



## The Liffey Swim —Ireland's great Olympic artefact

Published in 20th-century / Contemporary History, Features, Issue 4 (July/August 2012), Volume 20



***Jack B. Yeats's The Liffey Swim won the silver medal for painting in the 'Concourse d'Art' at the 1924 Paris Olympics. (National Gallery of Ireland)***

At the 1924 games, the only Olympic honours accredited to 'Irlande' in Paris were in what was known as the 'Concourse d'Art'. Poet Oliver St John Gogarty won a joint third place for a work entitled 'Ode to the Tailteann Games', and the 53-year-old Jack B. Yeats, already of world renown, won silver in the painting competition, held between March and April. Possibly through a simple loss in translation, the Yeats entry was referred to in the official Olympic report as Natation (Swimming), but in the artist's own notes, in Irish press coverage and in its exhibition 'life' after Paris it has always been The Liffey Swim. The Liffey Swim itself was first held in 1920 and attracted huge crowds annually along the banks to watch the mile-and-a-half swim from Victoria Quay to Butt Bridge. Although painted in 1923, the evidence suggests that Yeats took some artistic liberties with the work he created, depicting a blue sky whereas in fact the 1923 swim had been held in foul weather. The Irish Independent reported that 'it rained now and then, but like a deluge during the concluding stages of the race' and that 'a canopy of umbrellas ten deep lined the river'. Perhaps we can forgive the artist his meteorological licence, though he does depict the Custom House in the distance with its cupola missing, as it was in 1923 owing to its destruction in the Civil War. The idea of holding art competitions in conjunction with the sporting events of the Olympic

Games is entirely due to Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics:

*'Now the moment has come when we enter a phase and intend to re-establish the original beauty of the Olympic Games. In the high times of Olympia . . . the fine arts were combined harmoniously with the Olympic Games to create their glory.'*

Many of the baron's idealistic hopes for the Olympics came to naught, and indeed the artistic competitions would fade too after 1948. There is absolutely no question, however, that Yeats's 1924 Olympic medal is just that. It is identical to the medals won by athletes, rowers and so on, featuring two male figures on the reverse side and a face containing the simple inscription 'VIIIeme Olympiade Paris 1924' along with a circular design depicting oars, javelins, other sporting implements and a lyre, further proof that the Paris organisers considered the arts events to be as legitimate as the sporting ones. Jack B. Yeats enthusiasts will know that sporting themes, especially depictions of boxing and horse-racing, are found in many of his works. As early as 1897 he painted *At a small race meeting*, while during the First World War he did more works on horse-racing themes, such as *Before the Start* and *Drumcliffe Races*. Yeats actually submitted two paintings for judgement at the Paris Olympics, the second being *Before the Start*, even though it had been painted back in 1915. His love of horse- (and donkey-) racing was also a feature of Jack Yeats's occasional writings, and these give an insight into his love of movement and activity, key ingredients in *The Liffey Swim* too. In Yeats's story *Sligo* he wrote:

*' . . . in many games the player is too excited to be anything but deaf to the call of the encourager . . . the ordinary combined and scattered shoutings of a crowd are not what is wanted, but something to cheer and encourage. To call a jockey through a megaphone at the last of the flat races of the year the name of his favourite dangerously fat-making dish might rise the hope in him and encourage him to encourage his horse.'*

*The Liffey Swim* marks something of a watershed in Yeats's artistic style, typifying his growing confidence and interest in Expressionism. According to Donal Maguire, in his efforts to capture the movement and excitement among the crowd straining to watch the event 'the painting is rendered in broad, loosely applied brush strokes, which suggest rapidity of execution and convey a sense of energy in keeping with the atmosphere of the occasion'. The same commentator notes the increasing use of emotive colours, like the reds in the water, while there is a suggestion that both Yeats (in the fedora) and his wife (elaborate yellow hat) have been placed among the crowd watching the event. The Olympic report from 1924 shows that some world-

renowned artists and composers were involved in judging the respective competitions. These included the artist Sargent and the composers Ravel, Bartok and Stravinsky. Belfast-born Sir John Lavery was among the art-judging panel, even though he also had an entry in the competition. The *Irish Times* later failed to include Lavery as one of the Irish entries in the art competition, and it may be that he withdrew his entry once he had been confirmed as a member of the jury. Along with Lavery's reported entry Steven Donoghue, Seán Keating had a single entry, *The Fowler*.

What is also unusual is that the artist who beat Yeats to the gold medal, J. Jacoby of Luxembourg, submitted three separate entries to the competition (depicting a corner kick in football, action from a rugby game and a race start) and yet was awarded the gold for his general study of sport, presumably in all three paintings. Yeats's medal, on the other hand, is specifically credited for *Swimming alone*.

The Olympic success, ironically, did not result in an immediate sale of the painting for Yeats. It was exhibited subsequently in the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1925, where it was priced at £300. Yeats's own notes on his commissions and sales in the National Gallery archives show that the following year *The Liffey Swim* was exhibited in London and at the Walker Gallery in Liverpool. Eventually, it was sold on 3 December 1930 to the Haverty Bequest Fund for £250, which seems to have included not just the picture but the copyrights to reproduction as well. It was shown subsequently at the World Fair in New York during 1939 but has otherwise rested more or less continuously as one of the great treasures of modern Irish art at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

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#### **Further reading:**

D. Maguire, 'The Liffey Swim', in *A time and a place: two centuries of Irish social life* (Dublin, 2006).

N. Muller, *One hundred years of Olympic congresses* (Lausanne, 1994).

H. Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: a biography* (London, 1970; revised edn 1989).

R. Skelton (ed.), *The selected writings of Jack B. Yeats* (London, 1990)