

Lost Artwork from the 1912 Olympic Art Competition Emerges

By Richard Stanton

Carlo Pellegrini (1866–1937). The Italian studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, where he was made an honorary member in 1897. From 1900 he lived mainly in Switzerland, especially in Geneva. From him come a series of paintings in oil and tempera showing the Engadin winter landscapes, besides postcards and posters. Below: at Coubertin's prompting he entered the tripartite wall frieze "Winter Sports" for the Olympic Art Competition of 1912. This was awarded the gold medal.

Photos: Richard Stanton Archive



The Games of the Fifth Olympiad held in Stockholm in 1912 was the first to include on the roster of events competitions in the Fine Arts. Within a few short years later, however, any recollection of those events lay virtually forgotten. All that remained to history was a footnote of their existence and who the medal-winning artists were. Yet even then some of the recorded names were incomplete or wrong.

Among those artists was Carlo Pellegrini, winner of the gold medal for his painting, "Winter Sports," a collection of three friezes. In the case of this artist, in the 1912 *Official Report*, the initial of his forename erroneously appeared as "G" and his surname was misspelled.¹ This error was later compounded by expanding his name to "Giovanni Pellegrini" which still appears in many Olympic record sources.²

The artist's correct forename, Carlo, appeared in an article by IOC Member Raymond Gafner (1915–2002) in the *Revue Olympique* although the place and date of Pellegrini's demise were incorrect.³ The name Carlo Pellegrini was further verified as correct in an article in the *ISOH Journal* in 2001.⁴

The Olympic Museum held an exhibition of Carlo Pellegrini's artworks from February to March 1987 at their facilities in Lausanne.⁵ They were not able to locate the gold-medal work of art or a facsimile of it for



the exhibition. Its visual appearance was completely unknown until now.

In the 1990s, a connoisseur of the artwork, Henry Gessler, found artwork labeled on the reverse by Vouga, the original lithographer, "V Olympiaden. Olympiska Spelen / Stockholm 1912 – 1 Pris i Concours d'Art mälning till C. Pellegrini, Italien" and Serie 211 No. 2. In 2007 he came to the ISOH and was then able to contact me.

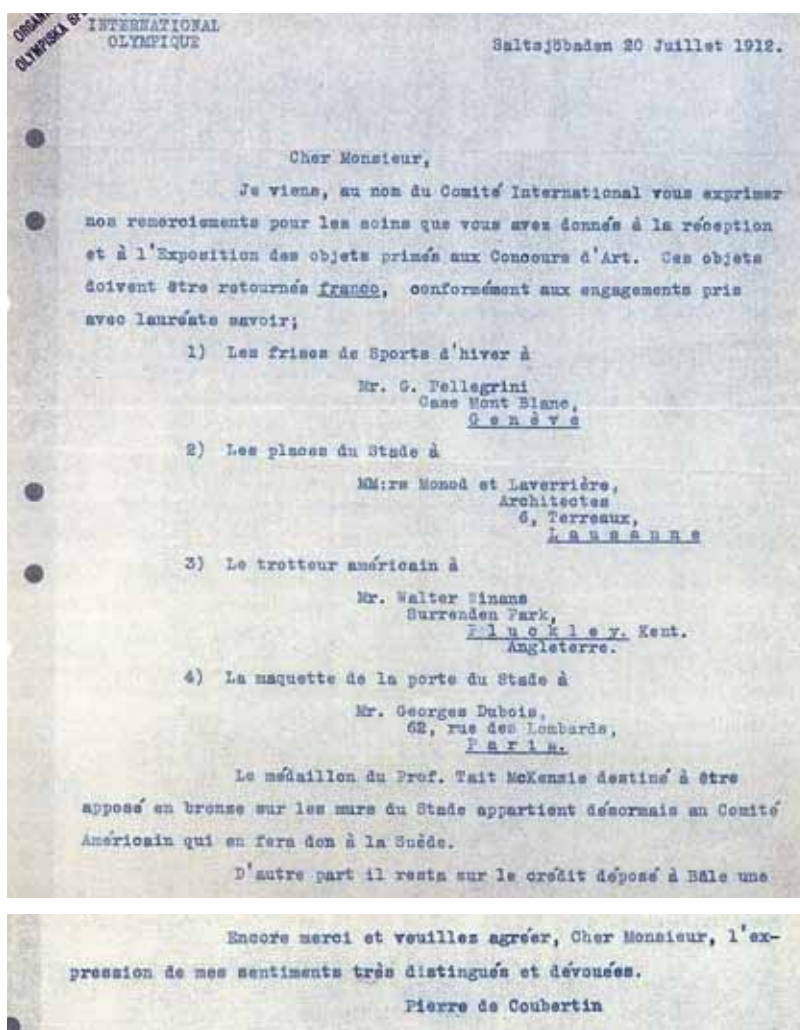
A piece of the missing triptych was confirmed. This image, however, represented only a third of the entire triptych and no further action followed until now.

In August of 2009, Gessler again contacted me through the ISOH, kindly sending a catalogue bringing his current findings of Pellegrini's artworks up to date. The more recent additions to his catalogue, unknown to him, contained more keys to the 1912 Olympic puzzle.

One of the items listed was a copy of the Olympic diploma Pellegrini had received along with his gold medal. It is part of a card designed for sending brief notes or announcements to his friends and patrons.⁶ It is rare that we see an Olympic diploma, which accompanied a medal in the Art Competitions. The actual diploma is in the possession of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

Next, the collection contained an image that I suspected was the source of the discovered panel no. 2 from the winning triptych. Continuing deeper into Gessler's catalogue, another piece of art was found which fit the right hand side of the possible triptych. As both newly discovered images were from Christie's auction catalogues he contacted their offices and apprised them of the new information.

In a spirit of cooperation, Christie's provided better quality images, contacted the purchasers of the right panel and informed them of the new discoveries. The owners of the right side panel more closely examined the panel purchased and confirmed it also was labeled

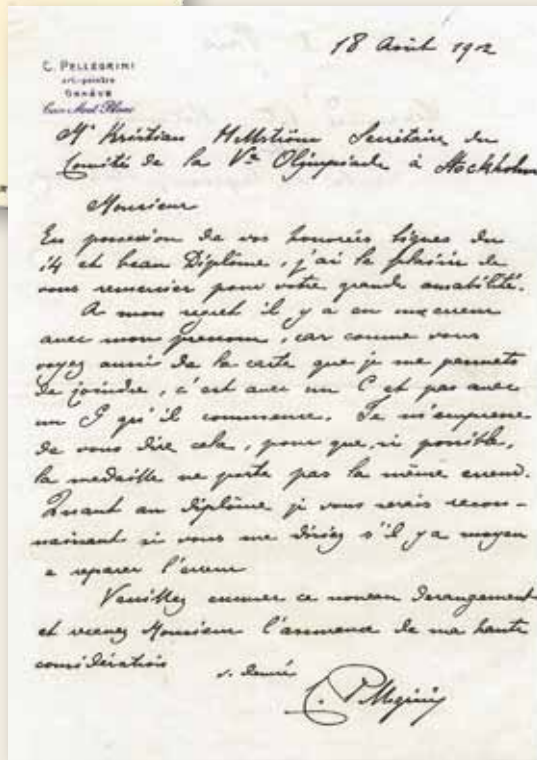


In the Art Competitions the IOC President made the decisions. In this letter, which he wrote on 20th July 1912 from Saltsjöbaden to the Organising Committee, he transmitted the addresses of the prizewinners. He did not mention the literature category. Coubertin, who had submitted his *Ode to Sport* under two pseudonyms, would have had to give his own address because he was judged the winner. Illustration: Volker Kluge Archive





Pellegrini later lived in the Villa Clerici which was built in 1776 in the Italian town of Erba (Como). He decorated his postcards with the Olympic diploma. Adjacent: letter to the General Secretary of the Stockholm Organising Committee, Kristian Hellström, in which he expresses thanks for the beautiful diploma.



by the lithographer as being part of the 1912 Olympic Art Competitions.

We now had the center and right panels of the triptych image, both confirmed as parts of the first prize (gold medal) of the 1912 Olympic artwork. We now had an image suspected to be the gold-medal artwork. As the left panel had not yet been found and so absolute confirmation still eluded us.

it is plausible given the common usage of pseudonyms in those competitions. Despite the left panel remaining unlocated at this time another mystery from the Art Competitions of 1912 is now solved.

I would like to thank Henry Gessler, the unnamed owners of the panels, and Giorgio Taroni for their courtesy and cooperation in sharing the images with the Olympic history. ■

Continuations of the search for the missing left hand panel lead to the discovery of a recently published biography of the painter in Italy.⁷ The biography contained the image of Pellegrini as well as confirmation that our suspected image was indeed the gold-medal triptych.

The biography contained a monochrome image of the triptych taken from a framed assembly of the three panels found among Pellegrini's possessions.⁸ He donated his gold medal to the Fascist Committee of Erba in 1935.⁹

Although not included in the biography Giorgio Taroni also discovered a copy of Pellegrini's birth declaration in the Albese register. This may point to a clarification of why his name was listed in the 1912 *Official Report* as "G. Pellegrini".

According to his birth declaration he was christened as "Carlo Gio. Batta" Pellegrini. "Gio." is a diminutive for Giovanni and "Batta." for Battista. Thus, perhaps his entry in the 1912 Olympics was masked behind his middle name "Giovanni." We have found no proof of this as of now but

At the suggestion of Manfred Bergman numerous postcards with winter sport motifs, created by Pellegrini were exhibited in 2003 at the Olympic Museum.

Illustrations: Richard Stanton Archive, Olympic Museum Lausanne



- 1 The *Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912*, Organisationskommittén för Olympiska Spelen, Stockholm 1912, p. 809
- 2 <http://www.olympic-museum.de/art/artcompetition.htm>, accessed August 2009
- 3 Raymond Gafner, Le bonjour de Vidy, in: *Revue Olympique*, No. 233, Mars 1987
- 4 Richard Stanton, In Search of the Artists of 1912, in: *Journal of Olympic History*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2001, p. 43
- 5 Invitation to the Exhibition opening on 4th February 1987
- 6 Card image provided by Jean Monvoisin, France
- 7 Giorgio Taroni, *Carlo Pellegrini – Pittore e Illustratore*, Giorgio Taroni Editore, ISBN 88-88601-05-08
- 8 Ibid, p. 42
- 9 Ibid, p. 31