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"Homage to Ling" — the most recent goldmedalled sculpture in the Olympic Games.

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One of the ingredients in the olympism formed by Pierre de Coubertin was the idea of competitions in both art and sport as a part of the Olympic Games. The most recent fulfillment of this idea was in London 1948.

During these games, Sweden won its second goldmedal in art by the entry "Homage to Ling" sculptured by Gustaf Nordahl. Since 1949 this sculpture has been situated in front of the main entry to the University College of Physical Education (GIH) in Stockholm, a school founded by P.H. Ling in 1813. The report on this matter at the International Olympic Academy's 9th Session for Educators in Olympia in July 1990 will briefly focus on:

1. P.H. Ling, the person honoured by the sculpture,
2. the background to the sculpture, and
3. the sculptor Gustaf Nordahl.

Per Henrik Ling — gymnasiarch and poet

During the latter part of the 18th century a renewed interest for physical exercise was seen in Europe. A growing interest in classicism was one of several explanatory factors behind this change. During its early phase it focused on gymnastics. Per Henrik Ling (1776—1839) became one of the main gymnasiarchs during this period.

At the turn of the century he stayed in Copenhagen for, among other things, studies at the gymnastic institute of Franz Nachtegall. In 1804 he returned to Sweden and developed a system of gymnastics with four elements:

- pedagogic gymnastics
- military gymnastics
- medical gymnastics
- aesthetic gymnastics

Pedagogic gymnastics was defined as "whereby one learns to master ones own body", whereas military gymnastics corresponded mainly to fencing, and medical gymnastics to physical therapy. The fourth element, the aesthetic gymnastics, was defined as "whereby one expresses the inner self — thoughts and emotions". It was mainly the first three elements that were developed.

If this system can be seen as approaching a whole system, so in-
Deed was the thinking of Ling in general, which in modern terms can be described as holistic (see e.g. Korsgaard 1989).

The element of specific interest in this context, the pedagogic gymnastics, was very systematic. Every movement was clearly defined and had a specific aim — the whole body was to be trained harmoniously and symmetrically. The system was further developed by P.H. Ling’s son Hjalmar Ling, and became internationally known as Linggymnastics, Swedish gymnastics and Swedish drill.

Of great importance for the development of this system was its strongly aimed linkage to “the laws of the human organism” upon which Ling meant that all physical exercises should be based. Anatomical, physiological, and biomechanical studies therefore became important parts of the curriculum at the school founded by Ling in 1813; the Gymnastic Central-Institute in Stockholm.

The impact of Ling was, however, not limited to gymnastics. He was also a poet with the ancient Nordic mythology as his main poetic theme. But his interests in art were wide, expressed by the fact that artists lived at his school for gymnastics, and that painters and sculptors were invited to the school for the study of drawing naked gymnasts in motion. He also stimulated sculptors to choose motifs from the Nordic mythology.

In 1835 he was chosen as a member of the most exclusive literary group in Sweden, the Swedish Academy, now well-known for its selections of the Nobel Prize winners in literature. The reason for this distinction was Ling’s combined efforts for gymnastics and poetry.

**The preludium to the sculpture**

In 1906 a proclamation for creating a statue to the memory of P.H. Ling was published in ”Tidskrift i Gymnastik” (Journal of Gymnastics). It was an initiative by the Association for Physical Education Teachers, then headed by colonel Viktor G. Balck, one of the main figures in the early history of the modern olympic movement. Balck was later in charge of the Olympic Games in Stockholm 1912. The proclamation was signed by a broad representation of leading figures in the academic, military and ecclesiastical establishments; i.e. the admiration of Ling was widely spread in Swedish society.

In 1943 the fund raising resulted in a sculpture competition, with Gustaf Nordahl as the winner. Interestingly enough, several other sculptors had similar entries.

The decision by the selection committee was, however, opposed by a group of physical education teachers who wanted a more clear cut representation of Ling himself. Enough money was raised so that a compromise which also included a full figure statue of Ling could settle the disagreement. Gustaf Nordahl was appointed to make both sculptures.
Gustaf Nordahl — the sculptor

Nordahl was born 1903 in Helsingborg, in the south of Sweden. His training included studies at the Superior College for Fine Art in Stockholm. Later he became a member of the Swedish Academy of Art. Gustaf Nordahl is still living today, and stated in 1988 when I met him that he considers “Homage” to be one of his best sculptures and one of the most beloved. To reach his goal he worked several hundred hours with two gymnasts as models.

Nordahl’s work belongs to the classical tradition, which is amply represented by “Homage to Ling”. The naked human body in positions of repose and harmonious proportions is an often recurring and varied theme in his works. His method of working has been one of constant reduction until reaching the essence, the core of the truth. “Something can always be added, but more can be reduced”, he once stated. But this, his “reductionism”, does not result in a lack of personality. I have always been interested in shaping an individual’s idea, to reduce the expressions hiding the lighter self, Nordahl states.

Nordahl’s “reductionism” applied to the process of creating “Homage”. In the original sketch of it, which was identical to that presented at the Olympic Games in London, the naked male held a laurel wreath in his right hand which, in order to create a more pure form, was left out in the completed sculpture.

The object of art is for Nordahl to create a linkage between the spiritual world and the spectator whereby spiritual force can reach the spectator. Personally I feel that Nordahl’s “Homage” has qualities that have reached this aim. I have seen this sculpture almost daily for fifteen years and it has had a constant power of creating a sense of hope. For a long time this was so in an unconscious manner. It took me thirteen years to realize that the feeling of hopefulness when passing the place where the sculpture stands was due to the sculpture itself.

When the Minister of Education, Josef Weijne, in 1949 held the inaugural speech he praised the sculpture for expressing “something of the essence of gymnastics” and believed that it “for future gymnasts would serve as a source of inspiration and symbolize the meaning with their own efforts in their service for gymnastics”.

Indeed, the selection of “Homage to Ling” for the goldmedal in the sculpture competition of the Olympic Games in 1948 was a wise choice. Not only is it an excellent sculpture, but it is meaningful on many levels at the same time as it stimulates the curiosity of the viewer.