

Charles de Coubertin's 'Sports Allegory/The Crowning of the Athletes: New Insights'

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Abstract

Charles de Coubertin, the father of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, was a successful painter in France in the second part of the nineteenth century. One of his paintings is exhibited in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne and appears often in Olympic history publications (Brown, 1997; de Coubertin, 1901–1914; Gafner, 1994; Müller & Wacker, 2008). In most of the published works, however, the authors did not include information about the painting; they only published the reproduction. Although the works do not explain the painting's content, the facts seem sufficient to consider the painting a well-known part of Olympic history. This paper explores the painting's contribution to Olympic history and applies the art historical method of *iconological analysis* (Panofsky, 1955) to relate the painting's content to different contexts, such as historic events or the artist's personal background. Proceedings of Olympic events and writings of Pierre de Coubertin correspond to the Olympic context. Concerning the personal background of the artist, primary sources of Charles de Coubertin discovered in the archives of the de Coubertin family unveil new insights about the painting and its title.

Keywords

Olympic Museum Lausanne, Charles de Coubertin, '*Jeux Olympiques, 1896*', art historical analysis, early Olympic history.

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The Olympic Museum in Lausanne exhibits a painting by Charles de Coubertin (1822–1902), father of the founder of the modern Olympic Games. The artist created this almost square painting (92.5 x 111.5 cm) entitled '*Sports Allegory/The Crowning of the Athletes*' ('*Allégorie aux sports/Couronnement des Athlètes*') in 1896 (Figure 1). Therein, Charles depicted a rather chaotic combination of persons dressed in ancient habits, athletes and their equipment, temple ruins, and good-like persons. The painting does not show Olympic scenes, such as a competition or the location of the first modern Olympic Games. It must be emphasised at this point that, although the artwork has a title, the paper refers to it from now on as the 'painting' only (to be explained later).

Figure 1. Sports Allegory/Crowning of the Athletes



Source: Collections Musée Olympe / 4134 / Y © 2017/ Peter. Grégoire.

De Coubertin's painting has no accompanying text; therefore, a visitor to the museum, when left alone with the overcrowded artwork, has no help when trying to understand its content. Although the painting's creation date, its creator, and its exhibition in the Olympic Museum seem to justify its link to Olympic history, research has not put forth a real explanation for this link until now. Sport historians seem to know of the painting, but they showed little attention to its content previously. The missing explanation in the publications and in the museum's exhibition triggered my interest in researching the painting.

The purpose of this paper is to promote de Coubertin's painting as a subject for academic discourses by focusing on its content. So far, the elements used by the artist to convey his ideas have been overlooked in such discourses. It is important to stress that the analysis of the content presented in this paper reflects the art historical stance, thereby enabling me to utilise my art historical background to the fullest. Consequently, the paper does not include a detailed discussion related to aesthetic and philosophical questions.

In the first part, I elaborate on what is known about the painting and its creator from Olympic history research, drawing on sport history research as well as art history research publications. Central topics are observations made by Brown (1997) and the fact that art historians have shown no interest in de Coubertin's painting thus far. The discussion also addresses why the painting is known under different titles.

The second part of this paper explains which information the artist conveyed in his painting. For reconstructing his ideas, I have used the so-called *iconological analysis*, founded by the art historian Erwin Panofsky (1955). This discipline-specific method for analysing artwork relates the content to different contexts, which then allows the artist's intentions to crystallise. Concerning the elements in the painting, this paper refers to results of a recent study introducing Panofsky's method to sport history research (Camps Y Wilant, 2016).

For the analysis, I have focused especially on the sources which enabled me to link the painting to different contexts. Sources created by Charles de Coubertin, novel because they are unpublished documents and artefacts, were recently discovered in the de Coubertin family archives. These new sources, some of which were accessed for academic purposes for the first time,

bring new insights concerning the painting's title in relation to the findings Brown made 20 years ago. These topics are addressed in the last two sections of this paper.

Literature Review

The first publication mentioning Charles de Coubertin's painting is the dissertation written by the Canadian, Brown (1997). Although his work centred on Pierre de Coubertin's aesthetic ideas, he made some interesting observations concerning Charles de Coubertin and his painting.

For example, Brown (1997) emphasised that the de Coubertin family cultivated an artistic environment. His statements describe the relationship, though not in great detail, between father and son based on the observation of an interaction between them, but not describing it in more detail (p. 67). Brown saw the painting as an expression of the father's appreciation for his son's activities; furthermore, he considered one of Pierre de Coubertin's articles (1894a) an inspirational source for the father and titled the painting '*The reintroduction of the Olympic Games*' (p. 208). Concerning the father's profession as an artist, Brown classified him as a 'moderately successful artist' (p. 28) and stated that father and son 'shared an interest in an allegorical and classical painting style' (p. 31). Brown also pointed to a lack of sources evidencing Pierre's opinion about his father. Concerning the painting, Brown did not offer details about its content, nor did he describe it.

It was not until 2008 that sports historians mentioned the painting again in print; for the years in between, no publications were found which mentioned the painting. The Germans Müller and Wacker (2008) edited an exhibition catalogue describing de Coubertin's painting, pointing out that it has an antique part with 'citizens of Athens' and a modern part 'with modern age athletes' (p. 58). The authors use the title '*Reintroduction of the Olympic Games—Allegory of Sports* for the painting,' emphasising its difficult content with the term 'allegory' (i.e. an artistic means that allows the artist to depict abstract content as, for example, a person) (Olbrich, 1996). Concerning the artist, Müller and Wacker (2008) describe him as a successful painter whose exhibitions over many years had earned for him distinction; a number of different topics were addressed within his oeuvre. Besides the exhibition involving Müller and Wacker, similar ones were conceptualised in Warsaw (Poland),

Cologne (Germany), Paris (France), and Hattingen (Germany). Additionally, the original painting has been shown outside Switzerland, as was the case in Hattingen (Friedrich, 2010).

Art historians representing the only art history publications mentioning the painting wrote the catalogue for the latter exhibition in Hattingen. The authors, Laube and Wick (2010), pointed to the division between the modern and the antique in their description.

In contrast to the small number of publications mentioning de Coubertin's painting, there are more examples containing its reproduction. The *Revue Olympic*, a monthly journal published by Pierre de Coubertin between 1901 and 1914, used reproductions as the cover (Brown, 1997; Müller & Wacker, 2008). Later publications about the Olympics also used a reproduction (Gaffner, 1994; International Society of Olympic Historians, 2009; Müller & Wacker, 2008).

In terms of publications about Charles de Coubertin, an interesting work is Pierre de Coubertin's autobiography edited by Patrick Clastres (2008) in which Pierre shares information about his father's education and artistic friends. Surprisingly, none of Pierre de Coubertin's biographers mentioned the father and his profession (Bermond, 2008; Boulogne, 1977; Callebat, 1988; Eyquem, 1968). The most recent work providing information about Charles de Coubertin is an article written by Yvan de Navacelle, Pierre de Coubertin's great-grandnephew (2015).

In art historical publications, Charles de Coubertin is listed in artist indices (Jourdan, 1859). In addition, his paintings are listed in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, the leading art journal of the nineteenth century (Lagrange, 1861). The fact that the Olympic Museum currently features his painting in an exhibit does not appear in any art historical publication. The most recent mention is within a database about painters at the Fine Art Salon in Paris (Kearns, 2010–13).

The examples above reinforce that an accompanying explanation for the painting is very brief, if present at all. Furthermore, the literature search demonstrates that Charles de Coubertin has been overlooked by sports historians as well as by art historians.

Nevertheless, there is a peculiarity: the authors mentioned above use different titles for the same painting. This observation becomes even more interesting when comparing the titles given

to the painting in articles versus the recent exhibition. The title used by the Olympic Museum, '*Sports Allegory/The Crowning of the Athletes*', does not mention the Olympic Games; rather, it links to a scene in the centre of the painting—the coronation of a rugby player with an olive branch. In 2014, the museum's document information officer, Stéphanie Knecht, informed me that the first inventory, dated around 1953, listed the painting without a title. In contrast, the second inventory in 1970 used the title '*Sports Allegory/The Crowning of the Athletes*' ('*Allégorie aux sports/Couronnement des Athlètes*'), which has been retained until the present. Interestingly, Brown, as well as Müller and Wacker, overlooked these facts in their research. The contradictory views about the title explain why this paper does not include references to the painting according to a specific title.

To summarise, published information about the artist and his painting is scarce and sometimes confusing, as in case of the title, but none of the authors mentioned herein attempt to analyse the painting, perhaps because an appropriate method to decode information in the painting had not been found. Below, a method is described that addresses the difficulties in decoding it.

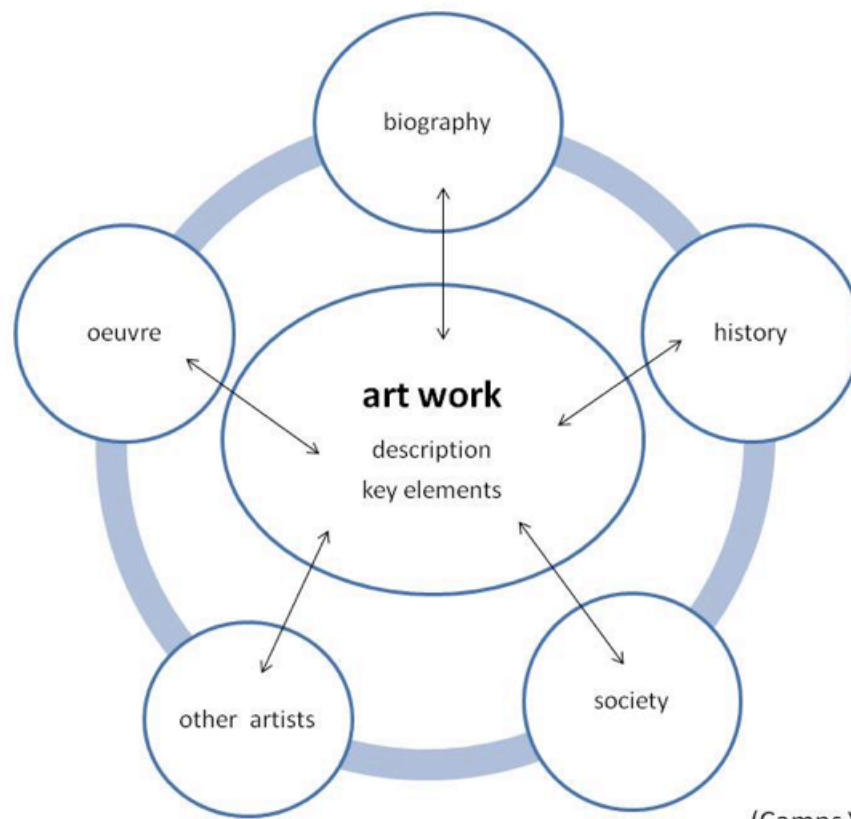
An Art Historical Method for Understanding the Painting's Content

To understand this paper's approach, it is necessary to explain the main facts about the art historical method used, the *iconological analysis*.

Analyses of the content of artworks began in 1912 with the work of the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), founder of the discipline of art history in Germany (Bredekamp et al., 1989–2009; Warnke, 1990). In 1955, his countryman Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) developed Warburg's way of analysing artworks into the well-known *iconological analysis*. Whereas Warburg's achievement was the inclusion of disciplines such as religion and culture to promote understanding about an artwork, Panofsky transformed the incoherent process into a structured three-step approach. This achievement promoted him to the 'most important representative of *iconology*' (Heidt Heller, 1990, p. 165).

The method's purpose is to decode the information an artist conveys in his or her artwork. Figure 2 summarises the steps in the analysis in a comprehensive way (Camps Y Wilant, 2014).

Figure 2. Steps of the iconological analysis based on Panofsky (1955)



(Camps Y Wilant, 2014)

A diagram of *iconological analysis* begins in the centre of Figure 2. Its first step is to describe all elements of an artwork, such as persons, animals, and buildings. The description also takes into account the painting's composition, i.e. the way in which the artists arranged all elements of an artwork. For example, are the figures arranged in groups, or do figures stand out? The description leads to the second step of the analysis, which involves identifying the key elements of an artwork through artistic means such as positioning (when a person is depicted as larger than others). Further, a figure can carry attributes that correspond to an artistic pattern, such as the god Poseidon with his trident. The last step analyses the artwork in relation to different contexts, such as the artist's life or societal events, which help to explain the elements in the painting. Below, these techniques are applied to understanding de Coubertin's painting.

The Painting's Content and Its Corresponding Sources

As explained in the preceding section, there are certain sources that help reconstruct the painter's intention. Accordingly, the more personal these sources are, the closer the analysis comes to the message the artist wished to convey.

For the analysis of the painting's content, I used different types of sources. First, I turned to the ones that have been consulted by scholars for research purposes many times before, such as proceedings of Olympic history as well as documents written by Pierre de Coubertin—all of which are hosted in the archives of the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne. Soon, I realised that these documents did not contain any information about Charles de Coubertin.

This observation made it necessary to search for personal sources by the artist, which I consider the second type of sources. I received access to the private archives of the de Coubertin family descendants. Therein, I discovered artefacts created by Charles de Coubertin, some of which were accessed for academic purposes for the first time. I use the term 'artefacts' because there are not only written documents but paintings as well.

I begin with a short description of steps one and two of the *iconological analysis*. The painting's composition is helpful, as it enables a structured analysis. Charles de Coubertin arranged the painting's elements into two parts. On the painting's right side, he depicted a cheering crowd in ancient clothes assembled near the ruins of the Erechtheion. On the left side and towards the centre, he positioned athletes and the skyline of Paris, with the Eiffel Tower in the background. These architectural elements refer to the letter bands in each top corner of the painting. Paris is represented on the left side and Athens on the right. For Athens, the artist included another artistic means: a depiction of the goddess Athena, wearing as attributes a golden helmet and a corselet atop the pedestal stairs and representing the city of Athens.

Accordingly, concerning the elements in the painting, I concentrated on a few elements—the athletes and the letter bands—, leaving other elements unstudied. The athletes consist of two rowers in a boat, three cyclists on their bicycles, a polo pony with corresponding hands high, a jockey in his silks, a rugby player with a ball under his arm, and a fencer with a sword; all are easily

identifiable by their equipment. The letter bands represent the cities of Athens and Paris. A detailed description of the painting is provided in the study mentioned above (Camps Y Wilant, 2016).

Having briefly explained the first two steps of the analysis, I move on to the last step—the *contextualisation*—in which the sources play an important role. The following sections illustrate how the different types of sources facilitate an understanding regarding the inclusion of the cities of Athens and Paris and some of the athletes in his work.

The cities of Paris and Athens

Because de Coubertin's painting is considered part of Olympic history, the first context that I refer to is Olympic history. A look into the relevant sources of Olympic history confirms that the city of Paris has played an important role. Several important events in Olympic history took place there, such as the founding congress of the International Olympic Committee in 1894 (P. de Coubertin, 1909) and the second modern Olympic Games in 1900.

Considering that de Coubertin created the painting in 1896, between the two events just mentioned, I found no proof that the artist referred to them directly. Furthermore, until now, I have not found a document stating the exact creation date of the painting. Nevertheless, the presentation of the Eiffel Tower opens another way to contextualise the painting to a certain year: 1889 was the year the Eiffel Tower was completed for the World's Fair. For this same event, Pierre de Coubertin organised the Congrès des Exercices Physiques with a school competition in riding and fencing (P. de Coubertin, 1909; Clastres, 2008).

Evidence for the Eiffel Tower representing the year 1889 is given in relation to de Coubertin's composition. The painter Luigi Loir designed the cover for the 1889 World's Fair book (Cornette de Saint Cyr, 2006). Therein, Loir separated objects into two groups in a fashion similar to de Coubertin's and used the architectural element of a temple. However, de Coubertin gave the composition his own 'handwriting' by positioning the elements on opposite sides.

It is in this context that a document from the archives of the Coubertin family descendants comes into play, proving that Pierre was not the only member of the family who was actively involved in World's Fairs. A document found in the collection of Yvan de

Navacelle, which I saw firsthand in May 2015, confirms that Charles de Coubertin participated in an art contest at the 1867 World's Fair (Musée d'Orsay, 1983). Although this is, at this time, the only evidence for his participation therein, his son Pierre begins his autobiography with mention of this event (Clastres, 2008).

Thus, no other documents were identified in which Charles de Coubertin explains the role of Paris in his painting in more detail. However, a document that fosters my observation concerning the 1889 Olympic congress is Charles de Coubertin's diary, presently kept in the Archives d'Histoire Contemporaine of the Centre d'Histoire des Sciences Politiques for archival reasons. As the diary is not publicly accessible, I cannot provide further details about the entries at this point in time. However, the editor of Pierre's autobiography, Patrick Clastres, informed me via email in March 2017 that the diary's publication is planned for the end of this year. Although the diary covers a later space of time (1891–1895), it is important to stress that Charles commented about many of his son's activities therein.

Another aspect that has to be considered regarding the city of Paris is the painter's personal link to the city. The fact that the Coubertin family owned a mansion at 20, rue Oudinot, in which Charles had his studio, allows the assumption that the artist had a strong link to the city.

Concerning Athens, there are two documents that provide evidence of its role in Olympic history. First is the report of the initial Olympic Games in 1896 (Lambros & Politis, 1896). Further, there is a document explaining that Athens played a role in Olympic history some years earlier. In 1894, Pierre de Coubertin spoke at the Parnassos Society in Athens, speaking about the city's 'white marble dress' (P. de Coubertin, 1894b, pp. 287-288). In terms of sources for Athens, Charles captured the description of the stone in the Erechtheion. Further, he also mentions his son's journey to Athens in his diary. However, as mentioned earlier, I cannot go into details here. Unfortunately, concerning the artefacts in the family archives, no document has been found to date that relates Charles de Coubertin to Athens. For example, the sketchbooks of his journeys, which I consulted as part of the private collection of Jacques de Navacelle in June 2014, did not confirm any relations with the city, country, persons, or events there.

The sources used for this part of the *iconological analysis* prove that the elements in Charles de Coubertin's painting refer to certain

events of Olympic history that took place in the cities of Paris and Athens. In addition, there is evidence that the artist was informed about the activities of his son.

The athletes

A closer look into the painting raises a question about the criteria Charles de Coubertin used for selecting the athletes he depicted in his painting. Some athletes represent sports which had been part of the programme of the first modern Olympic Games. According to the 1896 official report, the sports for the first modern Olympic Games were 'fencing, cycling, athletics, lawn tennis, weight lifting, swimming, wrestling, gymnastics and shooting' (Lambros & Politis, 1896). Polo and rugby were added in 1900 according to Mérillon's report (1900).

Although I did not find documents in which Charles refers to the athletes directly, certain sources have been helpful in this regard. From the sources identified and the almost central positioning given to the athletes by the artist, I concentrate on polo and rugby. For these sports, Olympic history sources give two facts. The documents of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC's) 1894 founding congress state that 'different ball sports [and ...] equestrian sports' were on the selection list for the first Olympic Games, but the latter were cancelled because of 'transportation problems with the horses' (P. de Coubertin, 1909, p. 98; Krayner, 1996, p. 43). As some members of the French National Olympic Committee were representatives of associations and clubs associated with various sports (P. de Coubertin 1909), I assume that the sports selection of the 1894 congress were influenced by these persons.

In addition, Pierre de Coubertin's writings provide examples demonstrating that his personal sports preferences might have influenced the choices of polo and rugby. He wrote several articles about polo for different journals, fostering the assumption concerning a personal interest (P. de Coubertin, 1890, 1893, 1915). In his autobiography, Pierre mentions the family horses at Mirville Castle (Clastres, 2008). Accordingly, there is another factor related to the Coubertin family: the proximity of their castle in Mirville to Dieppe, where the first polo match took place in 1880 (Deauville International Polo Club, 2014). Pierre de Coubertin (1891) also wrote articles about rugby. Durry (1996) discovered that Pierre

was a referee for a match in 1892, and Pierre mentions it in his 1909 publication.

In terms of evidence for Charles' choice of rugby, two sources are helpful. In 1892, he drew a watercolour entitled '*Ball game in the Bois de Boulogne*' (Müller & Wacker, 2008, p. 57). Although the title mentions a ball game, the artwork can be seen as evidence for his familiarity with rugby because, at that time, three types of ball games were popular in France: football, rugby, and a mixture of both (Guillain & Porte, 2007; Lubar 2008). The second piece of evidence is a note in his diary describing a rugby match.

So far, both types of sources provide evidence to explain the elements that Charles de Coubertin depicted in his painting. Taking into account that polo and rugby were part of the second Olympic Games, which took place long after he created the painting, I assume that Charles represented his son's personal sports preferences. Particularly, the articles and watercolour foster the assumption of a personal preference for these sports, and Charles' comments in his diary concerning the events organised by Pierre as well as his own sport activities further that impression.

New Information Concerning the Painting's Title

Among the artefacts of Charles de Coubertin, there is a piece of evidence which unveils groundbreaking information concerning the painting's title. I discovered a photograph showing a preparatory sketch for the painting in the so-called *Album* in which the artist collected information about his paintings and his participations in the Fine Art Salon.

The differences between the elements of the painting and those of the sketch allow me to classify the photograph as a preparatory sketch. For example, in the sketch, the figure above the goddess Athena—the woman on the pedestal stairs in the centre of the painting—holds a javelin in his left hand. Additionally, the rocks in the foreground are accompanied by smaller stones. The photograph is, at this point in time, the most important source related to the painting, not only because it is a preparatory sketch corresponding to the painting, but even more so because it provides information about its title. Below the photograph, Charles annotated '*Jeux Olympiques, 1896*'. Thus, this photograph corresponds to the original title. This discovery resolves the contradiction regarding the titles attributed to the painting in sport history up until now.

Figure 3. Charles de Coubertin, 'Jeux Olympiques, 1896', *Album*



Source: Collection Gilles de Navacelle, photograph: Camps Y Wilant.

Findings of the *Iconological Analysis* in Relation to Brown's Observations

With this new information drawn from the *iconological analysis*, it is possible to take up the state of research concerning de Coubertin's painting. Particularly Brown's (1997) findings are of interest, because, as mentioned above, the literature search demonstrated that Brown provided more information about the painting and analysed it in more detail than his colleagues. The findings of my analysis permit me to comment on three of Brown's findings.

First, as unveiled in the previous section, Brown was wrong about the title. An observation which Brown shares with all his other

colleagues. Second, Brown observed an existing connection between the painting and articles written by Pierre de Coubertin. For example, he pointed to the chronological difference between the article 'Le Rétablissement des Jeux Olympiques' (P. de Coubertin, 1894a) and the creation of the painting. Unfortunately, he overlooked that Pierre wrote many articles about the sports depicted in his father's work. Finally, Brown was right about the artistic environment of the Coubertin family, but he was wrong in his characterisation of the father's professional career. Instead of being an unsuccessful painter, the sources cited in this paper give evidence that Charles de Coubertin was among the most highly regarded artists exhibiting at the famous Fine Art Salon in Paris (Kearns, 2010–13; Müller & Wacker, 2008).

The comparison of the results of the *iconological analysis* and Brown's observations demonstrates that the lack of adequate sources 20 years ago hindered Brown in evaluating his observations. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that Brown observed very carefully the relationship between father and son; further, his observations addressed the artist and his painting.

Conclusions

My paper presents a new way of looking at the content of Charles de Coubertin's painting and unveils new information about the supposed well-known work in the collection of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

By choosing the method of the *iconological analysis* according to Panofsky (1955) I opted for an approach which focuses on content (i.e. the painting's elements). The defined set of contexts to which the elements relate gave me direction in my literature search. On the one hand, I was able to link the painting's elements to different events in Olympic history between 1889 and 1896, the painting's year of creation. On the other hand, the evidence provided manifests a strong affinity for Pierre de Coubertin's personal sport preferences, as this was the case for rugby and equestrian sport.

All findings of the third step in the analysis, the contextualisation, would have remained assumptions without some personal information from the artist. It was the discovery of sources in the private archives of the Coubertin family descendants that enabled me to reconstruct this personal context to some extent.

In particular, the artefacts by Charles facilitated verification of the information depicted. For example, Charles was informed of his son's activities and sports preferences during the early years of Olympic history.

Another contribution to sport history research is that the discovery of primary sources made it possible to take up earlier academic findings and elaborate on them, as with Brown's observations.

The most important contribution is that my research unveiled the painting's original title '*Jeux Olympiques, 1896*'. Knecht, the document information officer of the Olympic Museum, informed the author in an email sent in April 2017 that information about the painting's original title was added to the museum's database.

In terms of constraints, I want to emphasise that the artefacts discovered represent various types of sources and a fragmented view of the artist's way of seeing the world. Accordingly, the findings seem to raise more questions concerning the painting's content instead of answering them.

Concerning future research, I hope that additional documents in the Coubertin family archives will answer questions regarding the exact date of the painting's creation as well as the commissioning question. Moreover, there are elements in the painting for which notes from the artist are still missing.

In sum, with this paper, I demonstrate that Charles de Coubertin's painting, '*Jeux Olympiques, 1896*' is an interesting source for the early years in Olympic history, due to its complex content. Although questions regarding the title have been uncovered, parts of its content are still to be decoded.

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