literary elite – Yeats, Lennox Robinson, and George Russell, for example – dominated the organization and the awarding of prizes in the literary categories, and though he “scorned the comic spectacle of them handing themselves and their parasites literary laurels,” he added that it was funny enough to compensate Dubliners for the intolerable boredom of the Tailteann games (quoted in Cronin 2005: 63). In addition to awarding the gold, silver, and bronze medals, Yeats also insisted on a fourth prize, which he raised through private donations, to award to a promising young poet under thirty. He gave this award to Iseult Gonne’s husband, Francis Stuart, who remembered the ceremony, biographer Roy Foster notes, “as having the mixture of the serious and the ludicrous, the innocence and the falsity, that he came to associate with Yeats” (2003: 266).

Like Francis Stuart’s comment, it may seem that the story of the Olympic Art Competitions as it has been constructed so far is at times serious and ludicrous and that it moves between innocence and falsity. One of Jack Yeats’s paintings is a good example of such a suggestion. The imperative that a work of art entered into competition should have been executed in the years since the last Olympiad was violated a second time in the Irish art submissions. One of Jack Yeats’s submissions in 1924, his painting “Before the Start”, was completed nine years earlier in 1915. How did it make it into the final submissions sent to Paris? Who was doing the fudging here, ignoring the regulations, looking the other way? The artists? The Irish Olympic Council? Both? Why?

I think that none of this was done with the intent to deceive; instead, it was an effort to represent as richly as possible the artistic culture of the Free State, no matter how contestable the nature of culture or contested the notion of “art”. The Irish Olympic Council had been formed hastily just one year before the Paris Games. It had a lot of work to accomplish

just to *make* it to the Olympics. In addition to identifying artists with artwork already completed and ready to send to Paris with a sport-inspired theme, the council also had to discover and develop its cadre of athletes that included newly organized water polo and association football teams. The Council also needed to ready for Paris several tricolours for the ceremonies; it needed to delegate a coterie of representatives to act there on behalf of the Free State; and just as pressing, it needed to identify a national anthem. *The Dublin Evening Mail* got involved and in 1924 offered a prize of fifty guineas to the writer of the best lyrics for a new national anthem. There were hundreds of entries, but the panel of judges decided that not one “was worthy of fifty guineas or any portion of it” (<http://www.from-ireland.net/origin-irish-national-anthem>). The judges? Lennox Robinson, James Stephens, and William Butler Yeats. The Council decided for the time being to use “A Soldier’s Song”, later officially adopted as the national anthem by the Executive Council of the Irish Free State in 1926. A point worth stressing, then, is that 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 (quoted in McCarthy 2010: 309). It is something of a miracle, then, that the Irish council pulled it off in time.

Yes, there were glitches. Kevin McCarthy notes in his book on the Irish Olympic journey

that

The official report on the Paris Games suggests that although there was a definite Irish team, as many Irish entrants failed to take their places as did so, while the absence of a team photograph from the opening ceremony also suggests that this great opportunity for national identity may well have been diminished. The official report does not acknowledge the participation of an Irish team in the opening ceremony at Paris, with no actual listing of teams which participated but pictures of thirty-nine of the countries participating being included in the report, mostly in alphabetical order. One page includes Greece, Haiti, Holland, Hungary, India and Italy but no reference to Ireland or pictures of an Irish team have been found. However, other evidence has been offered to show that Ireland marched in twenty-fifth position among the forty five nations present, led by high-jumper Larry Stanley (2010: 317).

From the first Olympiad to host the art contests to the last, a total of one hundred and fifty-one 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*. 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, and so forth. 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.

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