When I began researching this chapter, I called my father—a former goalie for a rural Alberta hockey team—to ask whether he had any suggestions about where to start. He responded with one word: “Masks.” He then proceeded to sketch the history of the goalie mask, from Jacques Plante to Ken Dryden, punctuating his account with recollections of his own experiences. After our conversation, I looked into goalie-mask art and came across the painting *Legends of the Mask*, by Glen Green, a realistic depiction of five legendary goalie masks suspended against a black background (see figure 14.1). Looking into the emptiness of those eyeholes, I couldn't help but imagine my father’s eyes staring back at me.

My father’s response and my experience of *Legends of the Mask* clarified for me that much (if not all) of what I know about hockey is premised on some form of direct experience, some embodied encounter with the game. My father’s history of the mask—from Plante to Dryden—could never be separated from his experience of wearing a mask, just as my knowledge of the game was linked to my own experiences and those told to me by friends, coaches, and family members. My father’s story clarified another important point about my hockey knowledge: it has been largely gained and transmitted through informal communication. That sports culture is an informal and oral culture—something maintained through “watercooler
and barroom arguments and personal conversations”—has been observed before. But what does this tell us about how Canadians communicate through hockey art?

Figure 14.1 Glen Green, Legends of the Mask

In chapter 3 of his now classic work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), Walter Ong argues that, in primary oral cultures, the “restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes.” He goes on to outline a number of characteristics of communication within oral cultures, which collectively constitute what he calls the “psychodynamics of orality.” In oral cultures, words must necessarily serve as mnemonic aids. As Ong puts it, “You know what you can recall,” and, in the absence of written texts, words must enable people to remember. Words are, in particular, the vehicle not only for the transmission of abstract cultural values but for the acquisition of practical knowledge, or “know-how.” At the same time, oral communication remains intimately bound up with concrete objects. Ong writes that “oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld,” that is, to the world of everyday experience. Within the oral culture that surrounds sport, hockey art would appear to serve much the same function as do words in oral societies. The question is, then, whether hockey art has more in common with cave paintings than with the *Mona Lisa*.

**THE MNEMONIC FUNCTION**

One of the most important functions of communication in an oral culture is to preserve collective memory. Since oral cultures lack the means to record information
in written form, they rely instead on the spoken word to retain and transmit important information. As Ong points out, “To solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns.” Formulaic phrases or statements, rhyme and rhythm, repetition, antitheses, and alliteration are among the devices that help to preserve words, and hence information, in memory. Sayings such as “Red in the morning, the sailor’s warning; red in the night, the sailor’s delight” or “Divide and conquer” serve to communicate practical wisdom, while formulas such as “the clinging vine” or “the sturdy oak” remind us of key information. To Ong’s examples, one could add more recent expressions such as “lefty-loosey, righty-tighty” or, in the context of hockey culture, epithets such as “Sid the Kid.”

Although Ong does not concern himself with visual means of communication, mnemonic formulas need not be restricted to linguistic expressions like those above. As visual studies critics have made clear, picturing practices can also be mnemonic. Indeed, visual theorists Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites, and Kevin DeLuca and Anne Teresa Demo have each outlined how images help us to remember important events and people, perhaps even more easily than linguistic statements. These visual mnemonics represent subjects in consistent ways and so function as a form of collective memory.

For example, for Remember the Goal, painter D. R. Laird used the famous photograph of the 1972 Henderson goal as a visual model. Keeping the players in the same poses, he depicted adults as children and the professional rink as a backyard pond, framed by snow-covered trees and bushes. For the viewer, Laird thus creates both a visual replay, of the original Henderson goal, and a mental replay—the recollection of personal experiences of playing shinny hockey. When the iconic content of the photograph is transposed into everyday life and the characters are changed from famous hockey players to ordinary children, the historic photograph, which documents a distinct event that occurred in 1972, becomes a visual mnemonic formula that enables viewers to forge a connection between that event and the everyday experience of playing hockey outdoors. In other words, concrete, personal experience becomes a vehicle through which the larger history of Canadian hockey is transmitted.

One can find examples of the use of visual replay as a mnemonic device in the art of goalie masks as well. Jacques Plante, Hockey Hall of Fame goaltender who played for the Montreal Canadiens from 1953 to 1963 and won six Stanley Cups with the team, is generally considered to be the first goalie ever to wear a mask, although his masks were undecorated. In Glen Green’s Legends of the Mask (figure 14.1), Plante’s
iconic mask is the first on the left. Gerry Cheevers is commonly credited with the first decorated goalie mask, and his famous “scar face” or “stitches” design, which originated after he was hit in the face with a hockey puck, is often cited as inspiration for more elaborate mask art. Recalling that Cheevers would add more stitches to the mask every time a puck hit it, Ron Hextall noted, “When he started putting the stitches on, people took note, it wasn’t just to protect your face. It was a piece of art.”

From such humble beginnings, the tradition of hockey mask decoration has graduated to an art form. Although beautifully ornate, mask designs are typically extensions of team logos or visual expressions of personal nicknames. On 19 February 2011, however, the Montreal Canadiens and the Calgary Flames played an outdoor Heritage Classic game, and Carey Price, the goaltender for the Canadiens, commissioned a special mask for the event. The new Price mask, designed by David Arrigo, depicted Jacques Plante wearing his mask.

Unlike the more purely decorative masks, the mask that Price wore for the Heritage Classic functioned as a visual mnemonic formula in much the same way as Laird’s *Remember the Goal*. Interestingly, the Price mask, while clearly referencing Jacques Plante, combines features of both Plante and Price. As Price explained in an interview, the eyes and mouth on the front of the mask reproduce Plante’s features, but the ears and wisps of hair on the side of the mask are based on a photograph of the side of his own head. This mask on top of a mask creates a hybrid, one that literally put Price into the place of Plante. In so doing, the mask enlivened the memory of Plante in the embodied and lived play of Price, just as the children in Laird’s painting revive the memory of the Henderson goal through their play.

In *Oral History Theory*, Lynn Abrams points out that memory is best understood as precisely this process. Memory, she writes, is “the calling up of images, stories, experiences and emotions from our past life, ordering them, placing them within a narrative or story and then telling them in a way that is shaped at least in part by our social and cultural context.” This definition of remembering makes clear that memory is a bridge between personal experience and cultural knowledge. Those watching Price play while wearing the Plante mask are not only reminded of one of the Canadiens’ most revered players but also of the team’s glorious history.

Another example of how hockey art functions as a mnemonic formula is Tim Lee’s *Untitled (No. 4, 1970)*, a photograph that shows the artist suspended horizontally in midair, arms and legs outstretched. The image has been cut in half, with Lee divided at the waist, his legs in the left panel and his torso, head, and arms in the right panel. Each half of the image is enclosed in a heavy white frame, and the two are hung so that a stretch of white wall intervenes. The background of
the photograph is also white, and Lee is dressed in black. At first sight, the image resembles an act of levitation, and, in contrast to Laird’s Remember the Goal, in no apparent way does it reference hockey: there are no hockey sticks, no pastoral setting, no skates, no ice, no puck.

Although more subtle and abstract than the work of Laird, Lee’s work also remembers a very specific goal, however. Lee’s horizontal posture, accompanied by the references to “No. 4” and “1970” in the title, provide the viewer with both a visual and a verbal mnemonic, alluding to one of the most famous hockey goals ever recorded on film. On 10 May 1970, Bobby Orr, who wore number 4 for the Boston Bruins, scored an overtime winning goal against the St. Louis Blues. The goal was remarkable for two reasons. First, it won the Bruins the Stanley Cup, their first since 1941. Second, Orr flew into the air a split second after the goal, his arms and legs outstretched, his body nearly perfectly horizontal. Ray Lussier captured the moment in a photograph, and that photograph remains one of the most iconic hockey images of all time. Just as Laird reassembles the formal components of the Henderson goal into the everyday setting of ice pond hockey, Lee, too, remembers the distinctive element of the Orr goal, concretizing that moment through his own experience and body. In this way, Lee himself becomes the vehicle of cultural memory.

**ART AS APPRENTICESHIP**

In primary oral cultures, the acquisition of knowledge is closely associated with the interpersonal. As Ong argues, knowledge is conceptualized through a process of “assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings.” In such cultures, people learn “by apprenticeship—hunting with experienced hunters, for example—by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear.” Even in written cultures, however, immediate, “hands-on” learning is often the best way to master a new skill. In the case of hockey, communicating practical knowledge may simply involve an experienced player explaining the rules, describing specific strategies, demonstrating specific manoeuvres, and so on—a process akin to an apprenticeship. But hockey art can also function to communicate practical knowledge, in that it often depicts exemplary actions on the part of hockey’s most skilled practitioners. Hockey art teaches us what it means to be a hockey player, but it does so in part through the concrete illustration of “best practices,” that is, by forging visual links between a particular identity (hockey player) and the actions, the “know-how,” associated with that identity.
The relationship between hockey and the elaboration of national identity is well-trodden ground, and much of the study of hockey art has accordingly centred on hockey as a myth or metaphor for the nation. Viewed from this perspective, hockey reflects conventional ideals and values, functioning as a “mystic writing-pad,” a blank slate on which all that is, or that can be, “Canadian” is endlessly inscribed. Such interpretations of hockey and, by extension, hockey art are both appealing and compelling. Indeed, I have often thought about the cultural significance of one of the most ubiquitous visual hockey artifacts ever to circulate within the Canadian public sphere, the five-dollar bill created for the 2001–6 Canadian Journey series. The note features images of children playing hockey that “capture the spirit and beauty of the Canadian winter.” An image of Sir Wilfrid Laurier appears on the front of the bill, which also features a quotation from Roch Carrier’s story “Le chandail de hockey” (“The Hockey Sweater”), in both English and French. The quotation reads: “The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places—the school, the church and the skating rink—but our real life was on the skating rink.” When these images are taken together, the bill seems to make an iconographic statement of national unity, one that looks past differences of language and culture and instead finds commonality in those most quintessential of Canadian experiences—hockey and winter.

Yet, despite such benign and bucolic images, hockey is, and always has been, a rough sport, a characteristic that Michael Robidoux sees as fundamental to the role of hockey in the formation and expression of national identity. According to Robidoux, “hockey enabled Canadians to display qualities that have been valued in patriarchal relations: stoicism, courage, perseverance, and proficiency. The singularity of the game and the manner in which it was played were critical for a young and disparate nation to have as its own.” As hockey evolved into a modern, pan-Canadian sport, through the formalization of rules and governance structures, a patriarchal ideal of masculine identity founded on physical strength and dominance became entrenched in the society. Symbolically, hockey came to represent the masculine Canadian “cycle of life,” in which “the boy becomes a man, the player a fan, a coach, a father, a player again—and the game goes on.” As national ideology, hockey thus expresses a deeply patriarchal world view, one that is premised on “father-son bonding and bloodline.” Indeed, as Jay Scherer and Lisa McDermott argue, the association between this idealized masculine identity and the sport of hockey has become so deeply ingrained in the Canadian national consciousness that it can function as a political strategy. In particular, Scherer and McDermott trace the political rebranding of our former prime minister, Stephen Harper, as a “proud hockey Dad.”
In this interpretation, hockey art is reductive, its focus falling on the creation of iconic images that ignore the tensions and complexities of lived experience (including, of course, the somewhat inconvenient fact that women also play hockey). However, hockey does not simply serve to reinforce normative values. Robidoux opposes the modern form of the game, with its standardized rules and system of leagues, to what he calls its “vernacular” tradition, that is, the informal hockey of everyday life, localized, loosely organized (if at all), and unruly—the “road/ball/pond hockey in which people engage in variations of the game of hockey in unspecified locales, with unspecified participants in terms of age, number, gender, and skill.” While Robidoux acknowledges that “hockey was used ideologically to express national sentiment,” he argues that “its value as a vernacular entity was equal to, if not greater than, its symbolic value.” The distinction between hockey as official national sport and hockey in its vernacular expression entails a shift in perspective that can be useful to our understanding of hockey art. Considered from the point of view of ideology, hockey art seeks to inspire a sense of reverence: in our capacity as viewers (and spectators), we assume a passive role, admiring idealized images of male identity from which we remain at a distance. Considered from the point of view of vernacular tradition, however, hockey art communicates a different form of identity, one grounded in immediacy and in practical knowledge and skill. Far from simply perpetuating the masculine ideals enshrined in the imagery of hockey, this perspective reminds us that gender is socially constructed.

Consider, for example, Anthony Jenkins’s *Games Faces*, a series of portraits of hockey stars such as Mario Lemieux, Guy Lafleur, and Mark Messier (see figure 14.2). The series is interesting in that Jenkins uses a Wayne Gretzky tabletop hockey game as his canvas. Taken together, the images in the collection display precisely the type of ideal masculine identity described by Robidoux: the portraits are of “stoic, courageous, and physically dominant” men. The “official” pantheon of hockey remains clearly gendered. However, the rendering of the portraits on a working tabletop hockey game reminds us that hockey exists in vernacular forms as well. When the medium, the tabletop game, becomes the focus of analysis rather than the portraits themselves, *Game Faces* suggests a different sort of hockey identity, one that is based on participation—on the actions through which one acquires the ability to play. Viewed from this perspective, the portraits are not mere static images. As their medium of execution suggests, the esteem granted to these men is founded on the merit they have earned through the dedicated practice necessary to hone their skills. In other words, the traits worthy of respect and emulation are not inherent qualities of the male sex; rather, they are the traits that enable someone
to acquire expertise. From the point of view of the vernacular, the message is less “Be men like these” and more “Play like this.” This shift changes the focus of hockey art from the symbolic expression of gendered ideals to the realities of apprenticeship—that is, from ideology to know-how.

Figure 14.2 Super Mario (2004), Anthony Jenkins’s portrait of Mario Lemieux, in his Game Faces series

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Ong also argues that oral cultures “tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld.” In other words, oral communication is grounded in the concrete. “An oral culture,” he writes, “simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought.” As Ong points out, oral cultures are far from primitive or unsophisticated. But in oral cultures concepts are typically expressed in relation to specific, concrete phenomenal realities: meaning is embodied rather than abstracted. I would argue that hockey art also resists meanings premised on abstract thought. This does not mean that hockey art cannot convey abstract ideas. To focus on those ideas, however, is to dismiss the situational, operational, and concrete nature of hockey art, which amounts to a failure to recognize an important component of the art.

For example, in his kinetic sculpture, *Nul/Flirting with the Puck* (see figure 14.3), Jean-Pierre Gauthier suspends two hockey sticks from the ceiling. Each stick is equipped with an automated motor such that it makes gentle and constrained swings at a suspended puck, which remains just out of reach between the stick blades. Each
stick is also outfitted with a camera to record the action from the point of view of the stick. The endless commencement of an invisible game is then broadcast on three monitors.

This kinetic sculpture is certainly abstract and ambiguous, allowing for a range of interpretive possibilities. However, the sculpture is premised on the most basic, concrete, and recognizable components of hockey: a stick and a puck. Rather than working from the concrete to the abstract, the sculpture takes the abstract and makes it concrete. The sculpture strips hockey of the cultural, economic, social, and political meanings ascribed to it by ideological or symbolic readings and instead situates the meaning of hockey in the mechanical interaction of stick and puck, the material core of the game. Gauthier thereby defines hockey as an essential operation in the same way as the non-literate Russian peasants interviewed by A. R. Luria defined cutting tools through their operation. In Ong’s paraphrase, “If you are a workman with tools and see a log, you think of applying the tool to it, not of keeping the tool away from what it was made for.” Indeed, Nul/Flirting with the Puck suggests that if you are a hockey player and see a puck and a stick, you think of applying the stick to the puck, not of keeping the stick away from what it was made for.

Figure 14.4 Craig LeBlanc, Please Use Me (2004)
Another striking example of how hockey art communicates primarily through concrete objects is Craig LeBlanc’s sculpture *Please Use Me* (see figure 14.4). This simple sculpture consists of a plain hockey stick that sits with the tip of its blade on a white block, its butt end resting against the wall. The blade of the stick is stencil-cut with the phrase “PLEASE USE ME” in large white letters. The motionless stick, with its mute command, elegantly suggests that hockey derives its meaning from concrete practice. A hockey stick is made to be used, and its static existence in the museum display is unsettling, seemingly even for the stick itself. The emphatic statement of purpose carved into the blade expresses what is already known: the stick carries no meaning without its utility. *Please Use Me* does not make an abstract statement of myth or metaphor, nor does it make a statement about the division between art and life. Instead, it reminds the viewer that without the concrete practice of the game, there would be no stick and no hockey.

**CONCLUSION**

At the outset, I proposed that Ong’s insights into the characteristics of communication in an oral culture can shed light on the nature and functions of hockey art, especially given that much of sports culture is transmitted through informal and oral channels. To close, it is only fitting to consider another characteristic that Ong associates with communication within an oral culture: conservatism (or traditionalism). “Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes,” he explains, “oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation.” Innovation is not unknown. A narrator telling a story will, for example, introduce new elements, with the result that “there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely.” All the same, “the formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials.” In much the same way, hockey art appears to have a limited capacity to express novel thought.

Indeed, many theorists of sport culture lament the apparent inability of sports art to generate academic attention and to be received and thought of as art. They blame the dominant distinction between popular and high culture. In response, defenders of sports culture and sports art have argued that this characterization is largely a result of disciplinary bigotry and not a reflection of the formal characteristics of sports art. The difference between art and sports art, in other
words, is one of snobbish reception. As Mike O’Mahony phrases it, “What, therefore, might be at issue if . . . a representation of sport is encountered in an arena that conventionally posits an alternative set of values or concerns; namely an art exhibition?” In response to this question, he suggests that when sports art is situated in a receptive context otherwise reserved for high art, sports art becomes appreciated as high art and functions accordingly. The art does not change but its capacity to be art does.

I suggest quite the opposite—at least in part. Hockey art is difficult to recognize as high art because of the three central characteristics of hockey art that I have outlined: the mnemonic function of hockey art, which drives remembering by creating a synergy between personal lived experience and larger hockey culture; the manner in which hockey art transmits particular “know-how” and supports apprenticeship practice; and the reliance of hockey art on concrete material artifacts more than on abstract representations. These characteristics limit the ability of hockey art to satisfy a central expectation of much of high art: to unsettle larger societal and cultural concepts. Much like oral tradition, hockey art resists iconoclasm. A short comparison of Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg’s Zamboni (see figure 14.5) with Marcel Duchamp’s classic Dadaist work Fountain illustrates my point succinctly.

Figure 14.5 Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg, Zamboni (2006)
In 1917, Marcel Duchamp rested a urinal on its back, signed the object “R. Mutt, 1917,” and presented it as art. He titled the work *Fountain*. Heralded as the cornerstone of modernist art, the object shook the foundations of the art world by conceptually challenging the division between art and life. Ironically, when the original was submitted for exhibition, it was refused, although replicas have since found themselves in the hallowed halls of the most prestigious art museums in the world. What is important for our present discussion is that *Fountain* is a concrete object, not an abstract rendering, and an object embedded in daily life and daily routine (at least for half the population). In other words, *Fountain* shares many characteristics with those hockey art objects discussed thus far.

In 2006, Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg created a to-scale replica of a Zamboni from polystyrene and rested the sculpture on four concrete cinder blocks. The work is titled *Zamboni*. Unlike Duchamp’s found object, the creation of *Zamboni* demanded artistic labour. Also unlike Duchamp’s sculpture, *Zamboni* has, since its inception, had a place in art museum exhibitions. Thus in some ways, *Zamboni*, although sports art, is closer to high art than is *Fountain*. However, *Zamboni* is largely unable to challenge or disrupt cultural beliefs precisely because it functions as a mnemonic bridge between personal experience and a larger culture of hockey, it is embedded in a specific “know-how” of those hockey happenings, and it remains recognizably a concrete object, despite its career of exhibition showings. In short, whereas *Fountain* asserts something new, *Zamboni* rephrases what is known.

These assertions should not be taken as a denigration of hockey art. The issue, for me, is not whether hockey art is good or bad. Rather, the question concerns the type of knowledge that these objects communicate. Unlike many analysts of hockey art, I hesitate to consider these objects as transmitters of larger myths about the origins and nature of the Canadian nation or the symbolic, and implicitly ideological, impact of hockey iconography on identity formation. Instead, I argue that through an approach to hockey art that is grounded in hockey as a lived experience and an embodied form of knowledge, the objects of hockey art can be understood to function much like the communicative tools of oral-based cultures. Regardless of the specifics of its content, hockey art performs distinct cultural functions, serving less to challenge and unsettle traditional perspectives and values than to celebrate and reinforce them.

NOTES


3 Ibid., 33.

4 Ibid., 42, 48.

5 Ibid., 34.

6 Ibid., 34–35.


11 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 42.

12 Ibid., 8.


19 Sugars, “Notes on a Mystic Hockey Puck,” 159.
20 Jay Scherer and Lisa McDermott, “Playing Promotional Politics: Mythologizing Hockey and Manufacturing ‘Ordinary’ Canadians,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 43 (2011): 119. This rebranding, they contend, situated Harper squarely within the masculine Canadian “cycle of life” and was purposely reinforced by statements by Harper such as, “I love my job as Prime Minister, but if you could be a hockey player, I mean, what could be better than that?”


22 Ibid., 212.

23 Because gender is a matter of social perception, our understanding of “masculine” and “feminine” shifts in accordance with shifts in the embodied performance of gender. As long as women only very rarely played hockey, the game could continue to embody what were assumed to be “male” qualities. As Nancy Theberge notes, however, women’s participation hockey serves to challenge “modalities of feminine embodiment that are grounded in weakness and victimization.” In a series of interviews with adolescent girls who play hockey, Theberge probed the ways in which these women understand and use their bodies. As she discovered, the sheer physicality of the sport was integral to “the players’ sense of their athletics selves.” Nancy Theberge, “‘No Fear Comes’: Adolescent Girls, Ice Hockey, and the Embodiment of Gender,” *Youth and Society* 34, no. 4 (2003): 505.

24 Robidoux, “Imagining a Canadian Identity Through Sport,” 220.

25 Ibid., 48–49.

26 Ibid., 54.


28 Ibid., 40–41.

29 Ibid., 41.