

# OLYMPIC COLLECTIBLES

by Stathis Douramakos



*The Winged Victory plaster statue awarded to each foreign first place winner at the 1896 Athens Olympics.*

## The Winged Victory of Georgios VROUTOS

The Athens 1896 Olympic Games Organizing Committee commissioned sculptor Georgios VROUTOS, professor at the School of Fine Arts, to create in Pentelic marble a life-size statue of George Averof, the great benefactor whom we could safely call the first major sponsor of the modern Olympic Games.

Averof's statue was inaugurated on 24 March 1896, on the eve of the opening of the Games, in front and to the right of the entrance to the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens. The statue still stands.

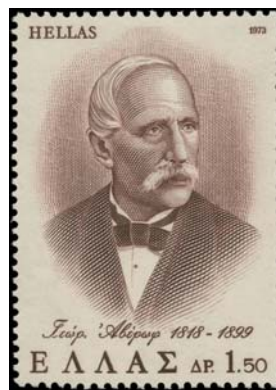
George VROUTOS felt very honored by this, so he decided to make an offering for the Olympic Games himself. He crafted 21 small plaster statues of Nike, the Winged Victory, and offered them to the Organizing Committee, so they could officially award them to the foreign first place winners.

It will be recalled that Nike, the Greek winged goddess of victory, was the daughter of the Titan, Pallas, and Styx (Water). Nike was originally an attribute of both Athena and Zeus, represented as a small figure carried in their hand. She gradually came to be recognized as a mediator between gods and mortals, and was frequently shown carrying a palm branch, wreath, or staff as the messenger of victory. When depicted on her own, she was often a winged figure hovering over the victor in a competition.

VROUTOS selected Nike, the Winged Victory, as the subject of the winners' statues because he felt that she personified the ideals of the Olympic Games. Victory represents success in achieving one's aims, and in doing the hard thing because it is right rather than the easy thing. There is no pleasure in gaining Victory through hate, greed, contempt, revenge and fear. Victory tastes bitter if it has not been honestly earned.

Nike has figured prominently in the iconography of sport. The design of the Jules Rimet Cup, awarded to the victorious team in World Cup competitions from 1930 to 1970, features the Winged Victory supporting an octagonal cup fashioned in gold. A souvenir sheet from Bulgaria illustrates both the Jules Rimet Cup and newer FIFA World Cup Trophy.

Olympic collectors will of course be familiar with another important work portraying Victory: the Olympic medal. Since 1928, medals awarded at the summer Olympic Games have featured the seated goddess Victory on the obverse side. The medal was designed by the noted Italian painter and sculptor, Giuseppe Cassioli, who, appropriately, was "victorious" in an open competition sponsored by the International Olympic Committee in 1923.



*George Averof (left) and the statue of him sculpted by Georgios VROUTOS (right).*



The Jules Rimet Cup, shown in the foreground of this souvenir sheet from Bulgaria, features the Winged Victory (Nike). The Cup was awarded to the victors of the World Cup from 1930 to 1970.



Polish stamp reproducing the obverse side of the Olympic medal showing the seated Nike.

The Cassioli-designed Olympic medal has frequently been portrayed in philately. One notable set of stamps from Poland commemorates their winners at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. Each stamp features a gold, silver, or bronze medal and an artistic representation of the winner in action.

Brazilian cinderella (label) featuring the Nike Corporation's famous "swoosh" logo at upper right. Nike is an important sports sponsor worldwide.



The Winged Victory has even been coopted for commercial use. The goddess's name has been appropriated by the sports shoe and apparel manufacturer, Nike. Anyone who follows sport is surely familiar with the company's logo – famously referred to as the Nike "swoosh". Carolyn Davidson, the logo's designer, said it symbolized the winged goddess' flight.

Returning to the 1896 celebration: on 3 April, the International Olympic Committee, with president Dimitris Vikelas, hosted a farewell reception in the grand lounge of the Hotel Grande Bretagne. During this reception, among other festivities, official award ceremonies took place.

First place foreign winners (who had already received their medals during the award ceremony held in the stadium) were each presented a small plaster Winged Victory bust made by Georgios VROUTOS who also attended the ceremony. Second place winners were also awarded their medals at this reception.

Articles from newspapers of the time describe the story in great detail:

*"The sentimentalist and fellow artist Mr. Georgios VROUTOS, crafted for the Olympic Games, artistic artifact of the bust of the winged Nike. He sent to the committee of the Games equal number of pieces to the Olympic winners with the name of each, in order to be handed to each Olympic winner in commemoration of the Games. Hear Hear!"*

Translated from: *TO ASTY*, 3 April 1896.

*"... The committee accepted the artistic offering of Mr. VROUTOS and will distribute today the statues to the winners."*

Translated from: *AKROPOLIS*, 3 April 1896.

*"The artistic Nikes of Mr. VROUTOS as we previously wrote, were sent to the committee, for each of the Olympic winners bearing their names, and were presented to them during the farewell social evening. The foreign Olympic winners received with enthusiasm those, which successfully symbolize their victory."*

Translated from: *EFIMERIS*, 6 April 1896.

*"The congenial sculptor Mr. VROUTOS, had the inspiration to offer as a memento to the foreign Olympic winners, a very nice artistic gift. He offered each of the 21 athletes, a small statue made of plaster, portraying the bust of Nike with wings, bearing a laurel wreath and a palm branch. These small statues were handed to each of the foreign athletes, the night before yesterday at the Grande Bretagne hotel during the reception that the Olympic committee held for everyone, the Olympic winners and athletes; the joy that the noble foreigners felt for the archaic gift of the artist Mr. VROUTOS was indescribable. Same plaster models will also be offered by Mr. VROUTOS to each of the Greek Olympic winners."*

Translated from: *TO ASTY*, 6 April 1896.

Only one of the 21 original plaster statues is known to exist. Privately owned, it was exhibited for the very first time during the 2004 Athens Olympic Games at the National Historical Museum of Greece.

Are any others hidden in private collections or dusty attics of the Olympic victors' heirs? Perhaps time will tell. In the meantime, if you would like to see more of the original research on the Winged Victory statues, please visit the author's web document at: [issuu.com/douramakos/docs/wingedvictor](http://issuu.com/douramakos/docs/wingedvictor)