



POSTER

POSTER

Past
Exhibition

Munich 1972

Sports Posters of the XXth Olympic Games

November 14, 2024–April 13, 2025

Design has been at the heart of the Olympics for more than one hundred years, beginning with the five interlocking, multicolored rings that have been the official symbol of the Games since the 1920s. They were designed by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Movement. Based on patterns common in ancient Greece, the five rings represent Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania; every national flag in the world includes at least one of the five colors. Ever since, the Olympic Games have been an occasion not only for athletic achievement but also for remarkable efforts in art, architecture, and graphic design.

There is much debate about which Olympics featured the best design, with Mexico City (1968), Los Angeles (1984), Barcelona (1992), and Grenoble (1968) each drawing enthusiastic advocates; however, there ultimately seems to be a broad consensus around the graphic program created for the XXth Olympiad held in Munich, West Germany, in 1972. This program, usually attributed to a single, visionary creative director, Otl Aicher, was, in fact, created by a team of designers who worked tirelessly on every detail of it for nearly six years. The result was a fully coordinated, rigorously executed, totally unified scheme that set a new standard for the design of the Games. It became an influential model not only for the design of sporting events but also for comprehensive identity programs of any kind.

The posters exhibited here show the design scheme created for the 1972 Munich Olympics at its best, one for each event, each capturing both a moment in time and making a bid for permanence. Together, they demonstrate a magically calibrated balance of consistency and surprise, control and power, precision and exuberance, much like those of the athletes they celebrate.

Curation

Michael Bierut

Design

Ola Baldych

Special Thanks

Mark Holt, author, *Munich '72*

Robert Probst, designer

Catherine Bindman, editor

Anita Sheih, proofreader

Sofía Jarrín, Spanish translator

All posters on display are from the Poster House Permanent Collection through a generous donation from Thomas Strong. These silkscreen posters were designed between 1970 and 1971 by Gerhard Joksch, with Nanke Claassen, Sepp Klement, György Nagy, Gabriele Pée, and Henri Wirthner under the direction of Otl Aicher and based on photography by Erich Baumann (canoeing, handball, judo, wrestling) and Max Mühlberger (basketball, shooting, field hockey, gymnastics, archery). Additional photography credits include Herbert Graaf (swimming), Dieter Frinke (soccer), Peter Cornelius (sailing), Albrecht Gaebele (track and field, fencing), Otto Hesse (boxing), Ken Kishimoto (volleyball), Fritz Fenzl (rowing), Longines (pentathlon, cycling), and Rolf Feser (weightlifting).

Whenever feasible, Poster House reuses materials from previous shows to drive sustainable practice.

Otl Aicher

German graphic designer Otto “Otl” Aicher led the multidisciplinary team that designed all the materials for the 1972 Munich Olympics. Born in Ulm, Aicher participated in anti-Nazi resistance movements and was arrested for refusing to join the Hitler Youth before being conscripted into the army to fight in World War II. He deserted in 1945.

After studying sculpture and operating a small studio, in 1953 Aicher cofounded the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (HfG; the Ulm School of Design). The HfG quickly began to play a critical role in postwar European modernism; its influence is recognized as rivaling that of the Bauhaus. The school’s dedication to systematically integrating logic and intuition across a broad range of disciplines reflected Aicher’s ambition to shed the habits of the past and invent a new graphic language for a new age. He often spoke of his profession as a civilizing element in society: “In design man becomes what he is. Animals have language and perception as well, but they do not have design.”

While at the HfG, Aicher became involved with the direction of corporate programs for companies such as Braun and Lufthansa, and developed a reputation for coordinating large, extremely complex design systems. It was, therefore, no surprise that, in 1966, he was invited by the Organizing Committee of the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich to become its Commissioner for Visual Design.

The Look of the Games

Otl Aicher and the designers he recruited to join the in-house Olympics design office that became known as Dept. XI shared a common aim: to ensure that every visual aspect of the Games would be completely coordinated down to the last detail. This meant everything from posters and publications to signage and iconography, uniforms and tickets, to the Munich 1972 mascot—a cute (if perhaps unnaturally geometric) dachshund named Waldi.

Aicher and his team conceived the program for the Games as a kind of game in itself. The playing fields would be modular grids made of precise dimensions and consistent 45- and 90-degree angles. The grids would dictate the construction of icons for individual sporting events, the design of page layouts, and even the markings on the fur of Waldi. The playing pieces of the games were limited in number but highly versatile. They included Univers, a sans-serif typeface family designed by Swiss typographer Adrian Frutiger (released in 1957) in an attempt to create an alphabet even more rationalist than Helvetica, and a palette of seven colors, no more, no less, each carefully chosen to reflect a different aspect of the Bavarian landscape.

The Organizing Committee requested a system that would project “Die heiteren Spiele” (The Cheerful Games). Many might have expected the designs to incorporate the *gemütlich* signifiers of Munich’s Oktoberfest, all dirndls and beer steins. What Aicher delivered instead was at once radical and timeless.

The Sports Posters

The posters celebrating the individual sporting events at the Munich 1972 games were designed by a team working under Otl Aicher's direction led by Gerhard Joksch, with Nanke Claassen, Sepp Klement, György Nagy, Gabriele Pée, and Henri Wirthner. Interestingly, Joksch was not a practicing graphic designer but a well-known political caricaturist who had originally been hired to work on the abstract icons that would represent each sport; Aicher sensed, correctly, that his ability to reduce elements to their expressive essence in his cartoons would translate to the language of sports. He was right: the set of icons created by Joksch and his colleagues, built of simple, geometric shapes on a modular grid, are admired (and copied) to this day.

Creating the posters represented a similar challenge: how to devise a consistent graphic language that could visually unify activities as diverse as shooting, cycling, and soccer. The solution was daring and shockingly effective. Starting with images provided by two of Germany's best sports photographers, Erich Baumann and Max Mühlberger, Joksch and his team used lab techniques to reduce their continuous tones to flat, high-contrast areas. After retouching the resulting films to enhance the legibility of the images, they silkscreened each poster, not in naturalistic hues but in the seven colors used in the Games' visual identity: blue, green, silver, orange, violet blue, dark green, and light orange. Many tests were done to establish the most effective combinations. The result was a series of electric images that, in their unified presentation, would be immediately identifiable even without the Munich '72 logo and Olympic rings.

The Games & the Real World

The 1972 Summer Olympics marked a tumultuous time in world history. Munich had been announced as the host city for the Games in April 1966. This meant that much of their planning took place in the exciting, chaotic, and sometimes violent milieu of the late sixties. This would be the second Olympics in Germany following the 1936 Berlin Games, inevitably associated with the rise of Adolf Hitler. The Organizing Committee intended Munich '72 to project to the world the values of a new Germany: modern, democratic, and optimistic.

This connected neatly with Otl Aicher's progressive views and with his intentions for the Games' design aesthetic, put forth on the first page of its standards manual as "cheerful, easy, dynamic, apolitical, not linked to pathos, free of ideology, a playful interplay of sport and culture." The clear, contemporary typography; the universal language implied by the sports icon system; and the vibrant, dizzying colors of the poster program: all of these represented the manifestation of these goals, unified in an all-encompassing, utterly rational system that left nothing to chance.

The real world would cruelly intervene before the Games were over. The planning period corresponded with racial unrest and political assassinations in America and mass protests around the world. In the months leading up to the opening of the Games, the far-left Baader-Meinhof Gang bombed two locations in Germany, including one of the Olympic sites. Finally, to the shock of the worldwide audience, the Games themselves were interrupted when the Black September Palestinian terrorist organization took 11 members of the Israeli team hostage, all of whom died: a sobering reminder that design, no matter how carefully planned and beautifully conceived, can shape our world but can never fully control it.

| | Calendrier des épreuves des Jeux de la XXe Olympiade Munich 1972 du 26 août au 10 septembre | | Time Schedule of the Games of the XXth Olympiad Munich 1972 from 26th August to 10th September | | Zeitplan für die Spiele der XX. Olympiade München 1972 vom 26. August bis 10. September | | compétitions de plein air open-air competitions | | Freiluftwettbewerbe competitions en salle indoor competitions | | Hallenwettbewerbe | | | | | |
|---|---|----------|--|----------|---|----------|--|----------|---|----------|-------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Etat arrêté: Janvier 1971 Date of issue: Jan. 1971 Stand: Januar 1971 | Sa Sa | Di Su | Lu Mo | Ma Tu | Me Mi | Je Do | Ve Fr | Sa Sa | Di Su | Lu Mo | Ma Tu | Me Mi | Je Do | Ve Fr | Sa Sa | Di Su |
| | 26. | 27. | 28. | 29. | 30. | 31. | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
| Athlétisme Track and Field Leichtathletik | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Aviron Rowing Rudern | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Basketball | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Boxe Boxing Boxen | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Canoa Canoeing Kanu | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cyclisme Cycling Radfahren | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Escrime Fencing Fechten | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Football/Soccer Fußball | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Gymnastique Gymnastics Turnen | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Haltérophilie Weightlifting Gewichtheben | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Handball | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hockey | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Judo | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lutte Wrestling Ringen | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Natation Swimming Schwimmen | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Pentathlon mod. Mod. Pentathlon Mod. Fünfkampf | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sports equestres Equestrian Events Reiten | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tir Shooting Schießen | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tir à l'arc Archery Bogenschießen | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Volleyball | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Yachting Segeln | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Time Schedule of the Games of the XXth Olympiad Munich 1972 From 26th August to 10th September, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Volleyball, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Ken Kishimoto

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Fencing, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Albrecht Gaebele

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Archery, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Max Mühlberger

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Field Hockey, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Max Mühlberger

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Judo, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Erich Baumann

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Rowing, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Fritz Fenzl

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

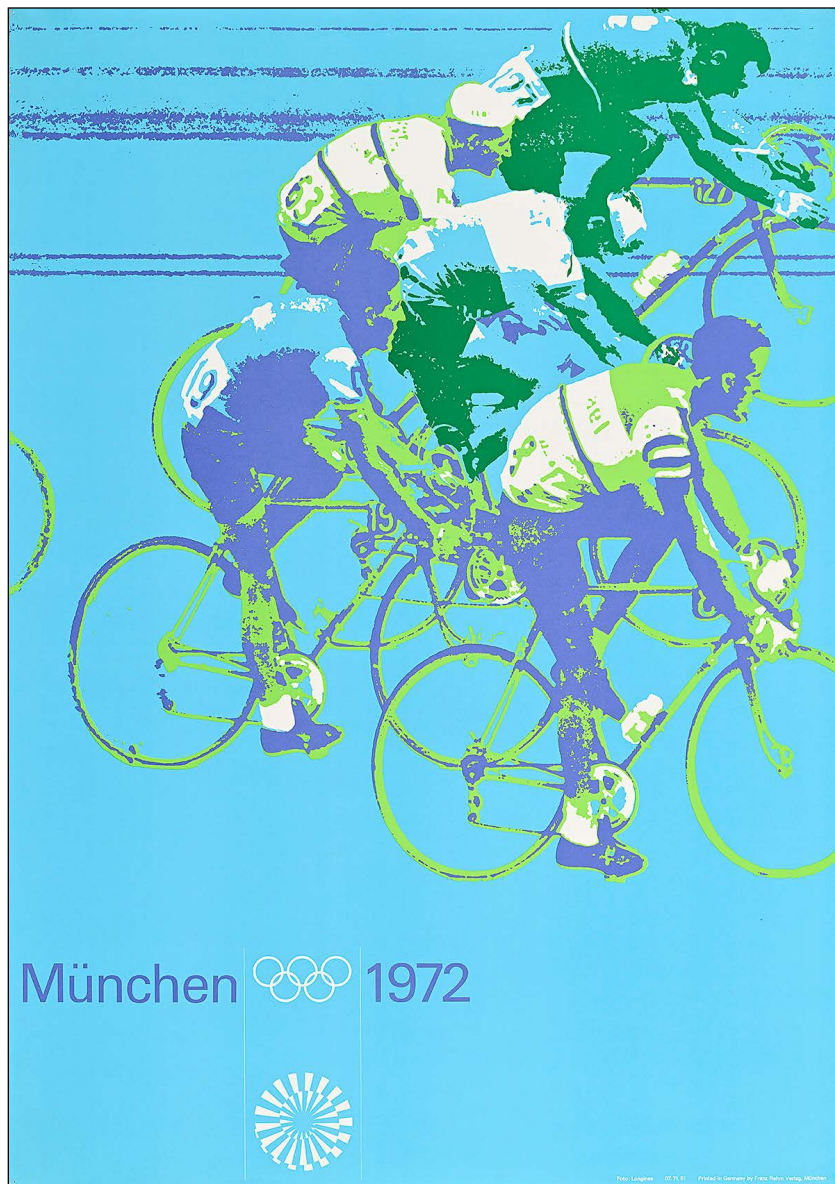


München Olympics/Track and Field, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Albrecht Gaebele

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Cycling, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher
Photographer: Longines

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

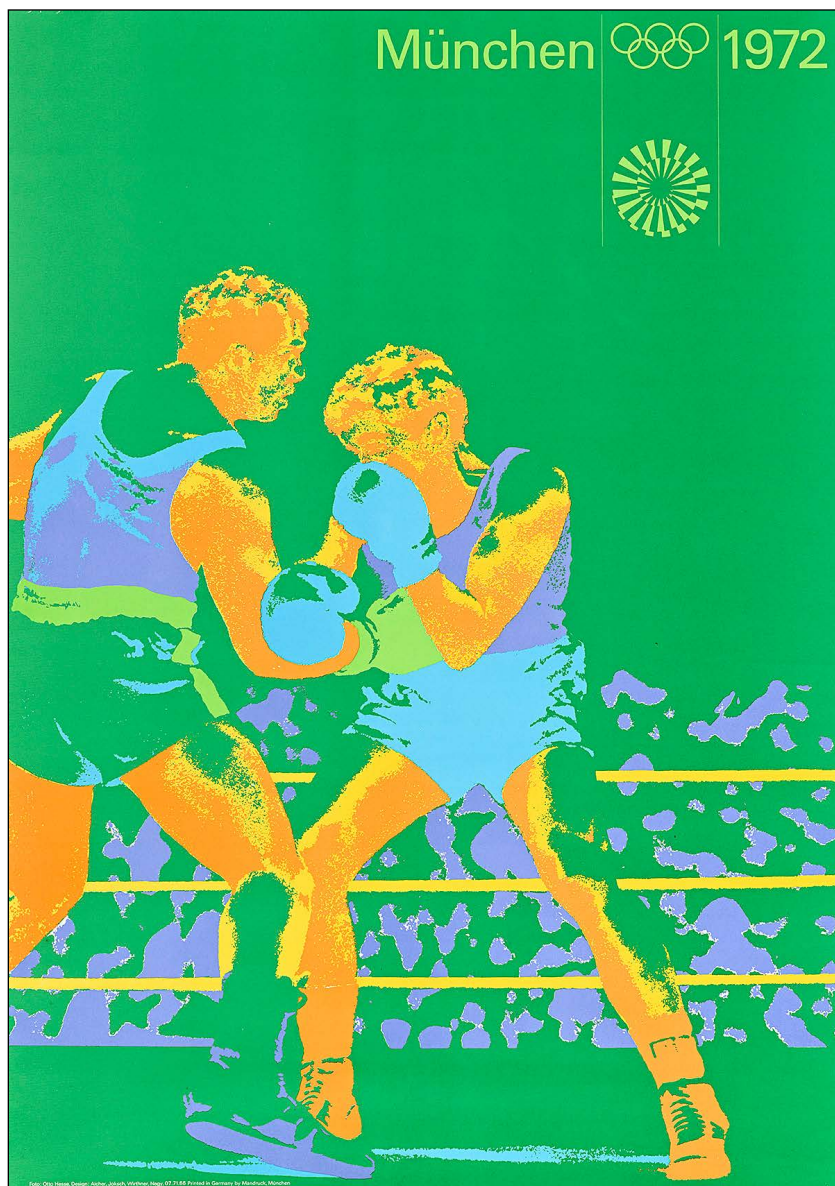


München Olympics/Gymnastics, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Max Mühlberger

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Boxing, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Otto Hesse

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Basketball, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Max Mühlberger

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

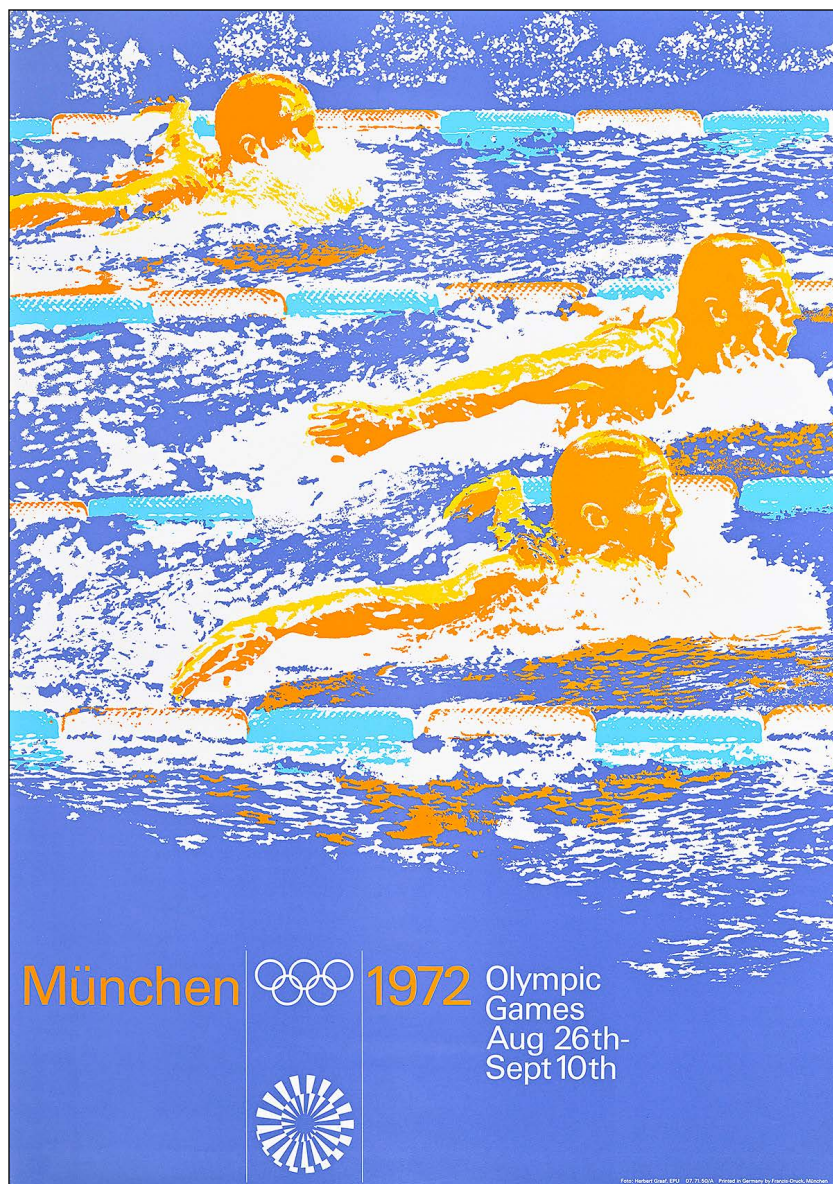


München Olympics/Soccer, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Dieter Frinke

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

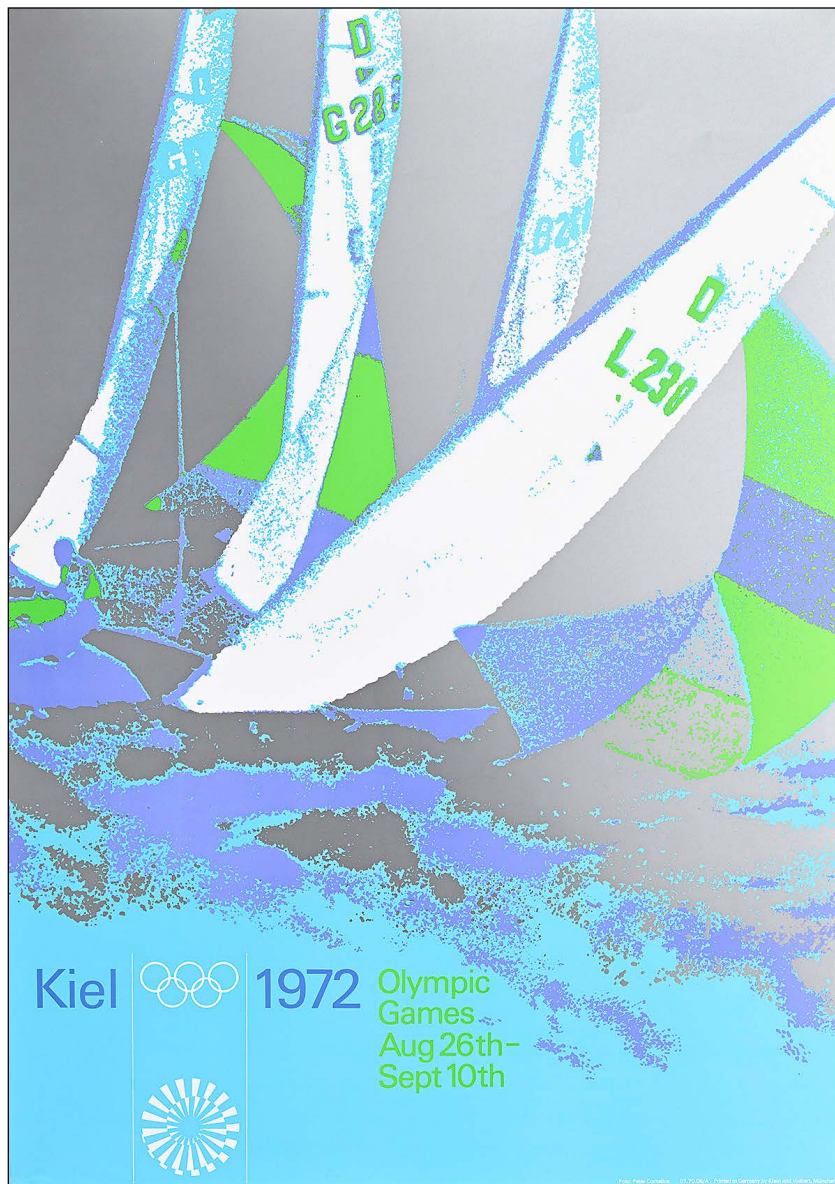


München Olympics/Swimming, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Herbert Graff

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

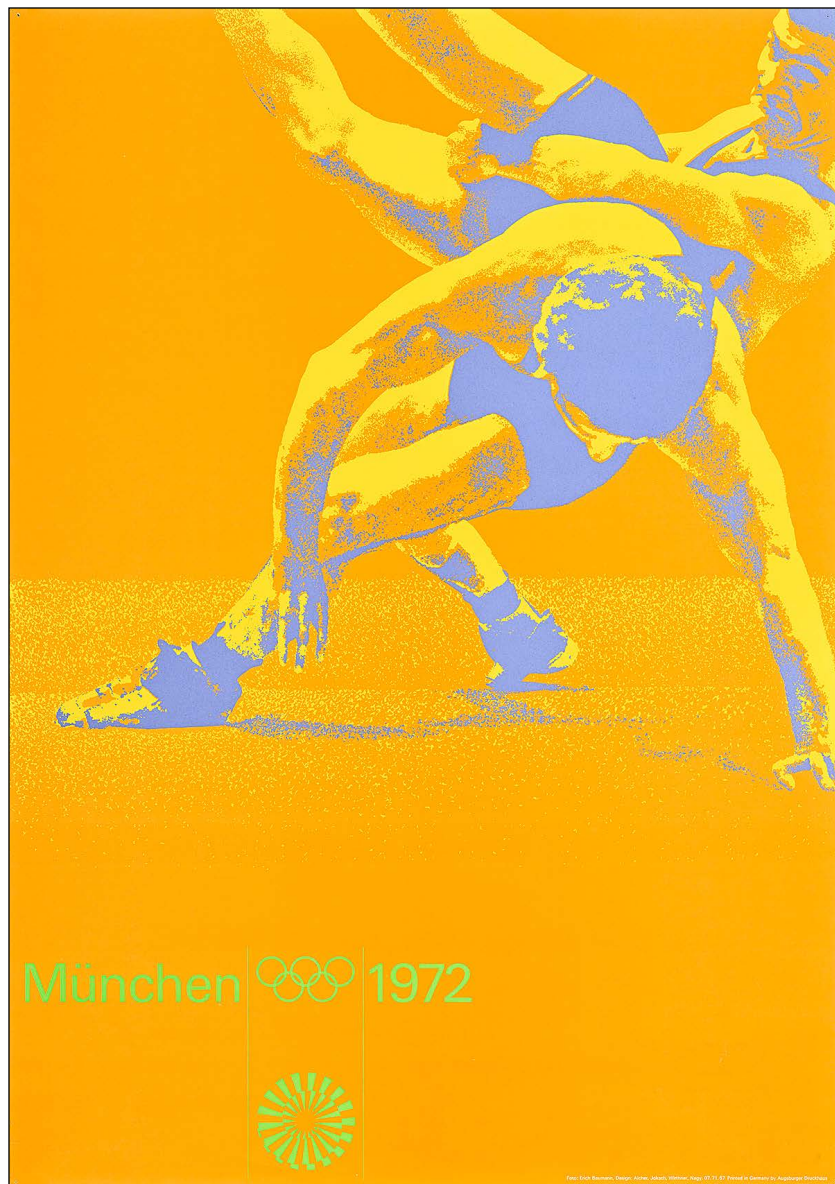


München Olympics/Sailing, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Peter Cornelius

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

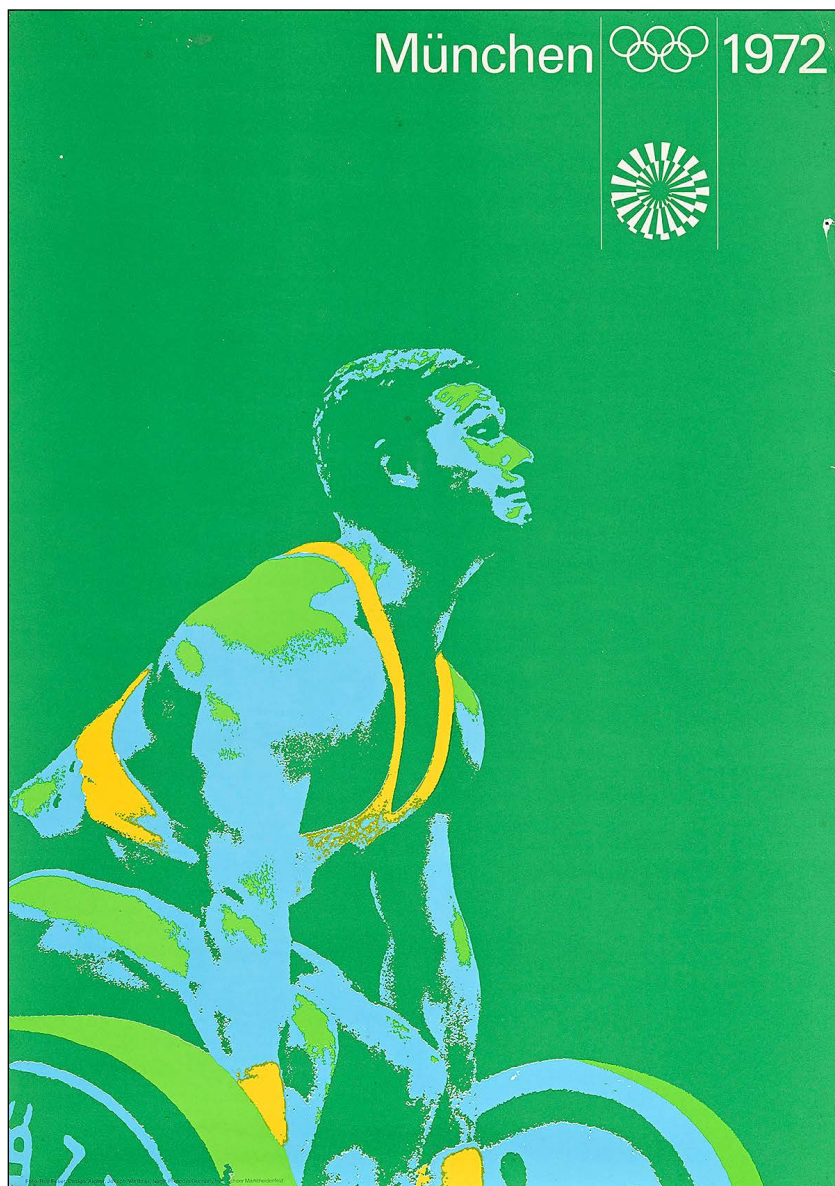


München Olympics/Wrestling, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Erich Baumann

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Weightlifting, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Rolf Feser

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Shooting, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Max Mühlberger

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Pentathlon, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Longines

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

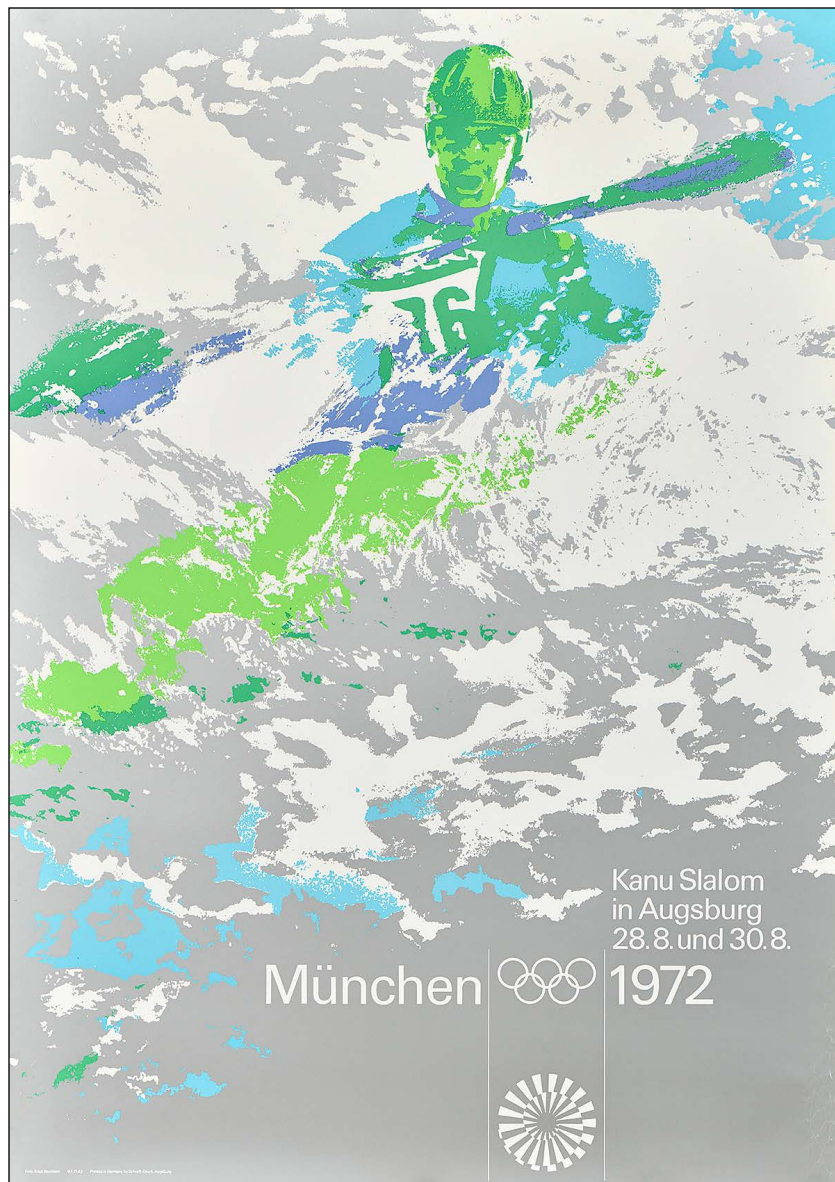


München Olympics/Handball, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher

Photographer: Erich Baumann

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection



München Olympics/Canoeing, 1972

Designer: Otl Aicher
Photographer: Erich Baumann

Gift of Thomas Strong, Poster House Permanent Collection

**POSTER
HOUSE**