

# Graz 2026 Olympic Arts Games: A Vision

Jörg Vogeltanz

Even though, as someone who admits to being unathletic and anti-competitive – someone who avoids sporting events and everything associated with them like the proverbial devil avoids holy water, and who, even at school, couldn't have cared less which team scored a goal – I'm rather indifferent as to when, where, why or how sporting competitions are held, or who takes part in them, the 2026 Winter Olympics – which, for a variety of understandable reasons that I won't go over again here, are not taking place in Graz – would, in my view, have been an opportunity for a renaissance. With a little political imagination and an understanding of cultural history – which, sadly, one can no longer hope for or even take for granted, not only in this country – the city of Graz could, despite the cancellation of the official Games, have made a *statement* – something to which current politics has, in any case, been reducing itself for some time now – and at least brought about the reintroduction of the Olympic art competitions. But before we go into detail here, let us take a closer look at the historical facts surrounding this: for art competitions did indeed take place at the Olympic Games from 1912 to 1948!

After all, the idea originated with Pierre de Coubertin himself, the founder of the modern Olympic movement. With the founding of the International Olympic Committee in 1894 and the staging of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, de Coubertin had seen his ideals realised: the promotion of mental and physical health, as well as sporting competition rather than armed conflict. However, the combination of art and sport on an equal footing was also a matter of great importance to him, which is why he proposed art competitions as part of the Games.

In May 1906, de Coubertin therefore organised a conference in Paris to which, alongside IOC members, representatives of artists' organisations were also invited. The conference concluded with a mandate for the IOC to organise art competitions in the five disciplines of architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpture. It is noteworthy that whilst all athletes were subject to strict amateur rules, artists were permitted to participate even if they were able to make a living from the proceeds of their art. As with the sporting competitions, gold, silver and bronze medals were awarded. However, it was not always possible to award all the medals... on some occasions, no medals were awarded at all.

Artists were permitted to submit multiple works, sometimes with an upper limit, meaning that, in theory, several awards per person in the same year were possible.

The competitions covered the disciplines of architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpture. The IOC rejected proposals to include dance, film, photography or theatre. In the field of architecture, there were two categories: General Architecture from 1912 to 1948 and, from 1928 onwards, Urban Planning as well. The distinction was not always clear-cut, meaning that some designs were awarded prizes in both categories. Unlike in the other fields, works in the architecture category were permitted to be 'published' – that is, actually built – before the Games. Jan Wils, who won gold in 1928 for the Amsterdam Olympic Stadium, is a well-known example of this practice. The number of categories in the literature section changed over time. Until 1924 and 1932, there was only one category. In 1928, 1936 and 1948, the category was divided into dramatic, epic and lyric literature. Entries were limited to a maximum of 20,000 words and could be written in any language, provided a translation into French or English was included, though in some cases a summary was sufficient. Similarly, until 1932 there was only a single music competition. In 1936, the competition was divided into orchestral, instrumental, solo vocal and choral categories; in 1948 the categories were reorganised into choir/orchestra, instrumental/chamber music and vocal. The jury often found it difficult to assess pieces submitted solely in musical notation, as no performances took place, which is why medals were not awarded in some decisions – in 1924 and 1936, none at all. Only in Berlin in 1936 were the winning pieces performed in public. The sculpture competition was divided into statue and relief/medal at the 1928 Summer Games. In 1936, a further subdivision was made between relief and medal. The general category of painting, which in 1928 had still been divided into drawing, graphic design and painting, changed several times at all subsequent Olympic Games: in 1932 the categories were painting, print, watercolour and drawing; in 1936 the subcategory of print was dropped and replaced by graphic design and commercial art. Finally, in 1948, the categories were subdivided into Applied Art, Engraving/Etching and Oil Painting/Watercolour.

The competitions were originally planned for the 1908 Olympic Games in Rome, but the Italian organisers were unable to prepare the Games properly for financial reasons, so in 1907 the IOC designated London as an alternative venue. Although the British organisers were in principle willing to include art competitions, they too had to cancel them due to the lack of preparation time. The argument was that the artists would not have had enough time to create and submit new works. De Coubertin was not

discouraged by this setback and continued to campaign vehemently for the art competitions to be included in the programme, now for the 1912 Games in Stockholm. The Swedish organisers were initially rather reluctant to accept the idea, but eventually relented. Participation remained low, with only 35 works submitted; nevertheless, medals were awarded in all categories. At the 1920 Summer Olympics in Antwerp, the art competitions were once again part of the programme, but were barely noticed by the public and seemed like an incongruous side event. That changed in 1924 in Paris, where the international art scene took the competitions seriously for the first time and a total of 193 works were submitted. It was surprising to see the participation of three artists from the Soviet Union, which (until 1952) did not usually send athletes to the Olympic Games, as the communist leadership regarded them as far too 'bourgeois an event'.

At the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, the art competitions once again gained significant importance. Over 1,100 works were exhibited at the *Stedelijk Museum* (not including contributions in literature, music and architecture). Four of the five categories were divided into sub-categories. The artists were permitted to sell their works at the end of the exhibition – a rule that was the subject of heated debate given the IOC's strict amateur status. At the Summer Games in Los Angeles (1932), the global economic crisis and the long journey led to significantly fewer participants in the sporting competitions. The art competitions, however, remained unaffected: the number of entries remained stable. A total of 384,000 people visited the exhibition at the *Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art*. The art competitions were also very popular with the public at the 1936 Games in Berlin and the 1948 Games in London, although the number of participants declined slightly once again.

Although some Olympic art medallists achieved a certain degree of fame in their home countries, only a few became truly famous worldwide. At the 1924 Games in Paris, for example, some members of the jury (including Selma Lagerlöf and Igor Stravinsky) were significantly more prominent than the participants themselves. At the 1949 IOC Congress in Rome, a report was presented which also showed that virtually all participants in the art competitions were professional artists and earned their living from their work. This contradicted the general amateur status so blatantly that the competitions were to be abolished and replaced by exhibitions without medals. The report sparked a heated debate within the IOC, following which the IOC initially decided in 1951 to reintroduce the competitions for the 1952 Games in Helsinki. However, due to time constraints, the Finnish organisers were unable to prepare either the competitions or the corresponding exhibitions. In 1954, the IOC therefore decided definitively

to replace the art competitions with exhibitions. Subsequent attempts to reverse this decision were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, an addendum was included in the Olympic Charter obliging the organisers of future Games to hold cultural events in order to "*promote harmonious relations, mutual understanding and friendship amongst the participants and visitors to the Olympic Games*".

It is precisely this provision in the Olympic Charter – which remains unchanged to this day and obliges every host city to integrate cultural programmes – that would have provided the perfect legal and conceptual basis for a genuine revival of the Olympic art competitions in Graz in 2026. Instead of the usual, often arbitrary-seeming events falsely termed 'Cultural Olympiads' – such as the non-competitive showcase of dance, music and photography – the reintroduction of genuine, medal-awarding art competitions with an international jury, public exhibitions and opportunities for sale would not only have evoked de Coubertin's spirit, but actually revived it.

The modern Olympic movement has been suffering for decades from progressive commercialisation and delegitimation: billions spent on infrastructure, massive environmental impact from artificial snow cannons and mega-structures required only temporarily, political exploitation, and a growing disconnect from the general public, who vote against the Games in referendums in many bids... The 2026 Winter Games in Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo are a prime example of this model. Despite a 'sustainability' advertising campaign and the purported use of existing facilities, there was massive criticism: for the new bobsleigh track, which alone cost a staggering 120 million euros, hundreds of trees were felled in a sensitive mountain forest, despite opposition from the International Olympic Committee, which would have preferred a solution using an existing bobsleigh track. Local environmentalists such as Luigi Casanova of *CIPRA Italia* and *Mountain Wilderness* derided the venue as the "Queen of Concrete". The total cost amounted to over 1.7 billion euros, accommodation prices skyrocketed, and protests in Milan made it clear that the promised environmental protection was little more than embarrassing greenwashing.

This is precisely where Graz could have provided a counterpoint with an 'Art Olympics': affordable, sustainable, deeply rooted in both local and European culture (the historic centre has also been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1999) and without the ecological and financial collateral damage of an overpriced winter sports event. Graz would have been tailor-made for this – and not merely out of a nostalgic whim, but on the basis of verifiable cultural, political and social factors.

The *steirischer herbst*, which despite a decline in content and, in the eyes of many culture enthusiasts, formal quality as well, still presents itself as *the* local interdisciplinary festival for contemporary art, is celebrating its 59th anniversary and could have once again staged interesting productions in theatre, performance, music and visual arts – perfectly aligned with the five classical disciplines of the historic Olympic art competitions. Established formats such as the *Diagonale*, *Klanglicht* or the *Elevate* Festival could have joined in, to name but a few. All these institutions and event platforms could have not only hosted the individual art competitions but also organically expanded them: architectural designs would have been discussed directly in public spaces or at World Heritage sites; literature could have been presented in existing libraries, publishing houses or the Literaturhaus; music would have been performed in concert halls, the opera house, the *Dom im Berg* and other venues (unlike the sheet music presentations at the historical Games); new media, film and photographic art would have found contemporary venues for Olympic participation for the first time in cinemas and public spaces, whilst painting and sculpture could have been exhibited in the numerous galleries and other exhibition spaces. Without expensive new buildings, but with maximum use of existing and UNESCO-protected spaces.

From a political perspective, the Olympic Arts Games in Graz in 2026 could have been a prime example of smart, resource-efficient cultural diplomacy – particularly in light of the political amateurism of recent years and the current cuts to funding – not only to the independent scene but also to cultural venues such as the Graz Opera House, which were implemented due to a deficit unprecedented since 1945, caused in part by serious budgetary misjudgements in the over-funding of COVID-19 countermeasures, as art and culture are always the first to bear the brunt of cuts in times of crisis.

Graz could therefore have sent a signal with modest resources – anchored in existing EU programmes: culture as a sustainable investment, not merely as a tiresome lip service or PR stunt. In times of polarisation and geopolitical tensions, an international jury could have made a concrete contribution to harmonious relations through decisions that foster unity. As Austria's second-largest city, with several universities and a university of applied sciences, Graz could have demonstrated that decentralised, sustainably effective cultural policy can work – regardless of historical mistakes, not only in the distribution of 2003 European Capital of Culture funds.

The historic Olympic art competitions had already attracted a wide audience – 384,000 visitors in Los Angeles in 1932 alone. In Graz, with its diverse population and numerous international students, the model of adapted

amateur rules would have built a bridge between art and everyday life, especially as most artists based in Graz are decidedly unable to make a living from their art (a historical eligibility criterion) and are dependent on regular state subsidies or a 'day job', unless they have the rare good fortune to have inherited wealth or to have wealthy parents or partners. Many freelance artists live in precarious economic circumstances, facing rejections, delayed or denied funding, a largely non-existent culture of private patronage, and stagnating incomes despite rising living costs.

Technically and organisationally, Graz 2026 would have been ideally prepared. The existing organisations, initiatives and event venues—both small and large—could have accommodated the disciplines alongside contemporary additions. A transparent call for entries free from party-political influence, together with a diverse and international expert jury, would have ensured higher quality and egalitarian conditions, exhibitions running parallel to the individual competition festivals, laboratories closely networked in terms of infrastructure and space, workshops, studios, presentation and performance venues, as well as associated retail opportunities – established with basic costs covered beyond the duration of the competition – could have actually implemented the very concept of 'Creative Industries' for the first time (!) in Graz. Financially speaking, this would have required only a fraction of the Olympic costs, without the need for expensive new buildings and the associated logistics; the sustainable elimination of precarious conditions for artists through cleverly implemented structures could finally have realised the social impact predicted for 2003 – an increased significance of the independent art scene.

The 2026 Olympic Arts Games in Graz would therefore not only have been desirable, but would have been highly successful. They could have reminded the Olympic movement of its roots, strengthened Graz as a cultural centre, and demonstrated that true renaissance does not take place in expensive stadiums or concrete tracks, but in minds, hearts, studios and public spaces – also, and indeed precisely, by not concealing the precariousness of the scene, but addressing it.

It is a shame about the missed opportunity – but the idea remains, for future generations who may once again learn what de Coubertin actually wanted: the harmonious union of body and mind, of competition and creativity, of sport and art in a world that needs unity, reconciliation and a sense of the value of contrast and difference more than ever.