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“The Body in Motion” feature  
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## “Artletes” and “The Body in Motion” at Petit Palais: Intersection of art and sport

By: Olivia Johnson | Aug. 11, 2024



Para-badminton athlete Mathieu Thomas, balancing on his toes next to “La Danseuse Sacha Lyo” (1932-1933) by Serge Youriévitich. © Petit Palais 2024

Over a century ago, Pierre de Coubertin, father of the modern Olympic Games, started the Cultural Olympiad, a competition for art portraying sport-related themes. After the competition’s end in 1948, Olympic host cities attempt to keep the spirit of the Cultural Olympiad alive through cultural experiences, concerts, public art projects and art exhibitions.

The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games are no different.

As a part of Paris’s Cultural Olympiad, the Petit Palais museum’s “The Body in Motion” exhibition returns to Coubertin’s vision and highlights the intersection of art and sport. The exhibit’s 50 works are accompanied by video interviews with 12 French Olympic athletes and para-athletes expressing their connections to the works.

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The interviews, interspersed with clips of the athletes running around sculptures or fencing with invisible opponents along the galleries, depicted deep conversations about the athletes' lives and how their chosen work relates to their challenges or victories.

“We, as the curators, have one point of view [about the art], whereas, for [the athletes], it was a personal point of view from their own history and what they faced,” exhibit curator and sculpture department head Anne-Charlotte Cathelineau said.

“It was really, really moving [...] I think what is very good about these videos is that they prove that you don't have to know art to speak about art. Art is mostly an emotional and personal experience.”

One of the interviews Cathelineau found particularly touching was with para-athlete sprinter Dimitri Jozwicki as he related the doubt of being a high-performing athlete to “Académie d'un homme assis à terre,” a 1646 drawing by Rembrandt, a Dutch painter and printmaker.



Jozwicki and Rembrandt's drawing, “Académie d'un homme assis à terre,” or “A man sitting on the ground” (1646). © Petit Palais 2024

He also spoke about how athletes' performances can cause audiences to feel an extensive range of emotions, especially for fans who have an understanding of disability – cerebral palsy, in Jozwicki's case.

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“I [want] to invite [the visitors] to question themselves about how they felt when they visited the museum,” Jozwicki said, “and how [they felt] about the [athletic] performances they saw. A little bit of comparing emotions and [they may see] that in the end, between artist and athlete, maybe there’s not that much difference.”

The time the athletes spent filming the interviews and forming ties with the artworks inspired pentathlon athlete Valentin Belaud to create the word “artletes,” which describes how the athletes related art and culture to their Olympics and sports journeys.

“Sport benefits from being connected with culture. Our sporting culture is a heritage that dates back to the dawn of time and should be associated [with other disciplines],” Belaud said in his video interview.

Even Petit Palais’s location is a perfect example of sports, culture, and art colliding, as it is just steps away from the Olympic fencing venue at Grand Palais, which also hosted the Cultural Olympiad in the 1924 Paris Olympic Games.

Cathelineau hopes Olympic attendees will visit Petit Palais before or after a match, view “The Body in Motion” and discover what culture and learning the exhibit offers. Cathelineau said the same goes for other venues, museums and cultural hubs.



Cathelineau speaks about her time as curator for “The Body in Motion.” Photo by Ella Hall, Manship Olympics photographer.

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“I think part of the Olympic Games is that people come to Paris and could discover lots of arts and culture from our country,” Cathelineau said. “It is the opportunity for people who come [to Paris] for the Olympic Games to also discover other museums [...] It’s a chance to [experience] a city which is kind of a museum in itself.”

Paris’s rich art and cultural history is no secret. The city has hundreds of architecturally complex buildings and monuments and [over 100 museums](#), some of which may go unnoticed during the Olympic Games.

“It would be a pity to not benefit from the Tour Eiffel, just in front of the Olympic Games and this museum, in front of the Grand Palais. You have the possibility to see it and say, ‘Wow.’ I feel touched, no other feeling than ‘wow,’” Paris 2024 Olympic Games venue volunteer Chaistelle Mahietta said while observing the exhibit.



Second floor sculpture hall in the Petit Palais. Photo by Ella Hall, Manship Olympics photographer.

As Petit Palais works around Olympic programming, Cathelineau said the museum is experiencing a lapse in attendance. What’s more, because the eight sections of “The Body in Motion” exhibition are included among Petit Palais’ permanent collections, some visitors might not know where it is on display.

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For those who are lucky enough to stop by, they are in awe.

One Olympic Games attendee and museum visitor from Germany, Marion Hukelmann, was like many of Petit Palais' visitors during the Olympic season. She stopped by with a friend before watching a fencing match, and when she saw the exhibit's many paintings, she gaped at them with her hand clasped over her mouth, whispering praise to the artists as she walked around the gallery.

"It's wonderful. It's amazing. I've never been here, and some of the paintings are just jumping in your eyes," Hukelmann said.



"The Swimmer" by Augustin Rouart. Photo by Ella Hall, Manship Olympics photographer.

The painting Cathelineau believes is the stand-out piece in this exhibit is "The Swimmer" by Augustin Rouart because of the artist's intimate relationship with his work.

"It's like an actual swimmer, and the gesture is very realistic, in fact, because the painter was a swimmer, too," Cathelineau said.

Rouart was very keen on the practice of "rhône," which means a nearness or relationship with his art. He wanted to put his sports expertise on the canvas, which is why the work demonstrates a swimmer's natural gestures and strokes.

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Just as athletes can relate to works of art, they can also create them.

Although “The Dancer Sacha Lyo” was not created by the Russian dancer herself, sculptor Serge Youriévitich carefully captures the beauty and grace of her dance and her struggle to achieve seemingly impossible feats.



“The Dancer Sacha Lyo” by Serge Youriévitich. Photo by Ella Hall, Manship Olympics photographer.

“I think it is kind of an embodiment of the ‘sportif prouesse,’ [or the gallantry and bravery] that all the athletes can achieve for the Olympic Games,” Cathelineau said. “For us, it was absolutely of use to include [works depicting] dance because it is the best fusion between art and sport, and also because a lot of our works are speaking of dance.”

Even though each athlete may not directly relate to the feat of holding an arabesque or wearing pointe shoes, Petit Palais’s diverse, rich exhibition and video interviews show that works of art have profound emotional connections for athletes and visitors alike.

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These are the same visitors watching Olympic events, screaming “Allez les bleus” in the stands and singing their country’s national anthem when their athlete wins gold.

These are also the same athletes shaking out their nerves before a big match, defying gravity and [wrapping into a giant hug with their partners after they break a world record.](#)

All sports experiences—of the athletes and their fans—are works of art. The emotions they carry inspire paintings, sculptures, and monuments. These moments are also displayed and captured within works of art from the past, preserving them forever.

The works in “The Body in Motion” exhibit are linked by the experiences of sport, not the ability to create or appreciate art or even win a gold medal.

Art and sport are both universal. They both unite. They both are beautiful.

Petit Palais provides a space where the athletes of the Olympics and Paralympics and works of art can be equally and fully celebrated throughout the games until the exhibit closes on Nov. 17.

“We might have the impression that [sports and art] are two completely different worlds,” Aziza Benhami, para-archery athlete, said. “But the more we think about it, the more they resemble, even merge into each other.”

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