

# Reaching for Gold

30 June – 2 September

It would be difficult to ignore the fact that Britain is hosting the Olympics this year. This is the third time they have been held in London since the Modern Olympic Games began in 1896. London also hosted the games in 1908 and 1948. In 1916, 1940 and 1944 there were no games, which makes this year's games the 27<sup>th</sup> occasion.



The first *recorded* Ancient Olympic Games were held in 776 BCE to honour Zeus and to show the physical qualities of the competing athletes.

The games promoted good relations between Greek cities but lasted just for one day and had one event – a running race. This race was won by Coroebus, a cook from Elis, which makes him the first recorded Olympic champion.

History also tells us that the Ancient Games were banned by Emperor Theodosius in 393 AD as he considered them unsuitable for a Christian empire.

1500 years later, a young Frenchman with a great deal of persistence decided a modern version of the Olympic Games would be a positive thing as it would advance the benefits of sport, culture and education. Pierre de Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee in 1894 and began work on organising the first Modern Olympic Games. These were held in Athens in 1896. 241 athletes from 14 countries took part, but no women. Winners received a silver medal and an olive branch. In 1900 the games took place in Paris – women included. De Coubertin designed the Olympic rings and the flag as symbols of universality; his biggest ambition for the games was to encourage a sense of world unity.

Today the Olympic Games, as we know them, are a huge event. The Beijing Olympics lasted for 16 days and athletes competed in 28 different sports. The Games are still overseen by the IOC<sup>1</sup> and now include the Winter Olympics which were started in response to the increasing popularity of snow and ice sports in the 1920s. The first Winter Olympics were held in Chamonix, France in 1924. By 2006, the Turin Winter Olympics saw over 2500 athletes, representing 80 competing countries.

Since 1968, each Summer Olympic Games has been followed by a Paralympic Games for athletes with disabilities. The formal explanation for the term 'Paralympic' is that it derives from the Greek *pará*, meaning 'beside' or 'alongside' and therefore refers to a competition which runs in parallel with the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. The 1988 Seoul Games was the first time the term 'Paralympic' came into use. Although the Paralympic Games has adopted the set of principles de Coubertin came up with for the Summer Olympics, respect, excellence and friendship, the Paralympics has the additional values of courage, determination, inspiration and equality added to their charter.

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<sup>1</sup> International Olympic Committee. There are 4 main constituents of the Olympic movement: the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Federations and the National Olympic Committees, and the Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games.

In order to mark the occasion of the Olympic Games taking place 'at home', Devon Guild added the three Summer Olympic values to our exhibition brief and our Members decided upon the title *Reaching for Gold*. The Summer Exhibition is an annual event and an important one for our Members. In our annual programme, this is the only exhibition held in the Jubilee Gallery which is exclusively for Members of the Devon Guild. Our 'regular' summer exhibition submission criteria ask that work submitted is recently made, executed to a high standard, entirely under the control of the maker, has never previously been exhibited at Devon Guild and concentrates on quality not quantity. The exhibition is selected by a panel of six Members and chaired by a seventh.<sup>2</sup>

Guild Members have responded to the exhibition title and values with varied materials, imaginative ideas and a resulting diverse collection of work. There are prints (monotype, linocut, collagraph, etching and woodcut), ceramics (large and small), textiles, wood (furniture and sculpture), glass, jewellery, photography and mixed media – quite a challenge for our exhibitions manager to display to best advantage!



Mike Tingle's piece, made up from nine squares of punched and painted copper, tells the story of Icarus who, as most of us know, flew too close to the sun which melted the wax in his home-made wings and resulted in disaster. Less well known perhaps is that Daedalus, the architect of King Minos's scary labyrinth, and also Icarus's father and maker of the wings (Daedalus was a fine



craftsman), warned his son not to fly too high *or* too low.

One of the squares in Mike Tingle's piece is called 'advised altitude' – a father's advice to his son – fatally ignored. The Icarus myth is often interpreted as failed ambition but another reading of it, and one that is encompassed in Mike Tingle's piece, is that it relates the impetuosity of youth. The two images above show that the Icarus story has been rendered in diverse styles by a number of artists.<sup>3</sup>

Merlyn Chesterman's large woodcut prints have a clear Chinese theme and imagery. They were made by Merlyn in China-Guanlan Printmaking Base, which operates as a cultural exchange initiative, funded by the Chinese government. The Base is a 300 year-old Chinese village saved from destruction and re-development in a rapidly industrialising part of Guangdong Province. The old village houses and the huge new printmaking workshop are now preserved, the printmaking facilities available for visiting artists to use for woodblock printmaking, screen printing, etching and lithography. A glass partition allows the public to watch the printmakers at work. The centre encourages international printmakers to make working visits and Merlyn, a willing

<sup>2</sup> See exhibition introduction panel

<sup>3</sup> Images: left - The Lament for Icarus, H J Draper, right – Icarus, Henri Matisse

participant, came home with three editions of her prints, some invaluable newly acquired skills, higher expectations, new ideas and new friends. So cultural exchange and understanding, one of the core principles of the Olympic ideal, has been tried and tested by Merlyn Chesterman and proved by the resulting prints to be a very fine thing.



Debby Mason's sparkling etching of a goldfish began life as a portrait of 'Barry', an unusual commission. While Debby was in conversation with a marine biologist, she learned that the scales of some types of fish have tiny lozenge shapes of guanine<sup>4</sup> within them, the compound that produces their iridescent mirror-like appearance. Fish scales are in fact non-metallic mirrors and extremely useful as the reflected light can make them virtually disappear in the face of predators.

Barry

Still on the subject of printmaking, Deborah Treliving's collagraphs are made using oil based ink on black Somerset paper with Japanese paper applied using the Chine-collé process. The collagraph plate was made from woven thread and paper; then varnished with shellac. Intaglio and relief processes were used to ink the plate. Using a new way of making the plate, Deborah set out to make a series of prints, the best of which, the gold standard, were submitted for this exhibition.

Jenny Southam's athletes, competing in the official 776 BCE kit, are throwing the discus, running, wrestling and leap-frogging. Their presence in this exhibition needs no introduction or explanation. Their lively athleticism and muscular bodies proclaim them to be small Olympians who are having quite a lot of fun.

Hugh Dunford-Wood's piece, *The Spiral Dance*, gives an alternative consideration to the Olympic ideals. The spiral reminds us that, in life, the line to the finish is anything but straight but we all must arrive in the end. Hugh's spiral is populated by a diverse, mainly joyful, collection of characters all heading towards the finish at their own pace.

Sam Pickard's digital screenprinted cotton canvas is an optimistic reminder that even wet summers have their delights. If the sun's not shining then at least the roses are blooming.

Jane Price's cabinet of curiosities, *The Alchemic Inquiry and the Search for the Philosopher's Stone* has used the age-old belief that base metals could be transformed into gold if only the secret could be discovered. It's hard to credit that for centuries this was a real belief, the philosopher's stone also being credited with powers of rejuvenation and possible immortality. Efforts to discover the secret were known as the *Magnum Opus* and how we laugh now, in our age of science, at this futile quest. Reaching for gold indeed! And yet ... are some of our current quests, prolonging youth, fame and wealth, unlimited free renewable energy or travel to the stars, another *Philosopher's Stone*? Or are we, some of us at least, programmed to always be *reaching for gold*?

<sup>4</sup> Guanine is one of the five main nucleobases found in the nucleic acids DNA and RNA.

P.de Burlet for Devon Guild of Craftsmen