

Reference: CH CIO-AH PT-PDC

Dates: 1882-2002, especially 1882-1937

Level of description: Fonds

Extent and medium: Approx. 9.7 l.m. of paper documents

Name of creator

Coubertin, Pierre de, 1863-1937 (President)

Administrative history/Biographical history

Pierre de Frédy, Baron de Coubertin, was born in Paris on 1 January 1863. He was the youngest of four children. His father, Charles de Frédy de Coubertin, was a painter. His mother, Marie-Marcelle Gigault de Crisenoy, inherited the family château at Mirville (Normandy), where Pierre de Coubertin spent most of his childhood when not travelling around Europe with his family.

Coubertin had a classical education at the Jesuit College of St Ignatius in Paris. In 1880, he passed his baccalaureate in literature. Although accepted by the Military School of Saint Cyr – like many sons of noble families at the time – he chose instead to study at the Law Faculty of the Political Sciences School. However, with little enthusiasm for a career in this field, he turned to education, which became a veritable passion. Thus it was that, in 1883, influenced by the work of French philosopher and historian Hippolyte Taine, and that of the Englishman Thomas Arnold (the Head of Rugby School), he went to England to compare the British and French education systems. After this trip, he began his life's work, namely reforming the education system through sport. Convinced of the importance of including sport in the balanced education of a person, he then devoted himself to spreading this idea using all means available: lectures, publications, setting up sports or educational societies, etc. These included the Union des sociétés françaises de course à pied (1887), l'Association pour la réforme de l'enseignement (1906), the Olympic Museum and Library (1925), l'Union Pédagogique Universelle (UPU, 1925) and the Bureau international de pédagogie sportive (BIPS, 1928).

Beginning in 1890, Pierre de Coubertin worked actively on re-establishing the Olympic Games (OG). After a failure in 1892, he organised the International Athletics Congress in Paris, in 1894, after which the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was created and the OG re-established. For Coubertin, this represented the consecration of his huge education reform project. Indeed, he regarded the OG as the ultimate means of promoting sport, and sought – as he wrote in 1894 – “to make them able to better fulfil the educational role incumbent upon them in the modern world” (Coubertin, quoted in *The Olympic Movement*, IOC). The first modern OG were held in Athens in 1896. After these, Coubertin took over from Demetrius Vikelas as IOC President. He held this position until 1925, when he became Honorary President for life.

Throughout his life, Pierre de Coubertin wrote a great deal. His various publications are estimated to run to some 15,000 printed pages, without counting his personal correspondence. This large written output mainly concerns Olympism, sport and education, but also subjects as varied as history, geography, sociology, psychology or politics. It was Coubertin who produced the “founding” texts of modern Olympism, including

the Olympic Charter, and numerous works like his *Histoire Universelle* published in 1926-1927 and his *Olympic Memoirs*, published in 1932.

A renowned humanist, Coubertin received several distinctions during his career. Among other things, he was a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1936 and received the Virginie Heriot Prize in the same year. On 22 June 1937, he was made an Honorary Citizen of Lausanne – the IOC headquarters since 1915 thanks to the Baron's initiative. Thanks to the generosity of certain friends, this honour enabled Coubertin to overcome the financial worries affecting him at the end of his life, as he had spent his whole personal fortune on funding various projects linked to Olympism and education.

Pierre de Coubertin died on 2 September 1937, felled by a heart attack in the La Grange park in Geneva. He left behind his wife, Marie Rothan (1861-1963), whom he married on 12 March 1895, and his two children, Jacques (1896-1952) and Renée (1901-1968). In accordance with his final wishes, his body was buried at the Bois de Vaux cemetery in Lausanne, and his heart was placed in a marble stele commemorating the revival of the Olympic Games in Olympia (Greece).

Method of entry

The Pierre de Coubertin fonds was begun unofficially as soon as the IOC was created in 1894. It forms the heart of the IOC's archives, kept in Lausanne since 1915. Until the end of the Baron's presidency in 1925, the fonds grew essentially thanks to the correspondence which he kept each year. After that, the fonds was added to a number of times – notably when the Olympic Museum was created in 1993 – by means of the acquisitions of various documents linked to Pierre de Coubertin. These are chiefly letters from the Baron which were in the possession of individuals or institutions, particularly the City of Geneva Archives.

Presentation of content

The fonds covers the academic, professional and personal activities of Pierre de Coubertin, especially his achievements in connection with his education reform project and Olympism. In this respect, the fonds offers information on the copious writings of Coubertin on these two subjects, between 1920 and 1937 (the year he died). As well as the Baron's writings, the fonds provides information on some of the organisations he founded, including the Union Pédagogique Universelle (UPU, 1925) and the Bureau international de pédagogie sportive (BIPS, 1928). The large amounts of correspondence produced or received by the Baron between 1889 and 1937 throw light on the relations he had with various colleagues, chiefly those involved in the Olympic Movement, including Godefroy de Blonay, Francis Messerli and the IOC Presidents Demetrius Vikelas, Henri de Baillet-Latour and J. Sigfrid Edström. The correspondence also reveals Coubertin's active involvement in the organisation of the Olympic Games, especially as IOC President between 1896 and 1925. Lastly, in more general terms, the fonds gives details of Coubertin's life and work, chiefly through the numerous works on the subject by various authors published between 1906 and 1999.

The fonds contains Pierre de Coubertin's numerous writings, in particular course notes, speeches, lecture texts, press articles, circulars and various publications in different formats linked to education or Olympism. It also contains hand- or typewritten letters from Pierre de Coubertin or his colleagues, as well as the autographs of numerous personalities that the Baron met during his life. The fonds also contains press articles on Coubertin or collected by him, biographical texts, documentation produced by the UPU and the BIPS, some portraits of the Baron and various documents concerning the Congresses in 1897, 1905, 1906 and 1914. Lastly, the fonds includes tourist brochures on Mirville, where the Baron grew up, and documents concerning his candidature for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1936.

Accrual

No

Conditions of access

The documents are freely accessible, subject to the provisions established by the IOC to this effect.

Language and scripts of documents

The documents are mainly in French. Some are in German, English, Italian and Greek.

Additional sources

A fonds entitled "Archives de la famille de Coubertin" is kept in the French National Archives under the classification number 66J1-68.

Other documents on this President may also be found in the Images section of the IOC's Olympic Studies Centre.

Notes

The content of this fonds, including the Olympic identifications, are the property of the IOC.

Rules or conventions

Description complies with ISAD (G).

Date(s) of description

July 2006