

Background Information

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History of the Cultural Olympiad and its Historical Role in the Olympic and Paralympic Games

The idea of a cultural program within the Olympic Games was initially conceived by the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin, as an arts competition that awarded medals in the categories of sculpture, painting, music, literature, and architecture. The subjects chosen were inspired by the 'idea of sport' or related to sports matters. Although the first modern Olympic Games were held in 1896, the arts component was not fully realized until the Stockholm Games in 1912 (Swedish Olympic Committee 1912, 806).

Later, it was decided that the presence of the arts in the Olympics would take the form of cultural exhibitions and festivals rather than competitions, beginning with the Melbourne Games in 1956. The new format was widely welcomed, and the Official Report of the Melbourne Games concluded that the format allowed for a significant commentary on Australia's contribution to the Arts (Garcia 2008, 369).

As a result, successive host cities became increasingly ambitious in their treatment of the arts festivals, and in 1992, Barcelona set a new precedent by establishing the model of the 'Cultural Olympiad', a program for cultural celebrations that lasted the four years preceding the Games and reached their peak during the Games themselves (Olympic World Library n.d.).

Cultural Events at the 1932 and 1984 Los Angeles Olympics

As part of the original conception of the Olympic arts program as a competition, the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics hosted an exhibition that opened simultaneously with the Games on July 30. Prizes were awarded in architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, and other categories, with the requirement that the art be related to "sport." In total, there were more than 1100 exhibits by artists representing 31 nations (Xth Olympiad, 749).



Figure 1: Jury, Painting. Xth Olympiad, Official Report (1933)

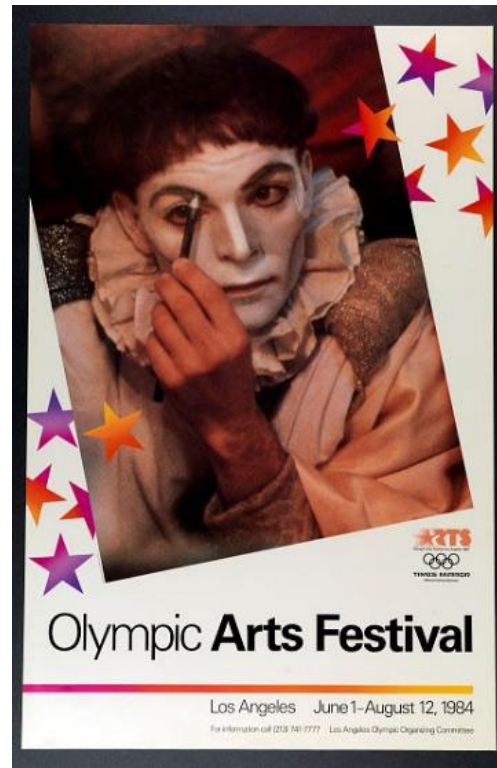


Figure 2: Promotional poster, Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival (1984)

More than 50 years later, the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival modeled the new trend in the cultural component of the Olympics, emphasizing cultural exhibitions and festivals. The Olympic Arts Festival was touted as a showcase for the world's best artists and was advertised to see 'performances and art never before seen in America... clowns from Italy and Australia... acrobats and musicians from the People's Republic of China' (Olympic Arts Festival 1983, 1). The festival, intended to showcase Los Angeles as a major international center for the arts, had a lasting impact on Los Angeles' cultural institutions. It is credited with inspiring the development of Los Angeles Opera (LA Opera 2023) and the construction of the Walt Disney Concert Hall (Swed 2024).

2024 Paris Cultural Olympiad

For the most recent summer Olympics, the Paris 2024 Cultural Olympiad set out to showcase the vitality of France's art and creative sectors by inviting artists, cultural institutions, sports organizations, cities, the state government and the general public to explore the links between culture, sport, and Olympic and Paralympic values (Garcia 2024, 44).

The Cultural Olympiad ran for three years (2021-2024), encompassing 2,596 certified projects that generated 111,066 activities in 5,048 locations all over France (Olympic Museum n.d.). A core facet of the Cultural Olympiad was social inclusion and democratization of culture: around 70% of all projects were free of charge, with activities frequently held outside in public squares, train stations, and rural landscapes to reach new audiences.

Additionally, the Paris Cultural Olympiad was notable for its unprecedented collaboration with LA28 by co-organizing projects like the Catch the Mic poetry handover and the Le Mural documentary to create a shared cultural legacy between host cities. (Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles n.d.)



Figure 1: 'Le Mural' documentary film poster (2024)

Other Olympic Games with Historically Significant Cultural Events

Berlin 1936

The 1936 Berlin Games are widely considered one of the first examples of the use of the Olympic Games for political purposes. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis used the cultural aspect of the Games to project their image, ideology, and influence internationally, and to reinforce their authority domestically (Johnson 2002, 273). During these Games, renowned athlete Jesse Owens took four gold medals in a racist environment where Hitler pushed discriminatory laws and propaganda against anyone not of the “Aryan” race (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum). Moreover, President Roosevelt at the time did not recognize any of the Black athletes who competed and won Olympic medals. Eventually, President Ford honored Jesse Owens in 1976 with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Mexico 1968

The first modern Games to run a year-long Cultural Olympiad, Mexico City was the first host country to turn an emphasis on culture into an integral aspect of the Games themselves. It was also the first 'developing' country to host the Games, and marks the Mexican government's effort to rebrand the country as a modern and stable international player with its use of modernist design, exhibitions, public imagery, and symbolism of peace. While intended to be a showcase of peace and progress, the Games were overshadowed by social unrest and the massacre of unarmed civilians (Ford 2023) on the eve of the Opening Ceremony (Zolov 2004, 159).

Barcelona 1992

Barcelona's Cultural Olympiad established the four-year program, spanning the entire period between games, of cultural initiatives in the city, which culminated in the 1992 Olympic Arts Festival (Lopez 2023). This Cultural Olympiad was remarkable for its focus on urban regeneration, using public art to revitalize neighborhoods.

Sydney 2000

The Sydney Games stand out for using the cultural programs of the Olympic Games as a platform for multiculturalism and to celebrate indigenous arts and culture. Among the four Olympic Arts Festivals that were held leading up to the Games, The Festival of Dreaming stands out as the first of its kind in Australia. It celebrated the world's indigenous cultures and was promoted as one of the largest and most representative indigenous arts festivals held in the world. The festival aimed to increase the awareness and appreciation of Australia's indigenous heritage. It comprised 30 visual arts exhibitions, 14 dance and theatre productions, eight performance troupes, 50 films, a literature program, three concerts, and a number of specially commissioned open events (Garcia 2012, Appendix 1). The content of the festival was determined by an all-Aboriginal managing team and toured nationally and internationally.

London 2012

The London Cultural Olympiad is noted for its focus on disability arts, which brought the disability arts movement into the mainstream more than any previous Games. In earlier Olympiads, disability-related programming such as Unlimited (Unlimited n.d.) would have been associated solely with the Paralympics. By contrast, London 2012 developed its Cultural Olympiad as a single cultural program for both the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and they marketed Unlimited as a flagship project from the outset in 2008, thus generating a multi-year cultural bridge between the two events. (Garcia 2013, 36)

Plans for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games

As of this Spring, LA28 has released its pillars for the 2028 Cultural Olympiad. Below is an excerpt from their official website on the programs currently being planned:

- Sixteen official LA28 Art Posters, eight Olympic and eight Paralympic, will be created by local artists selected through a jury-led process. Olympic art posters are among the most enduring cultural legacies of any Games; LA helped define that tradition in 1984, and the artists commissioned for 2028 will carry it forward. A public unveiling is set for July 2027.
- The Official LA28 Cultural Olympiad Mark ensures that the creative institutions and community organizations that already define this city's cultural life are recognized, amplified and connected to the world's biggest stage — regardless of their size or resources. Applications open across the region in early 2027.
- A Sport on the Silver Screen series will bring 28 sports films to audiences across the city. Free screenings at iconic LA locations, some paired with local food vendors and curated performances.
- A Cultural Olympiad Calendar and Mapping platform will serve as a digital guide to the breadth of programming, launching in January 2028 and gifted to a local partner organization as a lasting community tool long after the Closing Ceremony.
- An underwriting program will reduce or eliminate ticketing and entrance fees for some cultural programming during the Games, inclusive of park stages and film screenings. Programming will reach across Los Angeles City Council districts, LA County facilities, LA28 venue cities, and extend to LA28's national activations.

*Please see the attachment to this backgrounder that provides the most recently available framework for the Cultural Program being planned by the City of Los Angeles and the Cultural Framework being planned by the County of Los Angeles.

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