

Olympic Games Posters

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Introduction

WHAT IS A POSTER?

The **poster** is a form of visual communication, specific to public places, in which words, pictures and/or symbols are used together to convey a message.

The roots of the modern poster lie in Antiquity, where for instance in ancient Greece, mobile wooden panels called *axons* were used to inform the general population of decisions made by the authorities. Citizens of ancient Rome consulted the public *album* which consisted of a whitewashed wall on which official decisions were written.



ROMANS GATHERED AROUND AN ALBUM

The invention of printing techniques in the mid 15th century, together with rising literacy levels, meant that information of general concern became more and more common in public places. Advances in printing techniques in the 18th century also played a fundamental role in the further development of poster art.

Since the mid 19th century, the poster has become a main advertising medium and a form of expression for many artists. The modern poster is born !

In the past, posters often had a majority of text in order to convey the chosen message. Today's posters, on the contrary, communicate with a strict minimum of text, relying heavily on signs and symbols, logos and images. The choice of colour is another important factor in modern poster art. Bold or contrasting colours are often used in order to attract the eye and make people take notice.

The role of a poster is to inform and promote. Whether the poster is used in the domain of politics, culture, sport, tourism or advertising, **instant recognition and immediate comprehension** remain the principal factors in the choice of graphic design.

POSTER-MAKING TECHNIQUES

Posters, by definition, rely on being able to create multiple productions. This would be impossible without printing technology.

There are numerous different printing methods. In general, early official posters were **lithographs** and more recent official posters are **offset lithographs**.

The process involves copying the original image onto another surface (plate or cylinder), applying ink and then running it through a printing press, which transfers it to a sheet of paper.

The introduction of the computer in the creation process for original designs is the most recent evolution in poster art. Although such new methods mean that traces of the artistic medium are more difficult to find than in the Olympic posters of the past, new technology in the hands of today's designers adds endless creative possibilities designers of the past could only have dreamed of.

Lithography is a technique of reproducing images, also known as the "flat printing technique". It was invented in 1798 by Aloys Senefelder. The term, derived from the Greek word *lithos* meaning stone, describes the art of reproducing an image executed directly on a stone plate.

Offset lithography is a printing method in which the image is printed from a stone or metal plate onto a cylinder coated with rubber. The cylinder is then used to transfer the image, non-reversed, to the paper.



LITHOGRAPHY



DESIGNING WITH A COMPUTER



Announcing the Games

WHAT IS AN OLYMPIC POSTER ?

An Olympic poster communicates information about the Olympic Games. Each edition of the Games results in the creation of a substantial number of posters for advertising or communication purposes. Posters may feature the Olympic torch, mascots or pictograms, specific Olympic sports, competition sites, the Olympic village, cultural festivals or may seek to recruit volunteer helpers.

WHAT IS AN OFFICIAL OLYMPIC POSTER ?

The official Olympic poster promotes a specific edition of the Olympic Games. Usually selected by the **Organising Committee**, it is part of a specific “look and feel” of the Games. Over time, it becomes the **image or symbol of that edition of the Games**.

When a host city is awarded the Olympic Games, it establishes an **Organising Committee (OCOG)**, in charge of putting the necessary structures in place. [See sheets “The Olympic Movement”].

THE FIRST OLYMPIC POSTERS

The first modern Games were held in Athens (Greece) in 1896. No official Olympic poster was created to promote the specific edition of the Games. It was not until the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm (Sweden) that an official poster was planned for and executed.

Since 1912, host cities have been in charge of organising the promotion and advertising of each edition of the Games. In 1924, the first Olympic Winter Games were held ; since then, official Olympic posters have been produced for both Summer and Winter Games.

THE PROCESS OF SELECTION

In order to create the official Olympic poster, the **Organising Committee** of each edition of the Games generally sets up a poster contest. This contest may be open to all, to artists from the host country, or to specific artists pre-selected by the OCOG. The poster that wins first prize becomes the official poster of the Games and offers the artist or designer the opportunity to have his work circulated throughout the entire world.

Occasionally, a poster design has managed to impose itself completely on its own. For example, in 1920, the artwork on the official poster came from the cover of a book printed in 1914, called “*Will we have the VIIth Olympiad in Anvers in 1920?*”. This image was already strongly identified with the host city of the Games.

For the 1952 Helsinki Games (Finland), the poster design that had been chosen for the cancelled Games of 1940 was revived.

Artists submitting designs for official Olympic posters are often given strict guidelines for content. The designer does not necessarily have complete artistic freedom but must often adapt to a certain image of the Games. This does not mean that the end result is not of artistic merit ! In fact, communicating a specific desired message to the viewer is often the role of a graphic designer.

The distribution of the Olympic poster

In order to bring together athletes and spectators from around the world, Games organisers did not always have the highly developed modes of communication of today. For instance, radio was not used until the 1928 Games in Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and television not before the 1936 Games in Berlin (Germany); this meant the promotion of the Games was essentially dependent on print. **The poster was therefore an important method of announcing the Games.**

Making the Games a truly international event was a real challenge for the organisers of the first Olympiads. The official poster of 1912 was produced in 16 languages, which shows the importance for Games organisers of being understood by a large number of people. Although there was little time for the distribution of the poster abroad, it was sent to 30 different countries and posted in locations as varied as hotels, restaurants, stores, travel agencies, transport companies, sporting clubs and even in doctor's rooms. In the following years, Games organisers called on consulates and embassies of the host country as well as citizens living abroad in order to ensure the distribution of the poster.

In spite of the efforts made to translate posters and ensure efficient distribution networks, sometimes the poster design itself can cause communication difficulties. When the Stockholm official poster was issued, it was often criticised as being “too daring”, even though the nudity of the athletes made reference to the Games of Antiquity. It was not distributed in certain countries, even though the artist added ribbons in order to mask a certain amount of the nudity. Further remarks were made concerning the order of the 21 national flags presented in the poster. Actually, the artist had based the order of the flags on a colour scheme and not on politics. The Organising Committee defended their choice and left the poster as it was, as the artistic quality of the work was not in question.

With time, other forms of media, particularly television, have come to relate the information once communicated mainly by posters. Today, we no longer the need to put the exact dates of the Games on the official poster, nor to geographically situate the host city, as on the poster for the 1932 Lake Placid Games. The promotion of the Games, including related practical information, is now effectively communicated via television, radio and internet.



THE FIRST OFFICIAL OLYMPIC POSTER, STOCKHOLM 1912



PROMOTING THE GAMES: TV, RADIO AND INTERNET

Reading an Olympic poster

Olympic Winter Games Official poster – St Moritz 1948

Artists :

Fritz Hellinger (1923 – 1977), graphic art
Keerl, photography

Dimensions :

100 x 64 cm

Print Method :

Lithography

Edition :

15,000 copies, in several languages



THE CONTEXT

It is important to situate the 1948 St. Moritz (Switzerland) official poster in its social and political context. The 1940 Olympic Winter Games were to be held in Sapporo (Japan) but their candidature was withdrawn in 1938 due to the war with China. The candidature for the Games first shifted to St. Moritz and then to Garmisch-Partenkirchen (Germany). However, with the advent of the Second World War, cancellation of the Olympics was inevitable. No Olympic Games were organised in 1940 or in 1944. Finally, after the war in 1948, Switzerland, as a neutral country, offered favourable conditions for hosting this international sporting event.

READING THE IMAGE

Under a vast sky, two skiers cross a snow-covered landscape of sunlit mountain peaks.

– **The Alpine Sun**

The alpine sun is of primary importance in this poster, filling the sky with its radiating sunbeams and taking up a large portion of the image. This seems a very appropriate choice, as St. Moritz is known for its “champagne climate”, boasting 322 days of glorious sunshine per year.

The image of the sun has been associated with St. Moritz for a very long time. A sun designed in 1930 by graphic artist Walter Herdeg became the registered trademark of St. Moritz in 1937. Herdeg’s trademark sun, although not represented in the official poster, is part of the 1948 St. Moritz Olympic emblem and is found on other Games posters, athletes’ bibs and participant badges.

– **The Couple**

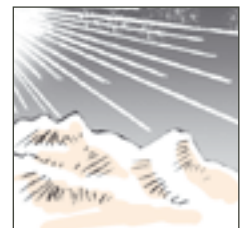
The poster shows a man and a woman on skis, viewed from behind. They appear particularly small in relation to the dominant motif of the sun. Surprisingly for an Olympic poster, they don’t seem particularly athletic. They look more like fashionable and relaxed tourists than athletes participating in an international sporting competition.

The couple’s brightly-coloured ski-clothes are representative of 1930s fashion. The man is shown tanned, an image associated at this time with good health, leisure and travel, as well as a certain quality of life. When tanning came into fashion in the 20’s, the negative effects of sun-exposure were still unknown!

– **The Mountains and Snow**

The snow-covered mountains in this image obviously relate to the theme of winter and skiing. St. Moritz is one of the world’s most famous ski resorts, and cannot be disassociated from this winter sport.

The sun-flooded, alpine view is clearly accented. The St. Moritz ski area, with the Piz Nair, boasts a top elevation of 3,057 metres. The width of ski slope depicted in the poster is worthy of note, as is the fact that the couple seems to be alone, “on top of the world”, as the St. Moritz slogan states.

– **The Snowflakes**

Ten very large snowflakes (almost as large as the sun) fill the sky and appear as the culminating point at the end of the sun’s rays.

The snowflakes, thickly outlined in black, appear as cut-outs. It is interesting to note the bold colours chosen: red, blue, orange and yellow, which are far from realistic! Certain forms clearly represent snowflakes while other shapes seem to resemble flowers.

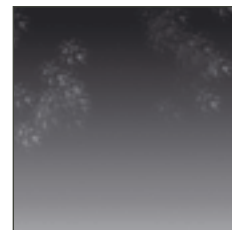
After 1948, the snowflake is often used as a symbol in official Winter Olympic posters.



– **The Sky**

The sky takes up the majority of the image. Its colour changes from light blue where it touches the immaculate white mountaintops, to dark bluish-green and then to greenish-black, the largest part.

The effect created in the sky can be seen as similar to frost on a window-pane, accentuating the winter aspect. The choice of the colour green may however suggest an area such as a forest or a pasture.



– **The Olympic Rings**

The symbol of the Olympic rings represents the union of the five continents and the meeting of athletes from all nations at the Olympic Games. In the 1948 St. Moritz official poster, the Olympic rings are situated just above the text, where their colours stand out against the bright white snow of the background.

The first time the Olympic rings are used in an official Olympic poster is for the 1928 St. Moritz Games.



– **The Swiss Shield**

The Swiss shield is seen in the top right-hand corner, perhaps as a counterbalance to the Olympic rings. The message is clear: the nations of the world are coming to Switzerland for the Olympic Games.



– **The Text**

The text reads “Olympic Winter Games 1948 St. Moritz Switzerland”, giving the title of the event, the year and the place where the Games are to be held. A second poster was made which also gives the exact dates of the event (30.01.1948 – 08.02.1948).

In order to ensure global communication, the text was translated into several languages.



– The Designers

This poster appears to be a cooperative work between **Fritz Hellinger**, a Swiss poster artist from Basel, and a photographer named Keerl. Both names are found inscribed in the top left-hand corner of the poster. As no clear explanation has been left behind in the archives, it is unclear whether Hellinger based his artwork on a photograph taken by Keerl or whether a collage of photography, drawing and cut-out was used.

Hellinger studied at the Basel Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Design) and worked as a freelance graphic artist for several Swiss clients such as Ricola sweets and the Basel Zoo.

– Composition and Style

The design of the 1948 St. Moritz official poster is notably asymmetrical. The main element of the composition, the sun, is situated in the left third, while the two remaining thirds are filled with the sky. This “imbalance” is compensated for by the extension of the sun’s rays and the counterweight of the vast sky.

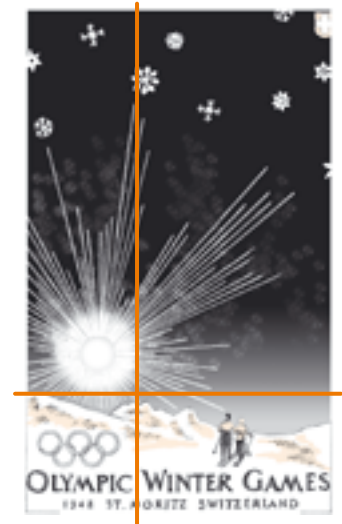
The style draws on the Swiss travel poster, presenting the alpine landscape. It is also characteristic of the two-dimensional style of the “Swiss school” in which all traces of perspective are suppressed.

– What is the message?

The message of this poster is dual: to inform the public of the coming Olympic Winter Games and to promote the ski resort of St. Moritz. The sunshine and snow-covered mountains depicted in the poster undoubtedly aim to encourage tourism in this post-War period.

The couple appears “on top of the world”, highlighting the exclusiveness of the ski station, while the rays of sunshine they bathe in emphasize St. Moritz’s famous climate. The image very clearly encourages winter tourism, and perhaps less obviously, tourism in summer (as seen in the green tint of the sky and the snowflake “flowers”). Overall, the image presented is clearly one of leisure sports and pleasure, promoting St. Moritz as a Swiss tourism “mecca”.

Supporting this theory, aside from the clear tourism poster style, is the fact that this poster was issued by the Swiss National Tourist Office (SNTO) in both an Olympic and non-Olympic form. A travel poster, using the exact same design, was also issued in 1948 with the text “*Vacances en Suisse*” (Holidays in Switzerland). This was not by chance, as the President of the Commission for Propaganda and Advertising for the St. Moritz Organizing Committee was also Director of the SNTO.



Olympic Summer Games Official poster – Rome 1960

Artist :

Armando Testa (1917 – 1992)

Dimensions :

99.5 x 70 cm

Print Method :

Lithography

Edition :

290,000 copies in 11 languages



THE CONTEXT

When Rome was designated to host the 1960 Olympic Games, a clear decision was made to bring the city's rich history to the forefront through this international sporting event. As well as the new sport infrastructures which were built, a number of ancient sites were restored and used to hold Olympic competitions: the wrestling events were held in Basilica of Maxentius, gymnastics in the Baths of Caracalla, and the Arch of Constantine served as the finish line of the marathon.

READING THE IMAGE

The poster shows the upper part of a **column**, known as a capital, decorated with human figures. At the top a she-wolf can be seen, feeding two infants. Text, dates and the Olympic rings complete the picture.

– The Wolf feeding Romulus and Remus

The she-wolf and twins represent the popular myth of the founding of Rome.

Legend has it that the twin boys were the offspring of the Roman god of war, Mars, and the nephews of the King of Alba Longa. The king, fearing a challenge for the crown, set the twins afloat in a basket on the Tiber River, which later floated ashore and was found by a female wolf.

Nursed by the she-wolf, the twins were later adopted by a shepherd and named Romulus and Remus. According to tradition, the adult Romulus and Remus founded the city of Roma in 753 B.C., on the site where they were discovered by the she-wolf. Later, in a quarrel for leadership, Romulus killed Remus and became sole ruler of Rome.

The image of the she-wolf and the twins is based on the sculpture of the Lupa Capitolina (**Capitoline Wolf**), which dates from the VIth century BC. The original sculpture had been damaged during Antiquity and was restored during the Renaissance. The twins we see today date from this period.

The sculpture has become a well-known symbol of the city of Rome.

– The Belvedere Capital (upper element of the column)

The capital featured on the poster is a reference to the **Belvedere capital**. This decorative architectural element was originally found in the **Baths of Caracalla**, built in the early third century AD. The Baths, richly decorated with artwork, housed cold, warm and hot water pools, plunge baths, a space for the practice of **gymnastics**, a large enclosed area for **running and games**, a library and gardens.

The Belvedere capital was later removed from the site of the ancient Baths of Caracalla to decorate the palaces of the Vatican.

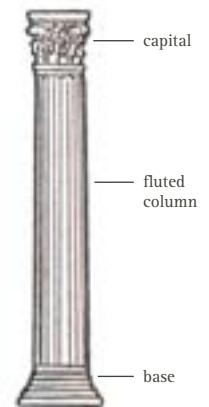
The presence of the Belvedere capital on this Olympic poster, refers to the ancient Baths and accentuates Roman heritage of physical movement. For this reason, the Organizing Committee of the Rome 1960 Games decided to hold the gymnastics competition in this early third century “sports complex”.

– On the Capital: the Athlete and the Crowd

The scene represented is of an athlete crowning himself with his right hand while holding a palm leaf of victory in his left. While he himself is nude, those surrounding him are toga-clad. Several other athletes are also wearing crowns, a symbol of victory.

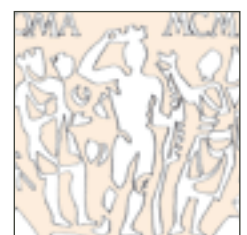
– The Text

The text on the poster uses Roman numerals rather than Arabic numbers, which reinforces the “antique” identity of these Games. It reads “Games of the XVII Olympiad, Roma, 25.VIII – 11.IX”; and, on the capital, “Roma MCMLX”.



The **Capitoline Wolf** can be viewed at the Palazzo Dei Conservatori on Capitol Hill in Rome.

The **Belvedere capital** can now be seen at the Vatican Museum in Rome.



“Games of the 17th Olympiad, Rome, 25.08 – 11.09, Rome 1960”

The information provided is complete: the name of the event, the edition of the Games, the Olympic symbol, the specific dates, the year and the location. As with other posters in the past, as a result of the amount of text used and for communication purposes, the poster was translated into 11 languages.

The Olympic rings are placed between the name of the city and the dates of the Games, communicating the nature of the event and its international status.



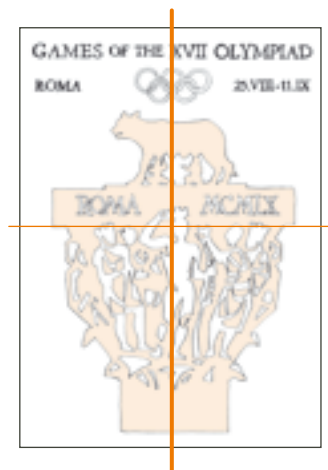
– The Designer

Armando Testa is a key figure in modern Italian graphic design, and more specifically in advertising. Originally a painter, he became a commercial artist with a vision which led to the creation of the advertising agency Studio Testa in 1956. In his work for well-known clients (Pirelli tyres, Lavazza coffee, the airline Alitalia, etc.) he displays an unconventional creativity as well as a sense of humour. “Armando Testa” is now an international Italian advertising agency working in the field of communication (media, television and internet), based on the original vision of its founder.

– Composition and Style

Three years before the Games, a poster contest was set up for Italian designers with clearly defined content stipulations: the idea of Olympic sport in Rome, the Olympic rings, and the text “Games of the XVII Olympiad – Rome – MCMLX”. Although 249 designs were submitted, the Jury did not find any to be to their liking. No prize was awarded, but rather a second competition was organised in which 12 of the most qualified Italian poster artists were invited to participate.

Armando Testa was awarded the prize for best design in this contest. He was nonetheless asked to make several specific modifications while keeping the same overall artistic inspiration and feel. Testa presented a second project, which was still found to be lacking. The elements to be included in the poster were indicated even more specifically: a pillar with capital and the Capitoline Wolf, the Olympic rings, and the previously mentioned text. Testa’s final project was accepted and went on to become the official poster.



The design of the 1960 Rome official poster is symmetrical, organised around a central axe, which gives an impression of harmony. The colours of the Capital and the column are subdued, yet stand out from the neutral white background. The artist has found a balance between the classical elements and his personal style and vision. He proposes a modern version of the Capital and Wolf, simplifying the design by using outlines. The overall design remains simple and eye-catching.

– What is the message?

The Capitoline Wolf, the Belvedere capital, the Baths of Caracalla and, of course, the Olympic Games: the poster brings together the past and the present, clearly establishing the link between ancient and modern Rome, and between sport and culture.

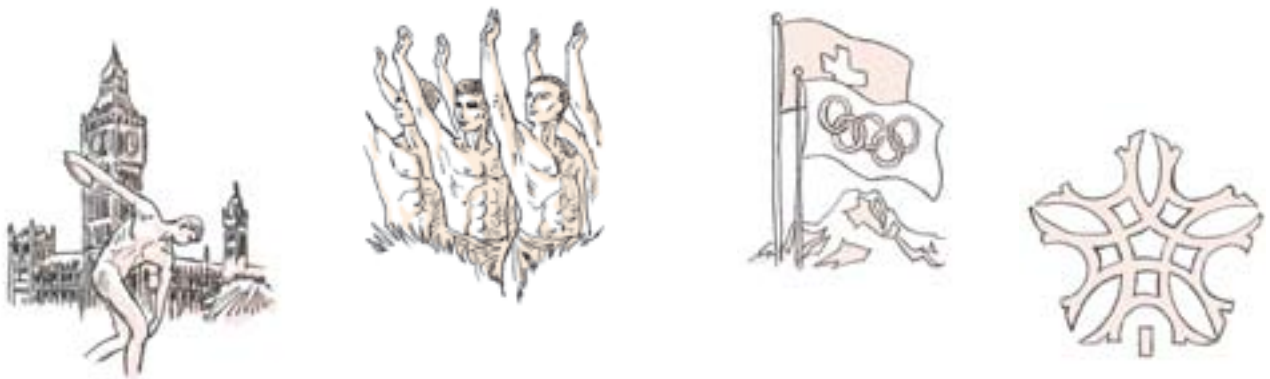
The visual history of the Games

The official Olympic posters provide a visual history of the image of each edition of the Olympic Games. They act as witnesses to both the styles and values of their time as well as the social and political context of the era.

SIGNIFICANT ELEMENTS

These posters, which span a century of Olympic history, draw on a specific vocabulary of symbols which can be divided into two main groups. The first includes figurative elements of significance for the host country such as public monuments, statues, flags, landscapes or cityscapes. The second puts more of an accent on graphic elements (e.g. poster of Mexico City 1968) or on the emblem of the Games (a design featuring the Olympic rings together with other distinctive elements). The most recent posters rely heavily on this form of communication and any text tends to be limited to the name of the host city and the year of the Games.

The Olympic rings themselves are usually what makes official posters immediately identifiable. Indeed, since 1928, the year they first appeared, the rings have been the overall unifying element on official posters.



SUMMER GAMES : LONDON 1948 AND PARIS 1924

WINTER GAMES : ST-MORITZ 1928 AND CALGARY 1988

ROLE IN THE COMMUNICATION OF THE GAMES

The official Olympic posters show the evolution not only of the Games themselves but also of design and poster art from 1896 to today. They are an Olympic tradition, and serves to remind us of each edition of the Games. Windows on the past, they let the Games of yesterday live and breathe.

Explore a little further...

Imagine the Olympic Games were to be hosted by your home town (or a near-by city). Design an Olympic Games poster. What elements would you find important to include and why?

Observe in detail an official Olympic Games poster. Try to analyse the choice of representation, the colours chosen, as well as any other significant elements. Situate the poster in its social and political context.

Compare two posters and try to decipher which is the more modern of the two. How does each poster relate to the period in which it was produced? How do its “look and feel” help identify its origins?

Choose another major sporting or cultural event and analyse the poster created for it.

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