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ART, SPORT, AND PROPAGANDA: 1972 MUNICH OLYMPICS

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In 1966, when the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) was named to host the 1972 Olympics in Munich, the country's Olympic Committee dubbed the event "the happy games" ("die heiteren Spiele") and set out to convey to the world that they were a modern, democratic society. As a key component of the promotional program, the committee commissioned limited edition posters by 35 internationally recognized artists to herald the Olympics—and help recast West Germany. This unprecedented project, which has been emulated ever since, included artists such as Josef Albers, David Hockney, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, and Jacob Lawrence.

And the Games were happy...and bright and color-coordinated. I know because I was there, living and working in Munich. The Bavarian city put on a great, all-around show—from the city's streets and squares and its theaters and museums to the modernist Olympic stadiums. Until the ninth day of the games. All the unity and goodwill came crashing down when 11 Israeli athletes and coaches and a West German police officer were killed by eight members of the Palestinian terrorist Black September group.

The horror overshadowed the Games, yet, as the exhibition, *Art, Sport, and Propaganda: 1972 Munich Olympics* at the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA), emphasizes, we can today re-view these wide-ranging, purposeful posters

as expressions of hope. Germany was reemerging—for example, Chancellor Willy Brandt, who sought reconciliation with the East European countries, was awarded the 1971 Nobel Peace Prize. Propaganda customarily serves an agenda or an "ism," though here we witness a type of propaganda that delivers uplift.

Guest curator Elissa Watters, who encountered several of the art posters in WCMA's collection as an intern at the museum, has assembled a thoughtful and thought-provoking exhibition. Watters (with Kevin M. Murphy, the Eugénie Prendergast Senior Curator of American and European Art) explores the stylistic roots of the Munich Games' graphic design, showcases the in-house designers, and displays 14 of the "fine art" posters. "The show is fundamentally about how graphic materials can promote very specific, deliberate messages," says Watters. "Its primary aim is to prompt visitors to think about how national identities and narratives can be created and shaped through images."

Two diametrically opposed posters open the show. In the official poster for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, a golden Aryan man, whose head intrudes into the Olympic Rings that top the poster, rises above the Brandenburg Gate's charging horses, symbolizing German supremacy and might.

Next to it, the official 1972 Munich poster bears the event's logo, a spiral representing change and development, and depicts the Games' television and radio tower, signaling exchange and freedom, and its iconic, tent-like structures, whose cables seem to emanate upward. (Recall that official Olympic posters of both Rome [1960] and Tokyo [1968], the two other Axis enemies, incorporated national symbols.)



Above, left: Franz Würbel, *Official Poster, Berlin Olympics, 1936*. © Franz Würbel, courtesy of LA84 Foundation, Los Angeles. Right: Otl Aicher and Rolf Müller, *Official Standard Poster, Munich Olympics, 1969–70*. © Florian Aicher, courtesy of LA84 Foundation, Los Angeles.



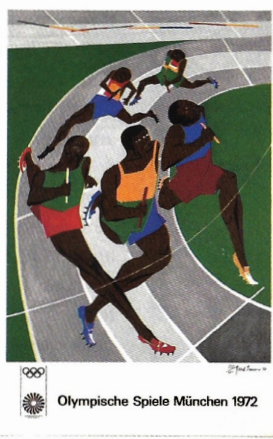
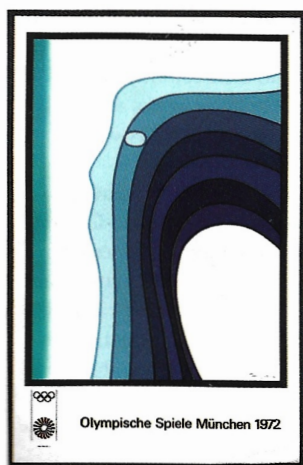
Watters next spotlights the influencers: Two works that evince the impact of the Bauhaus, the famous pre-WWII school of design, and three by two of the cofounders of the post-WWII Ulm School of Design in Ulm, Germany, which was modeled on the Bauhaus. A 1950 abstract lithograph, *Jürgen Uhde: An Introduction to Bela Bartok* by Otl Aicher, who later headed the Munich Games visual design team, has a jazzy, improvisational feel.

Among the standouts in the commissioned posters, the abstract vision of Polish-born Jan Lenica presents a flowing stream of lush blues that comprise a head in swift motion, eyeing a bright blue finish line. A bright, orderly abstract by Max Bill, another Ulm School founder, reflects the Games' sought-after modernity and openness.

In his Olympic poster of Black relay runners rounding a curve full force, Jacob Lawrence captures the push and pull of mid-distance running, while calling forth Jessie Owens, the unwelcomed champion of Hitler's Berlin Games. David Hockney summons his Los Angeles pool-side paintings of the late 1960s, with an image of a diver about to hit a shimmering pool.

The works on display, according to Watters, underscore the complex intersection of graphic design and political ideology. Posters are tasked to regale and to instruct. Seen through the lens of hope, the 1972 Munich Olympics graphic design program and the commissioned posters fulfilled their Olympian task, gloriously.

—Jack Curtis



Left: Jan Lenica, *Art Poster, Munich Olympics*, pub. 1969–70, screenprint. Williams College Museum of Art, Gift of Lewis Scheffey, Class of 1946. © Estate of Jan Lenica/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Right: Jacob Lawrence, *Art Poster, Munich Olympics*, 1971, pub. 1972, screenprint. Williams College Museum of Art, Gift of Lewis Scheffey, Class of 1946. © the Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. All photos on this page reproduced with permission of the United States Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee.