Beauty on Field and on Exhibit

Art meets athletics at several small sports-themed museums throughout the country.

“Omnipotent Triumph” by Martin Linson, which pays tribute to the Paralympic athlete, was displayed at the London Games.

“The same key characteristics are required to become a pro hockey player or a world-renowned sculptor,” said Dr. Thomas P. Rosandich, the founder and chief executive of the United States Sports Academy in Daphne, Ala. “Persistence, self-confidence, tolerance for risk, belief in your own vision, a standard of excellence and an appreciation for your role in the progress of the community.”

A sprawling building houses the academy’s administrative offices and the American Sport Art Museum and Archives, which has more than 1,500 paintings, prints and sculptures representing almost every sport. But few of the 1,200 students ever see the artwork. The academy offers online-
only instruction for bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in fields like sports management, strength and conditioning, coaching, health and fitness, and Olympism, which blends sport with culture and education.

Some of the museum’s artists specialize in sports subjects; others, like Norman Rockwell and Andy Warhol, are well known in the larger art world. On the grounds, welded metal sculptures by Bruce Larsen of Fairhope, Ala., portray a sprinter, a gymnast, a weight lifter and a basketball player. The exterior of the building bears a 27-foot-tall baseball-themed mural titled “A Tribute to the Human Spirit” by the Spanish artist Cristóbal Gabarrón. Inside, galleries have thematic or single-artist exhibits like the permanent collection of painted images from the 1972 Munich Olympics by LeRoy Neiman.

For Rosandich, art is not just decoration, and sports-themed art is not merely memorabilia for fans. It is his mission to connect the two areas of human achievement.

“The ancient Olympics honored both art and sport,” he said, “and ancient Greek art more often than not portrayed athletes. We are just carrying on that tradition.”

The American Sport Art Museum and Archives is not the only place that does so, but few others do.

“Many people are intimidated by art, thinking it's something they won’t understand,” said Elizabeth Varner, the executive director of the National Art Museum of Sport. “But we get a lot of sports fans coming in, and they become intrigued by how an artist interprets sports.”

The museum, which is expected to relocate from Indianapolis soon, has more than 1,000 artworks depicting 40 sports. Mina Papatheodorou-Valyraki's expressionistic painting of a Formula One Ferrari, Charles Fazzino’s mixed-media pop art view of Super Bowl XLVI and Rhoda Sherbell's bronze statue of Yankees Manager Casey Stengel are among the highlights.

The National Sporting Library and Museum in Middleburg, Va., is more specialized. It focuses on equestrian, fishing and field sports like polo, hunting and shooting.

The museum, in fox-hunting country 40 miles from Washington, draws 10,000 visitors annually to examine its 12,000-volume library of sporting books and 300-work collection of paintings and sculptures. Among the artists in the collection are Alfred James Munnings, a British painter of horses and outspoken enemy of Modernism in art, and Edward Troye, a Swiss-born painter of American thoroughbreds.

“Some people come in while on a fox hunt,” Claudia Pfeiffer, the museum’s curator, said. “They walk in with their boots and breeches on.”

These relatively small museums have little to no budgets for acquisitions, their collections are donated by collectors or the artists, and they are rarely crowded. Far better attended are the halls of fame of various sports, but only some of them have much original art.

Perhaps the most notable art collection is at the International Tennis Hall of Fame and Museum in Newport, R.I., which has a 1979 Warhol screen print of Chris Evert, a circa 1930 drawing of Bill Tilden by James Montgomery Flagg, a 1924 etching of Helen Wills by Childe Hassam, and a 1538 oil-on-board painting of a palace tennis court by the Flemish artist Lucas Gassel.
The Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., has a collection of more than 1,500 works, including pieces by Neiman, Rockwell and Warhol, but no more than 30 are displayed at one time. The Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, has some “limited edition prints, but not a lot of original art,” said its curator, Jason Aikens. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum has 13 Neiman paintings that he was commissioned to create in 1962, as well as other original artwork, said the director, Ellen Bireley.

For many American artists in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, athletic events were a frequent motif. A 1923 prizefight between Jack Dempsey and Luis Firpo is known to us primarily because of George Bellows’s 1924 oil “Dempsey and Firpo” — in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art — that shows Dempsey being knocked through the ropes. (Dempsey won the bout).

Thomas Eakins enjoyed painting wrestlers and swimmers, Winslow Homer frequently portrayed fishermen and hunters, and Fairfield Porter periodically depicted outdoor tennis.

“Sports has been a major genre in American art for most of our history,” said Allen Guttmann, a retired professor of English and American studies at Amherst College and the author of the 2011 book “Sports and American Art From Benjamin West to Andy Warhol.”

“Nowadays, very few living artists do sports subjects, in large measure because art dealers and museum directors think of sports as an unimportant area. They turn up their noses at it. That’s plain ignorant.”

Yet in San Francisco, the George Krevsky Gallery has offered a popular appreciation of the art of baseball every spring for 16 years.

Krevsky said “sports as a subject of art is rare these days,” but this exhibition attracts more visitors to the gallery than any other.

“It brings in people who don’t come in other times, and the response is always tremendous,” he said.

*Daniel Grant is the author of “The Business of Being an Artist.”*

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