



The Olympic symbols

- **Introduction**
Rings, motto and flame – Transmitting the values of Olympism through symbols: universality, excellence, peace and openness to others. 2
- **The rings**
Five interlacing rings to illustrate the universality of the Olympic Movement and the Olympic Games – Rings and flag proposed by Pierre de Coubertin in 1914 – Presence of the rings and flag at the Olympic Games – Symbol recognised all over the world. 3
- **The motto**
Citius Altius Fortius: three Latin words to convey an ideal – Motto used by Henri Didon and adopted by Pierre de Coubertin in 1894. 6
- **The flame**
Link between the Games of antiquity and the modern Games – Message of peace and friendship – Lighting of the flame and organisation of the relay. 7

Introduction

The **meaning** and the **values** of Olympism are conveyed by symbols: among these are the rings, the motto and the flame.

These symbols transmit a message in a simple and direct manner. They give the Olympic Movement and the Games an **identity**.



CLOSE-UP OF THE SYMBOLS IN THE OLYMPIC STADIUM

Outside the entrance to the Olympic Museum in Lausanne (Switzerland), the three symbols are brought together to welcome visitors from the whole world:

- The Olympic flag, decorated with **five rings**, flutters at the top of a flagpole
- **The motto** is engraved on a cauldron
- A fire burns in the cauldron, as a reminder of the **Olympic flame**.

The rings

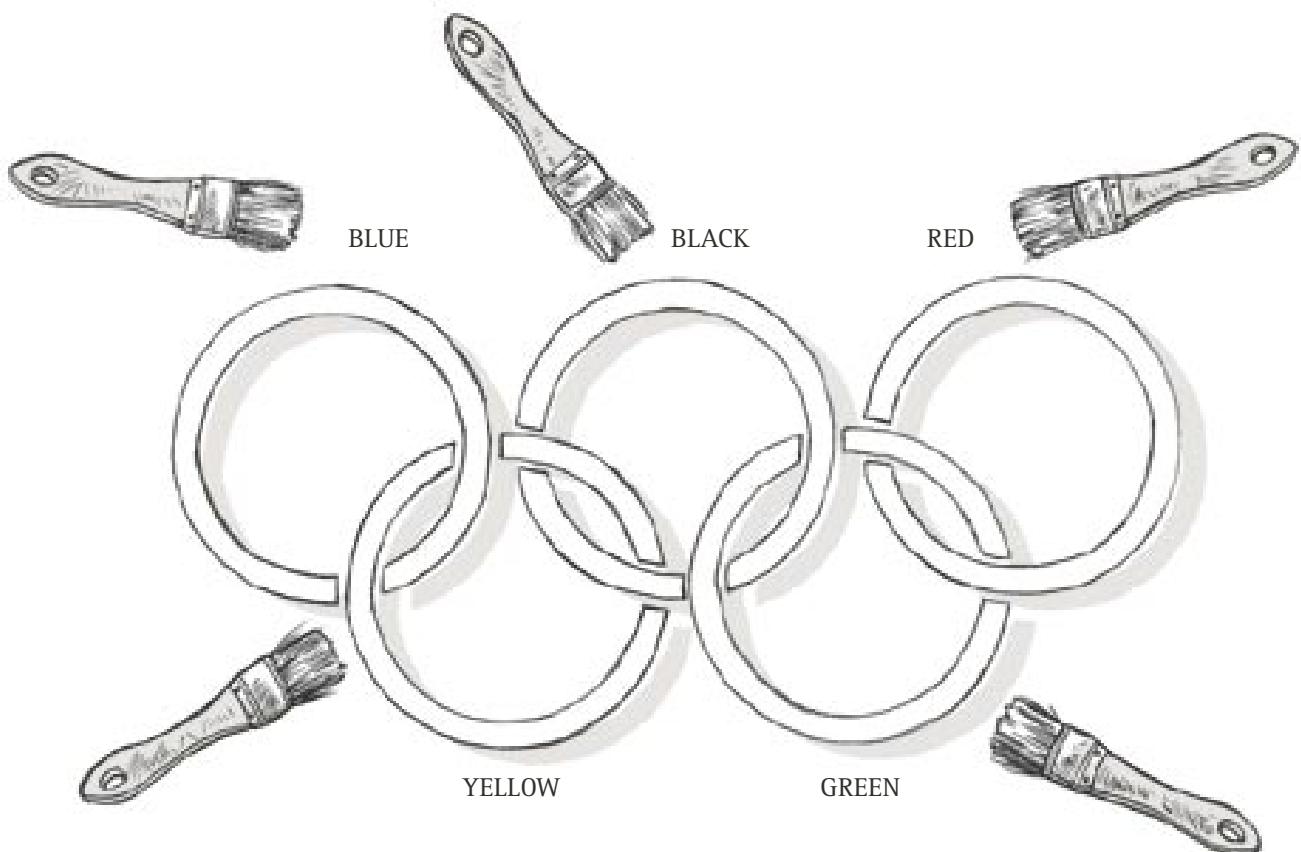
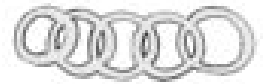
The **five** rings represent the **five continents**.

They are **interlaced** to show the **universality** of Olympism and the **meeting of the athletes of the whole world** during the Olympic Games.

RULES

At first, the way the rings were interlaced was sometimes a little odd compared with what we are used to today.

Nowadays, the Olympic symbol is subject to very strict rules. Graphic standards have been set down, which determine, for example, the exact position of each ring:



The rings cannot be used without the IOC's authorisation.

THE OLYMPIC FLAG

On the Olympic flag, the rings appear on a white background.

The flag reinforces the idea of the Olympic Movement's universality, as it brings together all the countries of the world.

Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympic Games, explains the meaning of the flag:

"The Olympic flag [...] has a white background, with five interlaced rings in the centre: blue, yellow, black, green and red [...] This design is symbolic; it represents the five continents of the world, united by Olympism, while the six colours are those that appear on all the national flags of the world at the present time." (1931)

Textes choisis II, p.470.

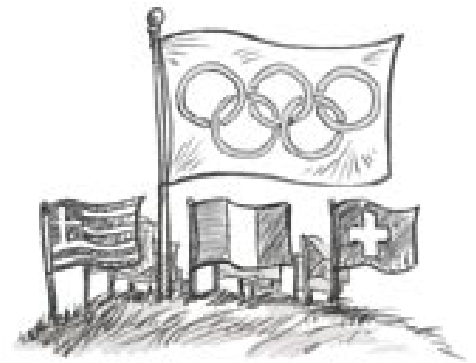
Combined in this way, the six colours of the flag (including the white of the background) represent all nations.

It is wrong, therefore, to believe that each of the colours corresponds to a certain continent!

At the Olympic Games, the flag is brought into the stadium during the opening ceremony. Since the **1960 Games in Rome** (Italy), it has been carried **horizontally** by a delegation of athletes or other people well known for their positive work in society.

After its arrival, the flag is hoisted up the flagpole. It must fly in the stadium during the whole of the Games. When the flag is lowered at the closing ceremony, it signals the end of the Games.

The mayor of the host city of the Games passes the Olympic flag to the mayor of the **next host city of the Games**.



HISTORY

Even though Pierre de Coubertin intended the Olympic Games to be an international event from the time of their re-establishment in 1896 in Athens (Greece), **it was only at the 1912 Games in Stockholm (Sweden) that, for the first time, the participants came from all five continents**. One year later, in **1913**, the five rings appeared at the top of a letter written by Pierre de Coubertin. He drew the rings and coloured them in by hand. He then described this symbol in the Olympic Review of August 1913.

It was also Coubertin who had the idea for the **Olympic flag**. He presented the rings and flag in **June 1914 in Paris** at the Olympic Congress.

The First World War prevented the Games from being celebrated in 1916 in Berlin (Germany) as planned. It was not until **1920 in Antwerp** (Belgium) that the flag and its five rings could be seen flying in an **Olympic stadium**.

The universality conveyed by the rings and the flag was a new idea at the beginning of the 20th century. Nationalism was very strong and tension between certain countries was high. It was in this climate, however, that Coubertin proposed a symbol which aimed to encourage **world unity**.

PART OF THE GAMES' IDENTITY

Today the Olympic rings are one of the most easily identifiable signs in the world, and everyone immediately associates them with the Olympic Games. However, this was not immediately the case.

Here are some examples of the integration of the rings and the flag into the visuals of the Olympic Games:

– **Winners' medals**

The rings appeared for the first time on the winners' medals at the **1924 Games in Paris** (France). They reappeared on the prize medals for the Equestrian Games in **1956 in Stockholm** (Sweden).

Since the **1976 Games in Montreal** (Canada) the rings have regularly featured on the winners' medals of the Summer Games, used alone or with the Organising Committee's emblem. For the Olympic Winter Games, the rings have appeared on the medals at each edition of the Games since 1928 in St Moritz (Switzerland).



A KANGAROO AND AN EMU ARE PART OF THE AUSTRALIAN NOC'S EMBLEM

THE EMBLEM OF THE ORGANISING COMMITTEE OF THE TURIN WINTER GAMES IN 2006

WHAT IS AN OLYMPIC EMBLEM?

It is a design featuring the Olympic rings together with other distinctive elements.

The National Olympic Committees (NOCs), and Organising Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs) all have an emblem featuring the Olympic rings.

– **Official posters**

The poster for the Olympic Winter Games in **St Moritz in 1928** was the first to feature the Olympic flag.

For the Summer Games, it was not until the **1932 Games in Los Angeles** (USA) that the Olympic rings appeared on an official poster.

– **Items and souvenirs**

You can find the rings on many items and souvenirs made for the Games dating back to the **1924 Olympic Winter Games in Chamonix** (France).

– **Stamps**

The world of **philately** soon got to know the rings. They have appeared on stamps since the **1928 Games in Amsterdam** (The Netherlands).

PART OF A CITY'S IDENTITY: LAUSANNE, OLYMPIC CAPITAL

In December 1993, the city of Lausanne (Switzerland), which has been home to the IOC since 1915, received the title of Olympic Capital. Five rings have been integrated into the city's tourism logo.

With the development of the Games throughout the 20th century, the five rings and the flag have become inseparable from the Olympic Movement and the Olympic Games.

The motto

A motto is a phrase which sums up a **life philosophy** or a code of conduct to follow.
The Olympic motto is made up of three Latin words :



Which means :

FASTER — HIGHER — STRONGER

These three words encourage the athlete to **give his or her best** during competition, and to view this effort as a victory in itself.

The sense of the motto is that being first is not necessarily a priority, but that giving one's best and striving for **personal excellence** is a worthwhile goal. It can apply equally to athletes and to each one of us.

HISTORY

The three Latin words became the Olympic motto **in 1894**, the date of the IOC's creation. Pierre de Coubertin proposed the motto, having borrowed it from his friend **Henri Didon**, a Dominican priest who taught sport to students.

To better understand the motto, we can compare it with the following well-known phrase :

The most important thing is not to win but to take part !

This idea was developed by Pierre de Coubertin who had been inspired by a sermon given by the Bishop of Pennsylvania, Ethelbert Talbot, during the Games of London in 1908.

The flame

The Olympic flame is one of the best-known features of the Games. From the moment the flame is lit to the moment it goes out, a very precise **ritual** is laid down :

– **The lighting**

In memory of the Olympic Games' origins, the flame is lit in **Olympia**, Greece, some months before the opening of the Games. The Olympic flame can only be lit by the **sun's rays**.

– **The relay route**

Carried by relay from Olympia to the host city of the Games, the flame crosses different regions, countries and continents. The passage of the flame announces the upcoming Olympic Games to the inhabitants along the route and allows those following its journey to discover their culture and customs. The torch relay invites discovery, stimulates curiosity and a desire to open up to others.

– **Arrival at the stadium**

The day of the opening of the Games, the flame enters the stadium. With the lighting of the cauldron by the last relay runner the flame is transferred from the torch to the place where it will continue to burn for the entire length of the Games. The flame is extinguished on the final day of the Games at the closing ceremony.



HISTORY

The initial lighting of the flame in Olympia and the first torch relay took place in the lead-up to the **1936 Games in Berlin** (Germany) [see sheets "The Olympic flame and torch relay"].

THE FIRE AT THE OLYMPIC MUSEUM

A fire burns permanently in a cauldron outside the entrance to the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

For the inauguration of the Museum on **23 June 1993**, this fire was lit **by laser** at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL) in Lausanne and then carried by relay to the Museum. Olympic champion **Katarina Witt** lit the cauldron.

The presence of the fire in front of the building is a reminder of the importance of the Olympic flame during the Games and the ceremonies devoted to it.

Explore a little further...

Design an emblem for the National Olympic Committee (NOC) of your country. The emblem you draw must feature some characteristics of your country and include the Olympic rings.

Then look for the real emblem (on the internet) and compare them!

Create a symbol which, in your opinion, represents peace in the world thanks to sport. Do a drawing, or make a collage or sculpture.

Think of a motto which best sums up your character, or think of a motto for your family, school or club. Explain the meaning of this motto.

Find examples of different rituals (past or present, in your country or elsewhere) performed for certain occasions and draw up a list with a short description. Some examples could be religious ceremonies or the annual celebrations of clubs or schools.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Young readers :

- > **How well do you know the Olympic Games?**
Lausanne : Olympic Museum and Studies Centre, 2002

Teachers :

- > **Olympic Charter**
Lausanne : IOC, 2001
- > Karl Lennartz, "The Story of the Rings" in the **Journal of Olympic History**, Vol. 10
December 2001 / January 2002, pp. 29-61