Olympic Visions: Images of the Games Through History

By Mike O’Mahony. Published in 2012 by Reaktion Books (175 pp., $35.00 US, hardback)

Reviewed by Allen Guttmann, Amherst College, Amherst, MA, USA

From 1960, when Roberto Vighi edited Sport ed Arte, to 2012, when Charles Brock edited the catalog of the National Gallery’s George Bellows exhibition, a number of distinguished art historians have deigned to discuss sports-themed art, but they have rarely been as astute about the sports depicted as about the aesthetics of the depiction. That Mike O’Mahony is among the rare exceptions was clear from Sport in the USSR (2006), subtitled Physical Culture-Visual Culture. That book is solidly grounded in Soviet sports history. Although O’Mahony certainly has some reservations about the overall quality of Soviet art in the Stalinist era, his subtle interpretations of statues by Iosif Chaikov and paintings by Aleksandr Deineka, among others, strongly support his argument that the sports-themed visual culture of the USSR was much richer than we have imagined.

Olympic Visions is a more ambitious book that includes a sketchy account of the visual culture of the ancient games as well as a much fuller, more satisfactory treatment of modern Olympic paintings, statues, posters, films, and miscellaneous “sporting paraphernalia.”

O’Mahony’s iconographic analysis is superb, but the organization of Olympic Images is something of a problem. “Imaging the Ancient Olympics” includes not only a well-known fourth-century prize amphora by Kittos and Myron’s better-known Discobolus, but also a photograph captioned Thomas Sabin of Coventry, Winner of the Three-Mile Bicycle Race. A bronze statue that may or may not be connected to the ancient Heraia appears in Chapter 3, which is devoted to modern women’s sports, some Olympic, some not. Only one of the eight images of Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills shows them as Olympic tennis contestants. Does the photograph of Lenglen in high heels and silk stockings, adorned by what looks like a fur muff, and sitting on a fancy table shed light on her Olympic performance? The chapter on female Olympians is followed by “Celluloid Games,” in which O’Mahony brilliantly contrasts Kon Ichikawa’s Tokyo Olympiad and Leni Riefenstahl’s endlessly controversial Olympia. The assessments are shrewd: “For all its focus on competition, Olympia bears far more similarity to a balletic than a sporting performance” (p. 73). O’Mahony’s final take on l’affaire Riefenstahl is intriguingly tendentious: “Ichikawa’s more democratic, humanist focus can certainly be read as proposing an alternative to Riefenstahl’s emphasis on authoritarian high-achievers” (p. 79).

Unsurprisingly, “The Russians Are Coming! The Olympics and the Cold War,” is the most authoritative chapter. A main focus here is on female athletes, some of whom were mentioned in O’Mahony’s earlier book. Here too, however, there are organizational problems. It is reasonable to have two full-page color images
of photogenic Olga Korbut and forgivable to have none of her more athletically accomplished rival Lyudmila Turischeva, but three images on the Spartakiads seem excessive.

Chapter 6 is a thematic medley: “Olympic Transgressions: Drugs, Political Protest and Terrorism.” Although transgression is the ostensible thread that links the topics of the chapter, the real motive for the grouping seems to be visual. The chapter brings together well-known but still stunning images of marathoner Dorando Pietri’s stagger at the end of the 1908 Olympics, Jesse Owens resting on the grass, side-by-side with Luz Long during the 1936 long jump competition, the victor’s podium in Berlin, the 1968 “Black Power” salute, a hooded “Black September” terrorist, and Ben Johnson’s momentary triumph at the finish of the men’s 100 meters at the Seoul Olympics.

For me, the most excitingly insightful chapter is the one devoted primarily to Olympic posters. I have seen most of them at least once and some of them many times, but I am upset to see how much I failed to see. The comparison of Olle Hjortzberg’s poster for 1912 to Walter van der Ven and Martha van Kuyck’s for 1920, for instance, is a wonderful example of “close reading.” (Lest I seem sycophantic, I note that this chapter includes two out-of-place photographs of Adolph Hitler, nobody’s idea of an Olympic poster boy.)

Chapter 7 is followed by a discussion of Olympic design as manifested in objects as different in size and function as the Olympic stadia and the relay torches designed for 1936 (the first year of the relay), 1948, and 2008. (The pictured stadia include Munich’s and Beijing’s but not the monumental stone structure from 1936.)

Concluding, O’Mahony asserts that we need to know the ways in which the Olympics are “documented and mediated to wider audiences through multiple forms of visual culture” (p. 157). I am persuaded. This valuable book is a good start.

**Race and Sport in Canada: Intersecting Inequalities**

Edited by Janelle Joseph, Simon Darnell, and Yuka Nakumura. Published in 2012 by Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc.  
(300 pp., $35.00 CAD, paperback)

Reviewed by Christine M. O’Bonsawin, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Over the past few decades, sport scholars have assertively rebuked and successfully debunked the popular myth that sport serves as the “great equalizer” for people of all races and ethnicities. In the Canadian context, the majority of members of the dominant (White) citizenry continue to imagine the nation-state as race-less and tolerant. It must be remembered that Canada was founded upon racist, xenophobic, and intolerant principles—namely, colonialism. The ongoing assertion of such doctrines in present-day Canada cannot be silenced under the futile and nonsensical policy of multiculturalism. Sport is no exception to this reality. In the prologue to *Race and Sport in Canada: Intersecting Inequalities*, Rinaldo Walcott aptly asserts that this anthology is ambitious in both its scope and purpose as the editors and contributing authors further invalidate the great equalizer myth of race and sport, and extend their critiques to intersectional analyses. Consequently, readers