

Juan Antonio Samaranch (1920–2010) — A Collector with a Vision

Billions of persons know J. A. Samaranch as a long-time IOC President, who remodelled the Olympic Movement, gave it its new universal image and assured its financial independence.

Many less people know J. A. Samaranch the “Collector”. “Collecting was a family tradition, for some generations, and Juan Antonio followed this tradition until the last day of his life. His father encouraged his first Hobby – philately – by giving him the first 1896 Olympic stamps. His interest spread to many spheres of collectibles, facilitated by his position in the international sports organisations and his personal relations with artists, painters and sculptors. His choice of objects to acquire indicated his firm belief in art that expressed “March versus the future”.

Being involved in sports, it was only natural that Juan Antonio’s interest focused more and more on Olympic and sports philately, Olympic coins and the large spectre of Olympic memorabilia. Olympic memorabilia (in the large sense of the word) were considered by him as the cultural heritage of the Olympic Movement and collectors of such objects as harbingers of the Olympic philosophy.

But Juan Antonio was not just a collector; he was a collector with a vision. A vision that would encompass all other collectors of Olympic memorabilia; a vision that would bring the collectors together, just as the Olympic Games bring athletes together; a vision proving that Olympic history can be documented by 3-dimensional artifacts.

He founded the International Federation of Olympic Philately (F.I.P.O.) in 1982, proposed by one of the 4 founding members of the International Olympic Collectors Group. 32 chapters of FIPO have been established worldwide. In 1993 he created the IOC Collectors Commission, adding the numismatic collectors (FINO) and memorabilia collectors (FINO).

His vision told him that Olympic collectibles ought to be displayed at the occasion of international sports manifestations and in 1985 the first “Olympilex” was organised on a trial basis in Lausanne. Today (renamed “OLYMPEX” – the Olympic Expo) is a permanent feature at all Olympic Games. His vision told him that the responsible authorities for the issuance of Olympic stamps must be encouraged to reach high artistic level, and Juan Antonio created the “Prix Olympia” which since 1984 rewards the 3 postal administrations that issue the most artistic Olympic stamps.

He wished to further personal meetings of Olympic memorabilia collectors, and 16 years ago created the “Olympic Collectors Fair” which today is the “Mecca” of Olympic collectors. These fairs were the favourites of Juan Antonio. He attended all of them, browsing through the stands and chatting with all participants. He prepared to attend the Cologne Fair in April of this year when his age and disease caught up with him leading to his death.

Last but not least, he built the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, realizing de Coubertin’s dream in the teens of last century.

Most eulogies relative to Juan Antonio detail the authors’ meetings and relations between them and Juan Antonio. This approach, I feel, is wrong. It is my belief that what we all ought to underscore Juan Antonio’s attitude towards the collectors.

He was open to all of them; any and every collector could approach him and discuss with him; his door was open to all of them. He listened to them and their remarks, wishes and observations and implemented those that he deemed being appropriate.

His greatest pride was on the 17th of July 2001 (also his birthday) when he boarded the plane from Moscow to Geneva and showed his friends his appointment as President of the Collectors Commission for life. His greatest joy was when he could chat with each and every participant of the Collectors Fairs. His trust in his collaborators was phenomenal and contributed immensely to the success of all manifestations created by him.

It is this extreme “accessibility” by which Juan Antonio surrounded himself, his transparent and convivial leadership that Juan Antonio Samaranch should be remembered by. His visions will be the steering motivations to all collectors.

Thank you, Juan Antonio, for all you have done for the Olympic collectors.

*Manfred Bergman,
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