

1. Mario Gros, official design of a postcard for the World Cup in Italy, 1934. Photo: <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/0500672401> (access date: 16.03.2023)

2. Franz Würbel, official poster of the Olympic Games in Berlin, 1936. Photo: private collection

3. Sanzo Wada, official design for the poster of the Tokyo 1940 Olympics, 1940. Photo from: Organizing Committee, *Report of the Organizing Committee on Its Work for the 12th Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo until the Relinquishment*, Tokyo, 1940, p. 138

Football, decathlon and the martial arts

The Axis Powers and the visual propaganda of the international mega sporting events: 1934-1940

Przemysław Strożek

Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Archiv der Avantgarden – Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

The most important international mega sporting events: the Summer and Winter Olympic Games and the football World Cups, were used by fascist regimes to enhance a nation's strength, prestige and imperialist ambitions. Thus they often anticipated military alliances and global conflicts. The historical testimonies of this were the 1930s-1940s events, organized and planned to be staged in those fascist states, which in 1940 would form a military alliance known as Axis Powers: fascist Italy – Nazi Germany – fascist/imperial Japan. The Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) awarded Italy to host the 1934 World Cup, while International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded Germany with the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin and the 1936 Winter Olympic Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. In the 1940s, several planned mega events were awarded to Japan and Italy, including the 1940 Olympic Games in Tokyo, the Winter Olympics in Sapporo, and the 1944 Winter Olympics in Cortina d'Ampezzo. These three events, however, were cancelled because of the outbreak of World War II, just like the 1942 World Cup, for which Nazi Germany formed a bid in 1936¹.

The above enumeration of organized and planned World Cups and the Olympic Games awarded to Italy, Germany, and Japan testify that those three countries dominated the mid-1930s – early 1940s global sports. The influential sports officials, including IOC president Henri Baillet-Latour and the founder of the Olympic movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, expressed positive views about the political leadership and state support for sport in fascist states². But, the 1934



¹ See **K. Moore**, *A second "Maracanzo"? The 2014 FIFA World Cup in historical perspective*, [in:] *FIFA World Cup and Beyond: Sport, Culture, Media and Governance*, Ed. **K. Bandyopadhyay**, **S. Naha**, **Sh. Mitra**, London – New York 2018, p. 9.

² See **M. Roche**, *Mega-events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture*, London – New York 2000, p. 118.



³ An introduction to the idea of “Axis Powers studies” was published in 2004. J. P. Sottile (*Axis Studies: A Critical Re-Evaluation of the Comparative Study of Fascism*, [in:] *Japan in the Fascist Era*, Ed. E. B. Reynolds, New York 2004) proposed an analysis of the transformations of fascist ideology in the three countries of Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis. The perspective suggested by Sottile was later adopted by, among others, in J. Siep’s book on the propaganda of motherhood in Japan, Germany and Italy in the 1930s: *Nationalisierte Mütterlichkeit als Phänomen der Moderne: Frauenzeitschriften in Japan, Deutschland und Italien in den 1930er Jahren* (München 2011).

⁴ J. P. Sottile, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

World Cup, the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the planned 1940 Tokyo Olympics were not only about sports. They were predominantly significant political mass events that strengthened the ties between these three countries. Most notably, the Berlin Olympics, organized in August 1936, was essential for Italian, German and Japanese officials to meet and discuss further collaboration. What followed soon were economic and military alliances. Just three months after the event – on 25 October 1936 – a coalition treaty was signed by Germany and Italy. Furthermore, on 26 November 1936, the Anti-Comintern Pact was concluded between Germany and Japan, which Italy joined on 6 November 1937. These developments gave rise to the military alliance known, from 1940, as the Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis, or simply, the Axis Powers.

A comparative study on international sporting events organized in fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and planned in fascist/imperial Japan offers a perfect example of Axis Studies proposed by Joseph P. Sottile³. He suggested that studies of fascism and Nazism had often focused on the study of fascist ideologies within a single country; this is most often Benito Mussolini’s Italy or Adolf Hitler’s Germany. In Sottile’s view, not enough focus was given by scholars to Japan, or comparative research considering transformations of fascism across all three countries. Instead, Sottile sought elements common for all three countries, stressing that: fascist Italy’s New Man and New Rome, Nazi Germany’s *Volkism* and spiritual Aryanism, and Japan’s promotion of *kokutai* and State Shinto were vehicles to achieve national solidarity⁴. Developing this statement further on, what was common to all three fascisms was the official interest in the uses of sports and visual propaganda for disseminating these ideological concepts.

Taking into account the need for a comparative approach in Axis Studies, I focus in my essay on the visual propaganda created at the time of sporting events organized in Italy and Germany: the 1934 World Cup and the 1936 Berlin Olympics, as well as the planned 1940 Olympic Games in Tokyo. I focus on a comparative analysis of depictions of athletes connected to those events to investigate similarities and differences in artistic practices under fascism. I treat paintings, sculptures, drawings, films, photography, poster and stamp design as non-hierarchical visual sources, which all together became a testimony of the ideological uses of sport in Italy, Germany and Japan. By doing this, I investigate the complex relationships between sport, art, design and politics to show how international mega sporting events were used to achieve the political goals right before and right after the formation of the Axis Powers.

I begin by showing how Italian artists shaped figures of footballers as unbeatable fascist champions. Next, I discuss how decathletes gained a prominent position in German art under Nazism as multifunctional ancient heroes with perfect bodies capable of winning

in every sporting discipline. And ultimately, I focus on the artistic depictions of traditional martial arts: *kendo* (a Japanese variation of fencing), *kyudo* (Japanese archery) and *sumo* (a Japanese variation of wrestling) as an exemplification of national sports in official modern art of fascist Japan. I conclude that each of the three regimes developed a specific type of sport to be promoted at the sporting events they hosted. In this way, depictions of football in fascist Italy were closely linked to the 1934 World Cup, while decathlon in Nazi Germany and martial arts in fascist/imperial Japan were an embodiment of the 1936 and 1940 Olympic Games, respectively. Despite fundamental differences in sporting topics and artistic styles, from futurism and *novocento* in Italy to neoclassical art under Nazism, and East Asian traditional arts, the depictions of athletes across the three regimes represented their militarist and imperialist ambitions just before the beginning of World War II.

The heroes in blue kits. Visualizing the 1934 World Cup in fascist Italy

According to the Italian sports historian Gigliola Gori, the critical aim of Mussolini's fascism was transforming the Italian nation into a nation of athletes⁵. Other sports historians, Robert Gordon and John London noted that sporting heroes started to be regarded as “embodiments of a core fascist myth, that of the ‘New Man’, the perfected fascist individual wholly imbued, in body and spirit, with a near-mystical devotion to the state”⁶. The sport was central to the fascist propaganda, which was to be confirmed in the global successes of Italian athletes in the international arena. In the 1930s, Italy gained the legendary second place at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, while the 1934 and 1938 victories of the *Azzurri* national football team (the Blues)⁷ at the two subsequent World Cups were of enormous importance to elevating football to the status of new Italian religion⁸.

The 1934 World Cup was awarded to Italy in October 1932 at the FIFA Congress in Stockholm and gave impetus to build new stadiums and modernize the country's infrastructure. The political aim was clear: to use football as a local and international platform for Italian fascism. The tournament was held in eight cities: Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, Rome, Trieste and Turin. Thus the distribution of the games across the Apennine Peninsula – from Liguria to Friuli Venezia Giulia, and along from Lombardy to Campania was a clear indication of the national overtones of the championship and the strengthening the unity of Italy's regions as one nation. The country cheered on the national team regardless of regional differences for the first time on such a scale. The 1934 football success was the source of national pride, greatness and power in Mussolini-



⁵ G. Gori, *Model of Masculinity: Mussolini, the “new Italian” of the Fascist Era*, [in:] *Superman Supreme: Fascist Body as Political Icon – Global Fascism*, Ed. J. A. Mangan, London 2000, p. 43.

⁶ R. S. C. Gordon, J. London, *Italy 1934: Football and Fascism*, [in:] *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup*, Ed. A. Tomlinson, Ch. Young, Albany 2006, p. 45.

⁷ *Gli Azzurri* (The Blues) is a nickname for Italian national team. Since 1911 Italian soccer players wore blue kits and white shorts. See P. Agnew, *Forza Italia: The Fall and Rise of Italian Football*, Berkshire 2007, p. 55.

⁸ More on complex relationships between football and fascism read: S. Martin, *Football and Fascism: National Game under Mussolini*, Oxford 2004.



4. Achille Funi, *Italian ancient Games*, mural, 5th Triennale Milan, 1933 (destroyed). Photo: <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/0500672401> (access date: 16.03.2023)



5. The official design of two stamps for the World Cup in Italy, 1934. Photo: private collection

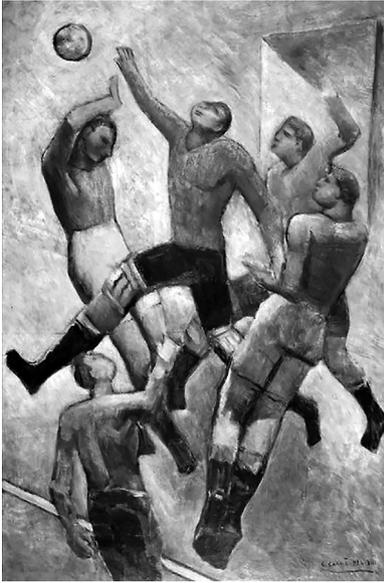


⁹ The first depictions of modern football can be dated by the beginnings of the 1910s, but this motifs began to be vividly present from 1928. More on this read: P. Strožek, *Football*, [in:] *Futurism: A Microhistory*, Ed. S. Bru, L. Somigli, B. Van den Bossche, Cambridge 2017.

ni's country. Thus, it was no surprise that the depictions of an Italian footballer – a victorious fascist, a godlike idol of the masses, a celebrity, a superhuman hero of a nation who never fails – penetrated the public space and the visual culture. It was present in Italian artistic trends of the 1930s, including the Novecento and the futurists. Artists connected to both movements, by then, backed the official propaganda of Benito Mussolini's regime.

Still, before the World Cup and right after Italy received a bronze medal in the football tournament at the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928, football began to be more vividly present in modern Italian art⁹. The futurist Gerardo Dottori created by then one of his best-known paintings, *Football Game* (1928), in which the competing football players in national outfits of *Azzurri* soared toward the sky, evoking the typical motifs in the futurist aesthetics: dynamism, sacral art and the style of aeropainting. In 1928 some other futurists created football-related artworks, including Pippo Rizzo, whose *Football*, exhibited at the Venice Biennale that year, explored the dynamism and motion of football players presented in rural Sicilian areas. This was in line with fascist aims to link sport with modernization programs in every region of unified Italy.

While futurists created the images of footballers bonded with modernization processes, Novecento artists, in turn, associated the national game with ancient traditions. A testimony of this was most notably a mural by [Fig. 4] Achille Funi entitled *Italian athletic games*



6. Carlo Carrà, *Football Game*, 1935. Photo: Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Rome



7. Enrico Prampolini, *Angels of Earth*, 1936, Arte Centro, Milano. Photo: author's collection

prepared for the Fifth Milan Triennale (1933). In this work depicted in neoclassical style, modern football and athletics were juxtaposed with ancient track-and-field sports, including a famous depiction of *Discobolous* by the ancient sculptor Myron. Funi's mural visualized thus a fusion of modernization processes (modern football and modern Olympics) with the eternal concept of the beautiful athletic body (ancient sports), which was connected by a figure holding *fascio littorio* (fasces), a symbol of fascism.

During the 1934 World Cup, 100,000 posters, 300,000 postcards and 1 million stamps [Fig. 5] were put into circulation as the most efficient way to mediate the visual propaganda of the event¹⁰. Luigi Marinati, Gino Boccasile [Fig. 8] and Mario Gros [Fig. 1] made three winning entries in the design competition. The first showed a symbolic, non-figurative connection between the ball, the globe and *fascio littorio*; the second an image of an *Azzurri* – a football player of the national team with a blue kit and white shorts at the moment kicking a ball against the national flags of countries, which competed in the tournament. In contrast, the latter showed a monument to *Azzurri* footballer as a living hero. Finally, by picturing his silhouette from below, Gros gave him a monumental posture of a godlike titan with a fascist salute.

After winning the tournament, Giuseppe Meazza, Gianpiero Combi, and Raimundo Orsi became the undisputed heroes of the masses, the victorious athletes of the young, strong, united Italian



¹⁰ See R. S. C. Gordon, J. London, *op. cit.*, p. 45.



8. Gino Bocasile, the official poster for the 1934 World Cup. Photo: author's collection



9. Mario Moschi, *Footballer*, 1933–1934, postcard. Photo: author's collection

nation. The daily Italian press of the 1930s often featured illustrations glorifying the *Azzurri*, who, thanks to their superhuman abilities, ascend towards the sky, breaking the laws of gravity. The same motives were also present in the arts. A testimony of this was a painting *Football Game* (1935) by Novecento artist Carlo D. Carrà [Fig. 6], who, before World War I, was a member of the futurist group but later painted in neoclassicist style. Another example of elevating football to the status of a new religion was the painting, *Angels of Earth* (1936) by the futurist Enrico Prampolini [Fig. 7]. He sacralized victories of the *Azzurri* by giving them the status of the titular “angels” inscribed in the dynamics of a football match, depicted in a more abstract aesthetics. He pictured their silhouettes in the national outfits above the outline of the Apennine Peninsula, where the tournament they won was played.

The images of Italian footballers created by Novecento artists and futurists were presented to the public for the first time on such a scale at The First National Exhibition of Sporting Arts in Rome, organized by the Italian Olympic Committee in 1935. The task of this exhibition was to select the best works for the Olympic Art Competition on the occasion of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. While not all presented artworks were selected, many focused on the figures of footballers: Ivanhoe Gambini exhibited a painting called *Blue victory*, Giovanni Consolazione painted the match *Bologna–Fiorentina 1:1*, Marisa Mori painted a football match broadcast, and Mario Moschi

created the famous sculpture *Footballer* (1934)¹¹ [Fig. 9]. The latter artwork presented a figure of an *Azzurri* player in motion, relentlessly charging forward. Captured in motion, with his stretched arms, he resembled the depiction of a footballer of a national team from the official World Cup poster from 1934 created by Gino Boccasile. But while the poster showed the player with his stretched arms, who is about to kick the ball, Moschi's sculpture conveyed a more militaristic message by presenting a New Man. He does not retreat from anything and makes maximum effort on his way to victory. Here, a footballer, as a figure of the fascist New Man, marches forward and never turns back. In 1936, Moschi's sculpture was sent to Berlin to represent fascist Italy at the Olympic Art Competition, where it was praised and honoured by the international jury supervised, among others, by most influential German sports officials Theodor Lewald and Carl Diem. It remained in the city, and right after the Olympics, it decorated the Olympic Stadium in Berlin¹².

Nazi decathletes at the Berlin Olympics 1936

While Berlin was awarded the Olympic Games still in 1931 during the times of the Weimar Republic and before the instalment of the Nazi dictatorship, it offered a perfect opportunity for Nazi officials to create ideological links between the Third Reich and classical Greece. Right after Adolf Hitler took power in Germany in 1933, the event was used by the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment to mediate the ideological purposes of Nazism to the broad masses through visualizing sports. Many official posters were designed at that time, including the official design by Franz Würbel from 1935 [Fig. 2]. It depicted a golden, wreathed athlete as an undamaged ancient statue of a godlike figure. The image of this monumental champion was reminiscent of an ancient Greek titan and athlete with a perfect body. It was pictured behind Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and a neoclassicist sculpture of a two-wheeled chariot pulled by four horses, symbolizing peace entering the city and the successful military conquests of Prussia. The raised right arm of the golden champion, however, directed to interpret the gesture not only as the Olympic salute but also as the widely disseminated fascist salute¹³.

Among the posters created for the 1936 Olympics were also those presenting a torch relay across Europe, from the ancient town of Olympia in Greece to the new Olympic Stadium in Berlin. This idea, envisioned earlier by the German sport's official Carl Diem, captured the attention and approval of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. The symbolic torch relay was used to reinforce the claimed genetic link between ancient Greece and Germany under Nazism.

The motif of the torch relay was a pivotal moment in one of the most known films on the Olympic Games: *Olympia* by Leni Riefen-



¹¹ For more on depictions of footballers in fascist art, see P. Strożek, *Futbol - futurizm - faszyzm. Piłka nożna i nacjonalistyczny modernizm we włoskiej kulturze pierwszej połowy XX wieku*, "Didaskalia" 2018, nr 145/146.

¹² The sculpture has been moved and now it is located in the Friedrich-Ludwig-Jahn Sportpark in Berlin.

¹³ The Olympic salute was used among others on the poster depictions during the 1924 Olympic Games. The difference between the Olympic and fascist salute is slight. Whereas the Nazi version of the fascist salute calls for the right arm to be raised upward and thrust forward, with the Olympic salute the same arm is raised upward and extended nearly all the way to the side. However the difference can become negligible. More on this read: G. Walters, *Berlin Games: How Hitler Stole the Olympic Dream*, London 2006.



10. Erwin Huber in Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, 1938, filmstill. Photo: author's collection

stahl (filmed in 1936, premiered in 1938). The movie opened with a Prologue showing the Greek tradition of sports and ancient sculptures presenting the eternal ideal of the perfect sporting body, which dissolves into the figures of modern athletes. These film sequences foreshadow sequences with a torch relay carried by athletic youth from Greece to Berlin. Both motifs presented a journey in time and space, across millennia and miles, to sanction the Nazi Olympics as a true successor to the ancient Games¹⁴.

In Riefenstahl's movie, the most known sporting artwork, the ancient sculpture of a *Discobolus* by Myron, dissolves into the figure of German decathlete Erwin Huber, a leading European in the decathlon discipline [Fig. 10]. From an athletic point of view, the decathlon is regarded as one of the most important and diverse events, reserved for multi-talented track and field athletes. It consists of track and field events, including 100 m, long jump, shot put, high jump, 400 m, 110 m hurdles, discus throw, pole vault, javelin throw, and 1500 m. It was first introduced during the 1912 Olympic Games and was a development of the ancient pentathlon, a contest featuring five track-and-field events. In Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, the decathlon was not only embodied in the figure of Huber as enlivened Myron's *Discobolus*, but this very sports discipline also formed the core of Part Two of the movie. It included the thrilling documentation of this competition won during the 1936 Berlin Olympics by American Glen Morris¹⁵.

Not only in Riefenstahl's movie but most notably in the official Nazi propaganda arts field, the figure of a decathlete, capable of participating in diverse track-and-field disciplines, became one of the most representative sculptural motifs in the Third Reich¹⁶. The figure of a decathlete was a model of a perfect athletic body capable of participating and winning in every athletics discipline. It was sculpted by the most prominent propaganda sculptors of the regime, including Georg Kolbe (*Decathlete*, 1933) [Fig. 11], Richard Scheibe (*Decathlete*, 1936), and Arno Breker (*Decathlete*, 1936) [Fig. 12], the beloved sculptor of Hitler. These three sculptures presented similar depictions of a naked athlete, standing still and reminiscent of ancient Greek statues. They were featured in the official exhibitions to represent the ideology of Nazism: Kolbe exhibited *Decathlete* in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1934, while Scheibe and Breker presented their sculptures of decathletes at the Great German Art Exhibition in Munich in 1937.

Breker's *Decathlete* presented a nude, beautiful, athletic man standing still in anticipation: severe and calm. He is staring into the void and is not carrying any sports equipment, such as a discus or a javelin. Nevertheless, he is capable of competing in every track and field discipline, and the only "attribute" defining his character as an athlete – as it were with Olympians in ancient Greece – was his athletic, perfect body. His nudity pointed to the timeless idea of physical beauty and classlessness, typical of the totalitarian ideology

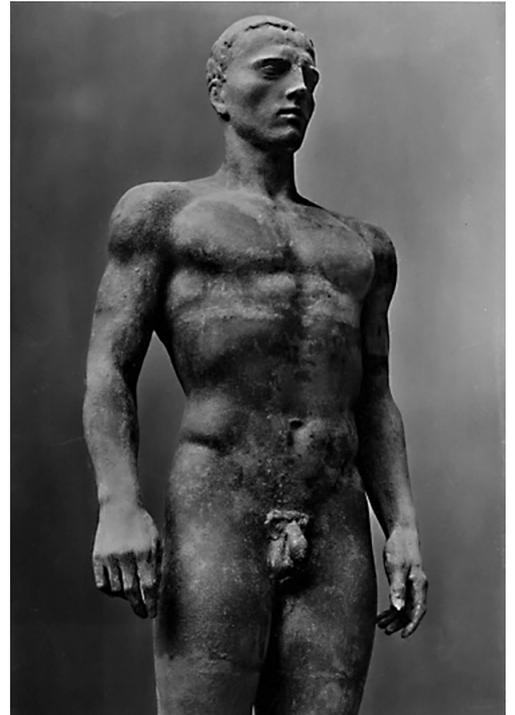
¹⁴ See D. G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, Chichester 2014, p. 1.

¹⁵ Later in her memoirs Riefenstahl admitted that she and Morris had an affair. See T. Downing, *Olympia*, 2nd Ed., London 2012, p. 104.

¹⁶ Th. Reuter, *Helden der Schönheit. Körperkult im Nationalsozialismus*, [in:] *Traditionsanspruch und Traditionsbruch. Die deutsche Kunst und ihre diktatorischen Sachwalter*, Ed. G. Bollenbeck, Th. La Presti, Wiesbaden 2002, p. 23.



11. Georg Kolbe, *Decathlete*, 1933, postcard. Photo: author's collection



12. Arno Breker, *Decathlete*, 1936, postcard. Photo: author's collection

of National Socialism. After all, all citizens of Nazi Germany could strive to transform their bodies according to the everlasting ideals of Greek culture. More than two thousand years passed between the first documented Games in 776 BC and the Nazi Olympic Games in 1936. Meanwhile, the world was transformed due to the Industrial Revolution and mechanical progress. And yet, the ideal of masculinity and the male athletic body has remained unchanged. Because of this, Breker and many other German sculptors have modelled their figures on athletes competing in ancient pentathlon and modern decathlon – the most sublimated sport discipline of the modern Olympic Games. A model for Breker's sculpture was a 21-year-old German decathlete Gustav Stührk.

Although Breker's artwork was deprived of movement, typical for the poetics of the Olympians' struggle, one is nevertheless convinced of his extraordinary physical prowess. It resembles Breker's other sculptures of muscular men who, according to art historian Stephen Kasher: "guard Führer, Reich, and Volk – and Manhood itself"¹⁷. Breker's immobile sculptures, similarly to the work of other German sculptors, aimed to cultivate the myth of the Aryan race,



¹⁷ S. L. Kasher, *The Art of Hitler*, "October" 1992, No. 59, p. 57.



¹⁸ See J. A. Mangan, *Icon of Monumental Brutality: Art and the Aryan Man*, [in:] *Shaping the Superman: Fascist Body as Political Icon – Aryan Fascism*, Ed. *idem*, London 1999, p. 146.

¹⁹ More on the history of Olympic Art Competitions read: R. Stanton, *The Forgotten Olympic Competitions: the Story of the Olympic Art Competitions of the 20th Century*, Victoria 2000.

²⁰ See Organisationskomitee für die XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936, *The XIth Olympic Games Berlin, 1936: Official Report*, Berlin 1936, Vol. 2, p. 474.

depicted an archetype of masculinity in the form of a naked, and thus a militarized body, standing still and waiting, prepared for the impending fight/battle/war¹⁸.

The Nazi propaganda officials most valued sculpture as an artistic genre. While painting was deemed personal and private, the sculpture was seen as public and placed in an open space to highlight the ideological goals of the regime to the masses. Consequently, the sculptures of beautiful, disciplined and heroic athletes were often displayed in public areas. They were erected close to government buildings and modernized stadiums, including the Olympic Park planned by Werner March for the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The *Reichsportfelde*, the first Olympic Park in a modern sense, included around 20 figurative sculptures of athletes created by the official propaganda sculptors, including Karl Albiker, Josef Wackerle, Kolbe and Breker.

Sport-themed sculptures dominated the German section of the 1936 Olympic Art Competition, which was opened by Goebbels in the Messe Berlin during the Berlin Olympics. Olympic Art Competitions were a part of a cultural program of every Olympic Games organized between 1912–1948 and aimed to select the best sport-related artworks. Artists, just like athletes, were awarded gold, silver and bronze medals. Consistent with Pierre de Coubertin’s cultural and political conservatism, these art competitions would predominantly feature traditional, figurative art. However, a look at the regulations governing these competitions reveals that the underlying aesthetic was one of mimesis – what the Olympic judges were looking for were works imitating the “beauty of sport”, the harmony and elegance of the athletic body, of heroic and courageous sporting rivalry, by following perceived ideals of classical Greco-Roman art¹⁹.

At the 1936 Olympic Art Competition in Berlin, several hundred artists from 23 countries exhibited more than 700 artworks on sport-related topics. Axis countries won 19 (out of the total 32) medals across all artistic disciplines: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and literature. Nazi Germany was ranked first with 12 medals, fascist Italy came second with five, and imperial Japan came ninth with two bronze medals. The international jury of the 1936 Olympic Competition was composed of the members of the active German committees and two foreign representatives for each artistic genre. The sculpture jury included John Lundquist (Sweden), Antonio Maraini (Italy), Georg Kolbe, Ferdinand Liebermann and Ludwig Isenbeck from Germany²⁰. The gold medal was awarded to an Italian sculptor, Farpi Vignoli, for his *Sulky Driver*, while Arno Breker’s *Decathlete* received a silver medal. The latter was then situated later in the Olympic Park, in front of the House of German Sports.

Towards the 1940 Olympic Games: connecting classicism with fascist modernity

According to the 1936 Olympic Art Competition in Berlin catalogue, Japanese artists exhibited 13 sculptures and reliefs and over sixty paintings and graphic artworks, a massive number compared to other national sections²¹. They won their first two medals: bronze in painting for *Ice Hockey* by Takaharu Fujita and bronze in drawings and watercolours for *Classical Horse Racing* by Sujaku Suzuki. *The Official Report* of the 1936 Games reproduced a sculpture of a sumo wrestler by Yoshioki Hasegawa placed in the centre of the Japanese section of the exhibition [Fig. 13]. Those artworks suggested a specific fusion of traditional warriors and sporting rivalry linked with modern-day sports disciplines. The crucial for the Japanese section was to exhibit depictions of Asian athletes as robust, self-assured competitors striving for victory in the present and the past²². The strong showcase of Japanese art during the Olympic Art Competition in Berlin had a political background. It was aimed at reinforcing the cultural relations between the Third Reich and Japan.

Just one day before the Berlin Olympics opened, on 31 July 1936, Tokyo was awarded to host the next Olympic Games in 1940. Germany and fascist Italy openly supported Tokyo's bid for this prestigious event²³. The 1940 Olympics in Tokyo was meant to coincide with the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of the Empire of Japan²⁴. However, the international mega sporting event, together with the Olympic Art Competition, scheduled for the following dates: 5 September – 6 October 1940, were cancelled already in 1938. The exhibition was planned to be held in the Tokyo Prefectural Art Gallery and organized under the supervision of the Japanese Sports Arts Association²⁵. It also intended to include, for the first time, photography and industrial arts as artistic disciplines next to painting, graphic arts and sculpture²⁶. As the authors of the *Report of the Organizing Committee* underlined:

The preparations for the art competitions were taken up by the Japanese Sports Arts Association, which has for its members practically all of the eminent artists in Japan. [...] When the Regulations for the arts competitions were ready for printing, all other preparations were well underway, and the negotiations with the National Olympic Committees abroad were about to begin, the Games were cancelled²⁷.

Still, before 1939, the Japanese Sports Arts Association opened an exhibition of sporting artworks held under the auspices of the Ministry of Education to select the best sport-themed artworks for the Olympic Competition. Three reproductions of artworks were featured in the *Report*. They showed a drawing of *Kendo* by Sadaji Hirasawa [Fig. 14], a sculpture of an archer (*kyudo*) by Eiji Yoshida, and



²¹ See *Olympische Kunstausstellung. Berlin, 15. Juli – 16. August 1936*, Berlin 1936, pp. 33–37.

²² More on the Japanese section of the Olympic Art Competition read: P. Strożek, *Towards the 1940 Summer Olympics in Tokyo: The fascist aesthetics of depictions of athletes at the 1936 Olympic Art Competition in Berlin vis a vis studies focusing on the Axis Powers (Rome–Berlin–Tokyo)*, [in:] *Metafiguracje – omdlenie = Metafigurations – Fainting: Sławomir Lipnicki*, Sc. Ed. M. Kaźmierczak, A. Zelmańska–Lipnicka, Gdańsk 2021, pp. 91–101.

²³ Ch. M. Sell, *The 1940 Tokyo Games: The Games that Never Were – The Art Contests and the XIIth Olympiad*, "Journal of Olympic History" 2017, No. 2, p. 41.

²⁴ See J. Traganou, *Tokyo's 1964 Olympics Design as a "Realm of [Design] Memory"*, [in:] *Sport, Memory and Nationhood in Japan: Remembering the Glory Days*, Ed. A. Niehaus, Ch. Tagsold, London – New York 2013, p. 69.

²⁵ See Ch. M. Sell, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²⁶ See *ibidem*, p. 48.

²⁷ *Organizing Committee of the XII Olympiad of 1940 in Tokyo, Report of the Organizing Committee on Its Work for the 12th Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo until the Relinquishment*, Tokyo 1940, pp. 88–89.



13. Yoshioki Hasegawa, *Wrestler*, 1936, Japanese section at the Olympic Art Competition in Berlin, 1936. Photo from: Organisationskomitee für die XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936, *The XIth Olympic Games Berlin, 1936: Official Report*, Berlin 1936, Vol. 2, p. 1118



14. Sadaji Hirasawa, *Kendo*, before 1939. Photo from: Organizing Committee, *Report of the Organizing Committee on Its Work for the 12th Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo until the Relinquishment*, Tokyo 1940, p. 165



²⁸ See J. R. Abel, *The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan's Global Engagement, 1933-1954*, Honolulu 2015, p. 129.

²⁹ Organizing Committee of the XII Olympiad of 1940 in Tokyo, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

³⁰ J. Traganaou, *Designing the Olympics: Representation, Participation, Contestation*, London - New York 2016, p. 61.

a sculpture presenting *An Impression of Sumo* by Yoshioki Hasegawa [Fig. 15], the same artist, who already exhibited at the 1936 Olympic Art Competition in Berlin.

All reproduced artworks showed the traditional Japanese martial arts culture: from *kendo* (a Japanese variation of fencing) through *kyudo* (Japanese archery) to *sumo* (a Japanese variation of wrestling). All those disciplines were also meant to be vividly present in sports propaganda during the 1940 Tokyo Olympics. The promotional books by Tokyo Olympic Committee described *kendo*, archery, *sumo* and other martial arts as exemplifying the spirit of ancient Japan that corresponded with the Olympic Games spirit²⁸. They were also featured in visual propaganda materials, including posters, postcards and stamps.

The Japanese Sports Arts Association launched a sports campaign in sculpture, drawing and painting and a competition related to posters, stamps and seal designs. According to the *Report*, more than 100,000 submissions were received²⁹. An art historian, Jilly Traganaou, underlined that:

most entries to the 1940 Games poster competition were dominated by historicism based on either Japanese or Western historical references, and depicted male athletes whose strong-body idealism alluded to militarism. These idealized representations of heroic figures, which had become standard in modern Olympic posters, adopted classicist design languages and carried strong affinities to the fascist aesthetics of Nazi Germany³⁰.



15. Yoshioki Hasegawa, *An Impression of Sumo*, before 1939. Photo from: Organizing Committee, *Report of the Organizing Committee on Its Work for the 12th Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo until the Relinquishment*, Tokyo 1940, p. 89



16. Norio Kuroda, official poster of the Tokyo Olympics, 1938-1939. Photo from: Organizing Committee, *Report of the Organizing Committee on Its Work for the 12th Olympic Games of 1940 in Tokyo until the Relinquishment*, Tokyo 1940, p. 88

The winner of the design of the Olympic stamp was Taiji Hiramoto, and the winner of the poster was Norio Kuroda [Fig. 16]. The poster showed Emperor Jimmu, the legendary founder of Japan as an archer (*kyudo*). He is situated against the backdrop of Mount Fuji. Emperor Jimmu is always depicted carrying a bow and was described as “divine might” or “god-warrior”.

The Kuroda’s design was, however, ultimately not accepted by art critics, and one can read in the *Report*: “due to minor opposition to the first selected poster design, the Publicity Section requested Mr. Sanzo Wada to draw a design for the poster of the Olympic Games”³¹. Kuroda’s poster was probably directed too much towards ancient times and was not linked with fascist contemporaneity. In this context, the design by Sanzo Wada connected the past with the present [Fig. 3]. He depicted a figure of a muscular athlete raising his right hand in a fascist gesture. A massive shadow of a samurai – performing the same motion – hovers over his figure. In this way, Sanzo Wada sanctioned the unbreakable link between traditional Japanese warrior culture and martial arts and Olympic modern sports in contemporary a fascist Japan. Still, this design was a testimony that Japanese artists and designers were increasingly creating a common visual vocabulary with the German Nazis and Italian fascists to highlight the role of sport in the ideological and visual propaganda of the regime.



³¹ Organizing Committee of the XII Olympiad of 1940 in Tokyo, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

Conclusion

As I intended to show, many artists and designers from the countries, which would form the Axis Powers, focused on specific types of athletes and sports that would fit the propaganda of particular sporting events they hosted. In 1934 the depictions of *Azzurri* penetrated Italian art for the first time on such a scale; in 1936 the sculptures of decathletes embodied multifunctional masculinity in Germany, while the traditional martial arts became recognized as modern national sports of fascist Japan around 1940. However, it does not mean that football, decathlon and martial arts were the only disciplines portrayed by artists in a part of the official propaganda. In the 1930s-mid-1940s, several hundred more sport-themed artworks were created to align with fascist propaganda, including paintings and sculptures of the boxing stars Primo Carnera in Italy and Max Schmeling in Germany. They also testified to the political and ideological uses of sports but were not so strictly connected with the propaganda of the international mega sporting events of 1934, 1936 and 1940 discussed in this article.

A short analysis of how artists from Italy, Germany and Japan depicted football, decathlon and martial arts as an embodiment of the 1934 World Cup, 1936 Berlin Olympics and 1940 Tokyo Olympics, respectively, can lead to some initial conclusions on the aesthetics of the official visual propaganda of transnational fascism. Artists from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany glorified the images of athletes as monumental figures of the New Man. These figures were predominantly male and embodied religious motifs (footballers as angels in Italy) and myths (decathlete in Germany as a mythical Aryan male). But while the Italian artists focused on football as modern-day sports and German artists on the timeless aspects of physical strength based on archetypes of ancient athletic beauty, in Japan, what mattered were traditional martial arts of East Asia, including *sumo*, *kendo* and *kyudo*. They did not fit the idea of physical beauty derived from ancient Greece and the European Olympic traditions. In the case of Italy and Germany, the images of muscular athletes provided, in some instances a continuation of the aesthetic of antiquity and, on the other, indicated progressive aspects of nationalist politics aimed at propagating the image of victorious fascist states. And while the Italian regime allowed avant-garde, more abstract, non-figurative depictions of athletes (as in the case of Enrico Prampolini and other futurists), the German officials banned any avant-garde representations of sport.

The sculptures of athletes were also created with different artistic approaches. While Italian artist, Mario Moschi, sculpted a footballer captured in motion, most sculptors from Nazi Germany concentrated on sculpting the immobile, perfect body of an Aryan man and a multi-talented decathlete who stands still, waiting for the war to

come. Unlike their Italian and German counterparts, Japanese artists focused less on visualizing athletes' bodies. Artworks prepared for the 1940 Tokyo Olympic Art Competition and poster designs indicate that they were more interested in warrior culture performed in traditional costumes or sumo outfits, which did not align with the ancient type of Olympic beauty. In addition, Japanese artists paid less attention to the naked, perfect athletic male body and references to European antiquity, which was not their sporting tradition. They instead did not follow the example of ancient Greek or Roman art but the aesthetic practices of East Asian culture.

Artists in Italy, Germany and Japan, who created propaganda of the mega sporting events, did not create a unified fascist aesthetics. They even sometimes opposed each other, when comparing abstract painting by Prampolini with neo-classical representations of sport in Nazi Germany. Despite many differences, this what united some depictions of athletes around the 1934 World Cup, 1936, and the 1940 Olympics was a fascist salute performed by athletes in the poster and postcard designs. This testified to the visual mediation of important international mega sporting events as simply fascist events across Italy, Germany and Japan. On the other hand, the 1936 Olympic Art Competition offered a perfect place to showcase the sport-themed art from Italy, Germany and Japan for the first time, and what followed that Germany and Italy dominated the artistic results of the competition, and Japan won their first medals. The exhibition might have been viewed as an essential step in creating a cultural alliance of the future Axis Powers. In conclusion the common element of all three Axis Powers' fascisms, which all drew on different artistic traditions, was the crucial aspect of militarization through sport. Almost all the images of athletes discussed above were a kind of anticipation about the coming war or even a call for waging and fighting a war. In many ways, they related to wartime aspects of physical training and the race to arm the Axis-Power countries for future warfare.

After World War II: Germany and Japan got banned from participating in the 1948 Olympics in London, the 1948 Winter Olympics in St. Moritz, and the 1950 World Cup in Brazil. Only Italy got permission to participate in those sporting events because they defected to the Allies in 1943. Nevertheless, the former Axis Powers were able to organize international sporting events in decades to come, including the Olympic Games in Rome (1960), Tokyo (1964, 2020), and Munich (1972), as well as World Cups in Italy (1990), Germany (1972, 2006) and Japan (co-hosted with South Korea, 2002). After the horrifying tragedies of World War II, those countries learned the lesson and respected human rights and the initial ideals of Olympism: excellence, respect and friendship. But it seems that the world's most vital sporting organizations, International Olympic Committee and FIFA, did not learn the lesson from the past and still award dictatorships with the right to organize international sporting events.

Shortly after the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the 2018 World Cup in Russia, and the later 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, the Kremlin government increased its activity in Ukraine, which resulted in the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war. On the opening day of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Russia and China declared a “no limits” partnership, backing each other over standoffs on Ukraine and Taiwan with a promise to collaborate more against the West. The story seems to repeat itself, and the uses of sport in the visual propaganda of the recent 2010–2020s geopolitical conflicts, just like in the case of the history of the 1930s–1940s Axis Powers, might provide some similar undertones for future scholarship on this subject.

Słowa kluczowe

sport, mistrzostwa świata, igrzyska olimpijskie, wystawy sztuki, Olimpijskie Konkursy Sztuki

Keywords

sport, World Cup, Olympic Games, art exhibitions, Olympic Art Competitions

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Dr. habil. Przemysław Strożek, przemyslaw.strozek@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-6473-7894

He is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences and an Associate Researcher and curator at the Archiv der Avantgarden, Dresden. He was a Fulbright fellow at the University of Georgia, a fellow at the Accademia dei Lincei and recipient of a Korea Foundation fellowship. He is the author of several dozen academic articles, and published extensively his research on sport and the avant-garde, as well as on sport and contemporary art. Together with Andreas Kramer he has co-edited *Sport and the European Avant-Garde (1900–1945)* (2021). He has curated numerous exhibitions, including an exhibition on Polish-Moroccan artistic relations at the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw.

Summary

PRZEMYSŁAW STROZEK (Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences; Archiv der Avantgarden – Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) / Football, decathlon and the martial arts. The Axis Powers and the visual propaganda of the international mega sporting events: 1934–1940

The article focuses on the visual propaganda of international mega sporting events organized and planned by three countries, which would form the Axis Powers: Italy, Germany and Japan. These were the 1934 World Cup in Italy, the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the planned 1940 Olympic Games in Tokyo. Each of the three regimes developed a specific type of sport to be promoted by artists at the sporting events they hosted: football in Italy, a decathlon in Germany and martial arts in Japan. Despite fundamental differences in sporting topics and artistic styles, the depictions of athletes represented the militarist and imperialist ambitions of the future Axis Powers. What united some depictions of athletes around these events were fascist salutes performed by athletes, which testified to the visual mediation of the 1934, 1936 and 1940 international mega sporting events as simply fascist events.