

Garments of Lights, Sounds and Wind Olympic ceremonies costumes

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Abstract:

The collection of stage costumes held by The Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage in Lausanne consists of garments and props used by performers during the Olympic ceremonies. They were designed by talented artists, such as Philippe Guillotel (1992), Eiko Ishioka (2008), Tahra Zafar (2012) or Kim Barrett (2014), to name a few. This collection covers several Olympic ceremonies from the late 1980s, which makes its uniqueness. After a brief introduction about the evolution of the Olympic ceremonies and its impacts on the costumes, the presentation will outline the issues raised by collecting, preserving and contextualizing Olympic costumes. At each edition of the Games, the process starts with a necessary selection within the hundreds of costumes produced, which explains the importance of linking this set to others collections. The presentation will conclude briefly with the question of displaying costumes designed to be worn in an outdoor context – the stadium – in the closed museum space.

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The collection of stage costumes at The Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage

The Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage holds a collection of stage costumes used by performers during the ceremonies that mark the opening and closing of the Olympic Games. They are not the only clothes present in our museum, as we also preserve competition sports gear, national team outfits and uniforms worn by the organising committees. Moreover, openings and closings are not the only formal events in the Olympic agenda: the medal presentation ceremonies, the flame-lighting ceremonies in Olympia, and the Olympic torch relays also require specific costumes. (For the medals presentation ceremonies, a good introduction can be found in Barney 1998. For the torch relay, see Durantez 2000). Nevertheless, because of their artistic nature, the collection of stage costumes is one of the most challenging in terms of care, documentation, display and interpretation.

A brief introduction to Olympic ceremonies

Since the beginning of the modern Olympic Games, the ceremonies have played an important role, but at first were centred on the protocol, which took priority over artistic performances. Some early ceremonies included mass sports demonstrations. The oldest ceremony costumes held in our institution were the clothes worn by gymnasts and dancers during the Festival that closed the 1936 Opening Ceremony in Berlin (Official Report, vol. 1, 1937, 575-576, 583). Performances involving dancers, acrobats and musicians gradually increased in importance and, therefore, more elaborate costumes were required. According to our image archives, the first stage costume might be the one worn by British skater Phil Taylor at the Lake Placid 1932 Winter Games. However, it is likely that his glittering suit featuring the god Hermes was not specifically designed for the Games; no mention of this

skating exhibition is found in the Official Report. For several decades, sports outfits shared the stage with military-style uniforms and national folklore costumes (Schanz 1996, 134-5).

With the influence of television, the formal ritual has been losing ground to the shows. *“The third stage or phase of the opening ceremony has lately consisted of a highly choreographed and visually alluring pageant of dance and music that shifts the mood from the excited expectation and high solemnity of the first two phases to the joy that is prescribed as the dominant mood of the festival.”* (MacAloon 1984, 253). In the 1980s, the costumes became more “showy”. From this period, our institution has a musical band uniform from the Los Angeles 1984 Opening Ceremony (Official Report 1985, 195). With its Disney-like style and the pastel colours that characterised the Look of Games, it is emblematic of the evolving ceremonies.

1992 marked a turning point in the development of the artistic performances. Philippe Guillotel produced extraordinary stage costumes for the shows created by Philippe Decouflé on the occasion of the Albertville Winter Games. Shortly after, the Barcelona Summer Games were the setting for the spectacular creations by Peter Minshall. From this point, the competitive spirit between the following organisers led them to recruit talented artists from the international cultural scene and/or to hire people who had already made their mark on past ceremonies.

A spectacle for billions of people

Olympic ceremonies are linked with a particular moment and place. They have a large impact on the image of the Games, and are instrumental in the promotion of their host city and country. As noted by sport editor Josep Maria Casanovas: *“These ceremonies provide a fantastic opportunity for the host cities to demonstrate their potential, creativity, aspirations, and talents.”* (Casanovas 1996, 257). There is always great public expectation, in the host country and abroad. The 1992 Barcelona ceremonies director Josep Roca reminds us how the ceremonies can impact the image of the Games: *“The Opening Ceremony, because of public expectation and the large television audience, is the most important cultural and creative event of the Games. [...] It is an introduction of the city to the world. The Closing Ceremony, whose atmosphere is more festive and emotional, fixes the final image of the Games and the city in the mind of the public.”* (Roca 1996, 227).

As sports journalist John Rodda pointed out, there are two Olympic ceremonies: the one in the stadium where the live audience sees the event from their distant seats, and the one on television where the audience watches a constructed version with close-up shots and commentaries (Rodda 1996, 7). Director of Jack Morton Public Events, which created the Athens 2004 ceremonies, David Zolkwer outlined the difficulties in retaining the spectators’ attention in a gigantic stadium. *“We tried to resist the temptation to constantly go for huge scale and instead tried to allow for human scale and the use of colour, light and sound to close the space down.”* (Rockwell and Mau 2006, 38). All components are large-scale: the stadium, the large budget and crew and the hundreds or thousands of participants involved. Managing the whole is part of the challenge taken on by those in charge of the ceremonies, as explained by 1996 cast member Myles A. Garcia: *“What is the real secret to staging these Olympic ceremonies? It’s moving large masses of people/performers/props in and out of one area to another in a jiffy. You have one particular area to focus on (the field) and a few short hours to do it.”* (Garcia 2010, 79)

Picking up the “right” pieces of memory?

For their success, Olympic ceremonies rely mostly on the effect created by the costumes, as noticed by Martin Green, Head of London 2012 ceremonies: *“Costume is really important because we have 15,000 volunteers taking part in our ceremonies and we want them to look their best; over six months we are going to make about 26,000 costumes for people to wear. Apart from the big sets that we built, everybody will be looking to the costumes to bring colour, lightness and excitement into the shows.”* (Opening Ceremony Costume 2012) For our institution, the first challenge is the selection process in cooperation with the organising committee. At every edition of the Olympic Games – that means every two years – we have to choose a few from the hundreds of costumes produced. In the past, we made different attempts to select and negotiate the costumes shortly after the ceremonies, because before then they are undisclosed and under embargo. Now, we rely on the selection made by the art directors and head designers.

Our collections definition requires five costumes per ceremony (so ten in total, for the opening and the closing); but we know how arbitrary this number could be. It is not related to the number of segments that make up the ceremonies (for the protocol, see Factsheet 2014) and, by the way, has nothing to do with the five rings... Because of the space they need, we have to think carefully before acquiring more than ten costumes. We have made exceptions on some occasions, following the designer’s suggestions. As an example, Tahra Zafar, Head of Costumes for the London 2012 ceremonies, provided us with sets of outfits to be presented in groups; and we agreed that all the groups were necessary to illustrate the highlights of the ceremonies. On other occasions, we have had to turn down huge costumes and props, like a giant inflatable beaver from the Vancouver 2010 Closing Ceremony (Vancouver Knowledge Report 2010, 18).

Constraints in costume design

The Olympic ceremonies give art directors and designers the occasion to make use of an unprecedented budget, but the public expectations are as high as the resources (Boisseau 2003, 98). Factors like the budget and the deadlines influence the final productions. Among the constraints, Eiko Ishioka raised the question of safety while describing her work for the Cirque du Soleil show *Varekai*; but she probably also had this in mind when she designed the costumes for the 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremony: *“Although artistically a costume might be exciting, it must also work for the acrobatic performance (...) the costume must be lightweight, flexible and easy to maintain...”* (Jiangping 2006, 309) Indeed, most creators actually mix voluminous costumes with body-tight outfits more suitable for physical performances. The creators’ strength lies in their ability to combine simple and elaborate costumes, to re-use some elements and to customise outfits with the accessories. At the Lillehammer 1994 Olympic Games, the Vetter costumes were used as a thread between the two ceremonies. At the Nagano 1998 Opening Ceremony, coats and cloaks allowed the performers to change their appearance dramatically, without great expense: *“Giant straw guardians known as dosojin enter the arena, followed by local schoolchildren dressed as yukinko (snow children), in traditional winter coats and hats of straw (...) suddenly, the children throw off their straw coats and hats, revealing brightly colored costumes.”* (Opening Ceremony 1998, 12)

As our selection is not sufficient to illustrate all aspects of the ceremonial and shows, it is important to put it in a broader perspective and to link the set to other collections held elsewhere in the world. More recently, we have started to complete and fill the gaps in our costume collection with sketches. We received different unused and prototype costumes from Eiko Ishioka, together with a lot of sketches, textile samples and documentation. (The legacy was donated in 2014 by Nicholas Soutanakis.) This material allows us to see the

evolution between the sketches and the design adopted by the heads of ceremonies. Ishioka recalled that many of the first drafts presented by her and the six-designer team in New York were rejected (Morikawa 2008-2009, 41). Cai Guo-Qiang, who was in charge of the fireworks, explained this tough screening process: *“The Olympics’ audience was four billion people, and the Opening Ceremony has to entertain them all. (...) We have many more ideals but only simple ideas remained in the end. Those simple ideas looked stupid and boring but as we worked on it, we understood the meaning of its simplicity and purity...”*

Preserving their shine?

The quality of the cut and fabrics, the richness of details and accessories often marvel us, like the Sochi 2014 costumes that had up to ten pieces, with superb lining or metal chiselled buttons. As the Olympic ceremonies are both live performances and television shows, the costumes must be attractive viewed from near and far. Interestingly, Ishioka explained about her attention to detail: *“I always strive to do very detailed work of the highest possible quality, as this has a direct and positive psychological impact on the performer wearing the costume (...) When performers are surrounded by beautifully executed sets and costumes, they are able to escape from the real world and completely submerge themselves in the theatrical world created on stage.”* (Jiangping 2006, 12-3)

Costumes and props are created to provide a high visual impact. They are often of large dimensions, to make the performers look bigger, and made from a broad range of materials, such as papier-mâché, real hair, straw, polyurethane foam or latex, that cause preservation issues (Guibert and Sanjuan 2007, 6). The costumes often have beads, sequins, feathers or fringes and must be handled with great care. Some costumes are sophisticated and include ignition or lighting systems, like the Torino 2006 Sparks of Passion skating costume, which included a flame-burner in its helmet, or the Moschino gown worn by the signboard-bearer of the Italian delegation (Official Report, vol. 1, 2006, 12, 72). These mechanisms raise several questions, when these elements may threaten the preservation of the whole or need to be restored.

The costumes are not designed to last but to serve during rehearsals and ceremonies. Some deterioration results from the performers’ activities. For instance, the worn-out Albertville 1992 costumes recall the demanding performances choreographed by Decouflé: *“The dancer leaps, twirls and pirouettes, the ski-jumper soars like a bird, the skater spins like a weather-vane... Each sport has its gestures and in those gestures lies their art”* (XVI Olympic Winter Games 1992). Furthermore, because the costumes are used in an outdoor context, they often bear traces of moisture, sweat, make-up or dust. They must not be restored or cleaned “too much”. As an institution specialised in sportswear, we are aware of the importance of the wear and tear in the artefacts’ history. We favour minimal restoration and have long discussions with our external restorers about whether stains and marks should remain as evidence of the context.

Documenting from head to toe

Huge efforts are needed to document their production and their use during the performances. Above all, our image archives provide a major contribution to the documentation work. Close-up pictures and footage from the Olympic ceremonies, rehearsals and backstage preparations help us to know when they were used, by whom, and with which accessories and props. The comparative work between artefacts and images is essential to record and dress the mannequins properly. Remember that costumes arrive very often in scattered packages, shoes coming with shoes and hats with hats! In this regard, strict customs

legislation requiring the exact list of materials, makers and countries of production could assist the collections specialist.

Artistic directors and designers constantly change the scale by having an eye on the details while keeping the big picture in mind. The curator who wants to study the costumes needs to do this, too. In many cases, the costumes must be considered at the same time as individual pieces, and as elements of a whole. As a matter of interest, the designers of the Beijing 2008 Opening Ceremony designed a set of black suits with light bulbs. During the first rehearsal, art director Zhang Yimou judged the effect too “ninja-like”, and the costume crew had to produce a hundred new green outfits in about five days (Garcia 2010, 139). We know that change can occur at a very late stage (Ning 2008, 208).

Studying the reception of Olympic ceremonies by the public is easy because of the large impact produced by the Olympic Games and the importance of the events in the national branding. However this mass of information might disappear after a while and needs to be archived. By contrast, research work on the designers' inspiration and influence could be a long-distance race. The creative process is complex and involves the organisers, numerous experts and a crew of costumers, prop designers and make-up artists. As the ceremonies production archives remain in the host country, we mainly use publications issued by the organising committees, as well as articles and media reports. This documentation is often lacking with regard to several steps of the process, such as planning, budgeting, treating fabrics, cutting, etc. The interview of Sharon E. Secord, head of wardrobe at the Vancouver 2010 ceremonies provides an insight of the back stage work (Kovacs 2012). In the future, we would like to further engage the creative teams, performers and volunteers in the interpretation of the costumes.

Exhibiting the ephemeral

The presentation concludes with the question of how to display costumes and props. Anthropologist John MacAloon described the Olympic rituals as rites of passage, where the opening ceremony prepares the spectators for the excitement of the sporting events, while the closing ceremony serves to mark the return to normality (MacAloon 1984, 252-3). The costumes play an important role in these processes. They are part of performances involving spectacular lighting effects, music, dance and mass choreography, and can look “empty” out of this context. Is it possible to fully apprehend the ceremonies outside the moment of the live performance? Most of our visitors probably do not have the chance to attend the event, so the question is important. With the broadcast version, viewers get explanations, close-ups and a bird's-eye view of the stage (Baka 2010, 274-76), but miss the stadium's unique atmosphere, where the audience was often given the opportunity to be part of the grand design, by flashing lights, ringing bells or raising colorful flags or panels (Rockwell and Mau 2006, 38). Our challenge is to give to the public an insight into what the live ceremonies are like, with the crowd, the heat or the cold, the music, the fireworks and all the visual effects.



Fig. 1:
London 2012 Opening Ceremony. ©2012/CIO /FURLONG, Christopher

How can we bring the costumes alive without sacrificing their preservation? Shall we present the Seoul 1988 golden parachute suit or the London 2012 Mary Poppins costume in the air (fig. 1), as they were flying during their ceremony? Is it possible to attract the visitors' attention to unusual details, such as the body-painted tunic of the Atlanta 1996 Greek musician or the unexpected Tyvek fabric used for the Athens 2004 folklore costumes without lighting them too much? For our permanent gallery, the choice has been made to display costumes close to the digitals created for the exhibition, requiring careful work on the lights. They are presented on plain static mannequins but without a showcase, with the exception of a display cabinet, which is used for the most fragile items. Images, sounds and lights are present in the display, with the backstage work only suggested, because this topic is an exhibition theme in itself. It is in fact a semi-permanent exhibition, with a regular turnover of costumes. It allows us to make better use of this collection, which covers several Olympic ceremonies from the late 1980s, with few gaps since then, making it unique.

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