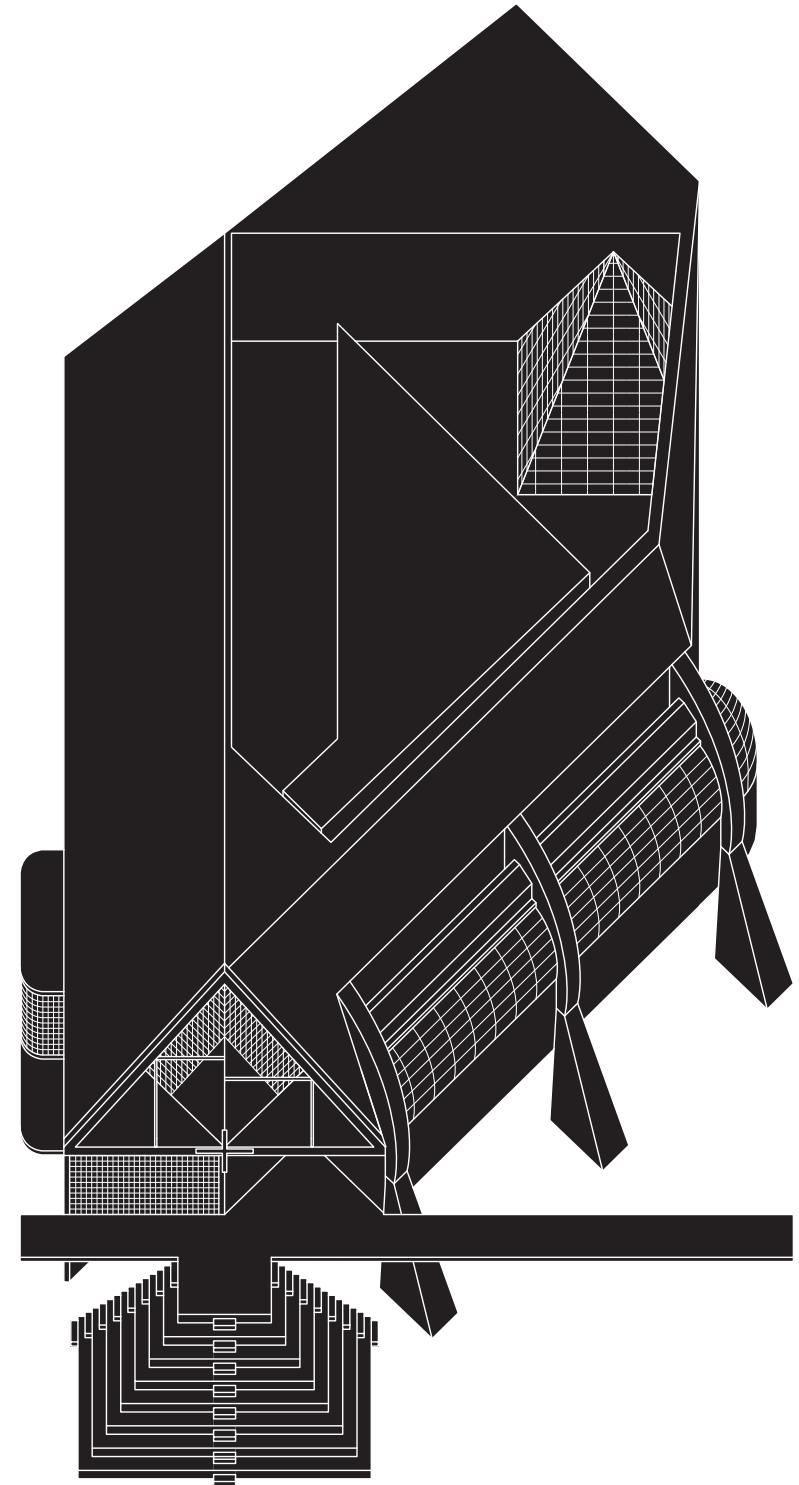


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**SAN ROCCO - SCARY ARCHITECTS**

**5 - FALL 2012**



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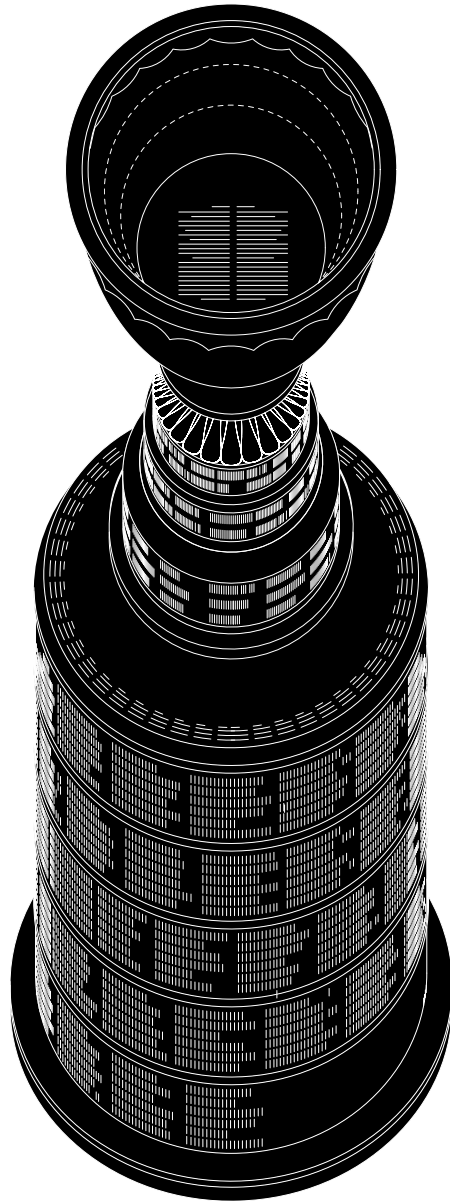
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# THE STANLEY CUP: AN INQUIRY INTO THE ESSENCE OF MONUMENTALITY

Pier Paolo Tamburelli

## I

The Stanley Cup is the trophy assigned annually to the winner of the National Hockey League (aka the NHL). The cup is a small silver bowl measuring 18.5 centimetres in height and 29 in diameter. The bowl rests on a gigantic stepped, cylindrical base with a lower diameter of 43.8 centimetres. Altogether the cup is 89.5 centimetres high and weighs 15.5 kilograms.

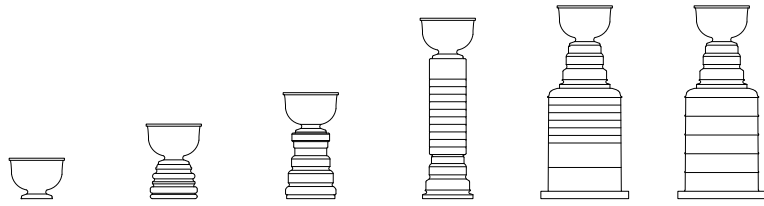
The Stanley Cup is by far the best trophy design in contemporary sports. It is certainly much more interesting than the simply adequate UEFA Champions League Cup; impossible to compare with the provincial wannabe-classicism of the Copa Libertadores; totally opposed to the sad modernism of the FIFA World Cup or the UEFA Europa League Cup; entirely free from the naivety of the FIFA Club's World Cup and the NBA's Larry O'Brien trophy; miles away from the souvenir-like irrelevance of the MLB Commissioner's Trophy or the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* aesthetic of the NFL's Lombardi Trophy. Among today's trophies, only the Venus Rosewater Dish (a silver dish measuring 48 centimetres in diameter and decorated with figures from mythology which is given to the Wimbledon Ladies' Singles champion) possesses a comparable quality, but its beauty is definitely of another kind. The dish is elegant, polite, literally *subtle*, whereas the Stanley Cup is symmetrical, heavy, outspoken, monumental.

So why is the Stanley Cup so monumental? Or better, what is it that makes it so monumental? Or even better, what do we discover about monumentality by looking at the Stanley Cup?



Wives of 1961 Chicago Blackhawks players with the Stanley Cup (L to R): Mrs. Hay, Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Macdonald, Mrs. St-Laurent

**Evolution of the Stanley Cup (L to R): 1893, 1921, 1920s, 1930s, 1948, 1957**



Initially, the Stanley Cup had only one ring, which was attached to the bottom of the bowl by the Montréal Amateur Athletic Association. Clubs engraved their team names on this ring until it was full in 1902. With no more space left on the ring, teams started to record their names on the bowl's interior surface. In 1909, the Ottawa Senators added a second band to the cup, and in 1924, the Montréal Canadiens added another one. Since then, a new band has been added each year, turning the cup into a slowly growing column. The "Stovepipe Cup", as it was nicknamed, soon became unwieldy, so it was redesigned in 1948. This re-working of the trophy also allowed the honouring of the teams that had not engraved their names previously. The cup's current design was introduced in 1958, when the old base was replaced with one comprising five bands, each of which could display the names of the members of thirteen teams. *This information about the history of the Stanley Cup was taken from Wikipedia.*

## II

The Stanley Cup looks bigger than any other contemporary sports trophy, but this is not true. The Stanley Cup is only slightly bigger than the UEFA Champions League Cup and even slightly smaller than the Copa Libertadores. It is not the size that is different, it is the *scale*. The gigantic scale of the Stanley Cup is a consequence of its *form*, and its form is the consequence of the need to have the greatest possible number of names appear on the trophy. Although the Stanley Cup is not the only cup that provides a record of the winning teams of the past, the difference is that, contrary to all other trophies, the base of the Stanley Cup is engraved with the names of all of the members (players, coaches and staff) of the teams who won it. So in contrast to the 52 *team* names appearing on the Copa Libertadores, the Stanley Cup, as of today, displays 2,163 names.

The Stanley Cup, as a figure, is entirely defined by its gigantic base bearing all of the names. The list of names *is* the form of the cup, immediately producing the fat cylinder as a consequence of the need for a maximum of space for text. The monumentality of the trophy is the list's quantity of names. The cup is the base with each of the successive victories. The original bowl indeed seems of little visual importance compared to the colossal base.

The original punch bowl was a relatively standard piece of 19th-century tableware bought for ten guineas in a Sheffield jewellery shop in 1892 by Lord Stanley of Preston, who was Governor General of Canada at the time. Compared to its gigantic base, the little, readymade punchbowl becomes irrelevant: it is just a pretext for the visual repetition of victories displayed below. In the end, the process of repeating and accumulating is so important that the original – repeated – object somehow vanishes. As a sacred object, the bowl has nothing to do with the question of form: it exists beyond any formal quality. Indeed, the bowl survives like a wooden xoanon inside a Greek temple of marble, like a broken piece of pottery once touched by a mediaeval saint at the heart of a Baroque altar.



Cups (L to R): Copa Libertadores, Stanley Cup, UEFA Champions League Cup, UEFA Europa League Cup, MLB Commissioner's Trophy, NBA Larry O'Brien Trophy, NFL Lombardi Trophy, Venus Rosewater Dish, FIFA World Club Cup, FIFA World Cup

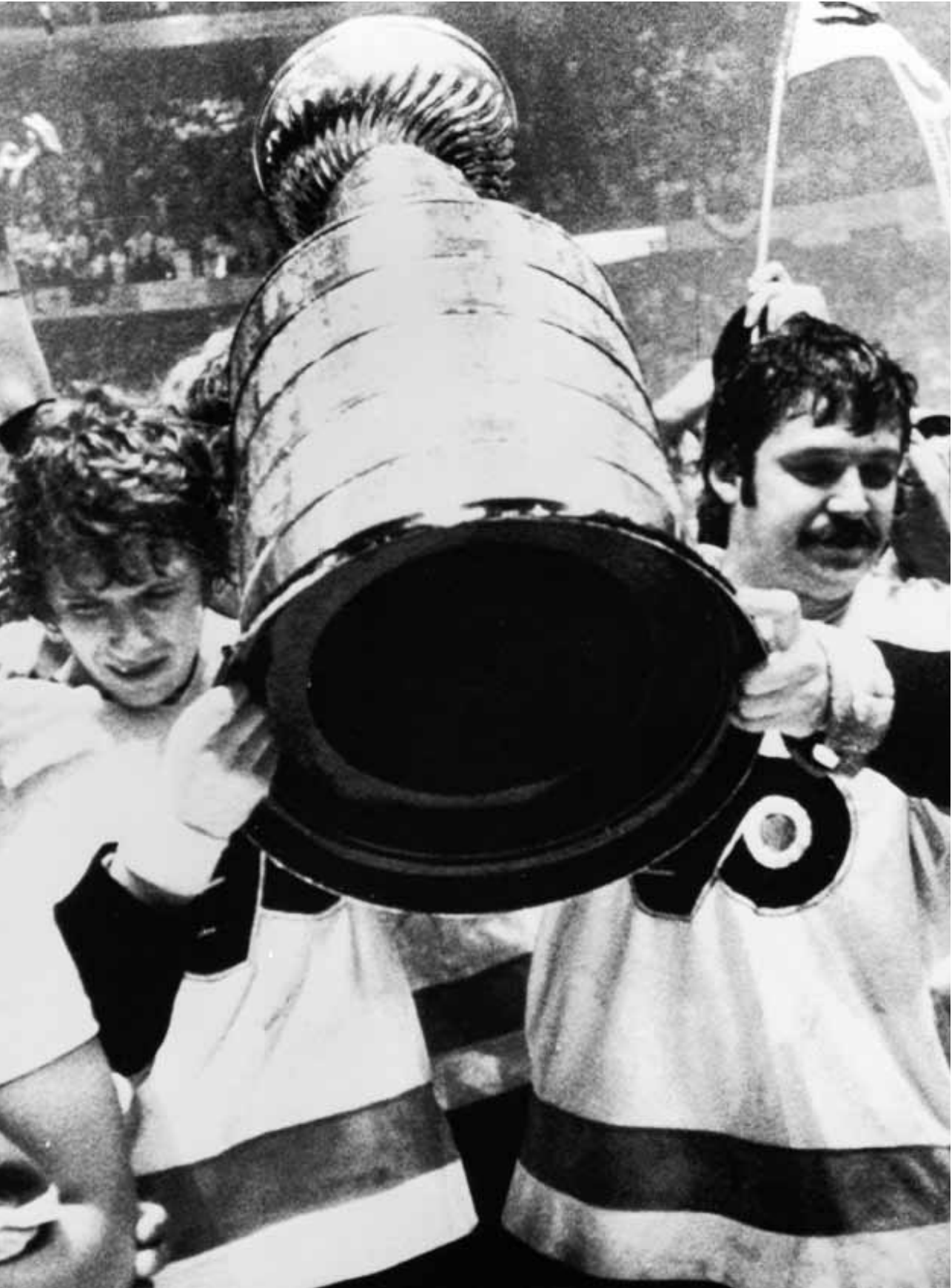
### III

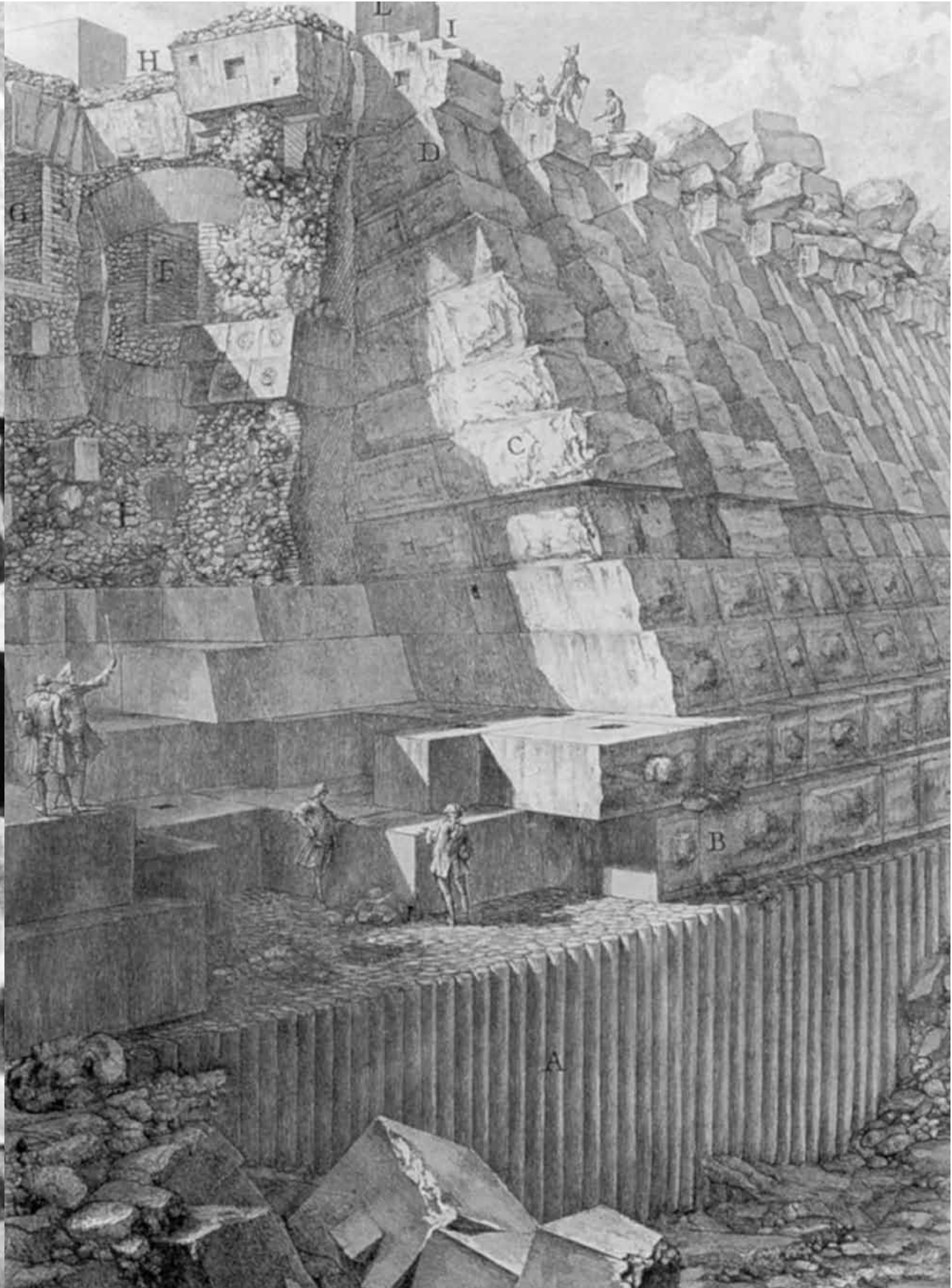
The Stanley Cup is a *monument*.

The cup embodies the repetition of the original victory occurring *in illo tempore*, something that all winners repeat and re-enact each year by winning the cup. Every time the winners win the *entire history* of the cup – all the goals, all the assists, all the saves, all the screams. In the supreme moment of triumph when the trophy is lifted to the sky, the victors become the winners of all previous championships. All teams unite into a single ideal team (a gigantic team eternally playing in some sort of hockey Valhalla, or maybe even a devastating *Wütendes Heer* on skates led by Wotan himself).

Each new victory contributes to the tower of victories. And, to describe it correctly, the new victory is not built on top of the previous ones; rather, it is the previous ones that rest on top of the present one. Every new victory literally raises the previous ones by adding a new base for them. The present fortifies the past. The newest names are consequently engraved *at the base* of the cup: they are the foundations for the fortress of victories. Thus, the victory of the 1972 Boston Bruins grows greater because of the 1973 victory of the Montréal Canadiens, and the victory of the 1973 Montréal Canadiens is fortified by the 1974 victory of the Philadelphia Flyers. As a monument, the Stanley Cup protects the past against the future. Indeed, monumentality is precisely this: ensuring that the future will be like the past. The Stanley Cup treats ice hockey as something that cannot be subjected to change. It helps build a future in which ice hockey will continue to be exactly what it has always been; it protects the players of the past against the possibility of a future without ice hockey.

Following pages:  
 (left) Philadelphia Flyers celebrate Stanley Cup win, 1974; (right) Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Veduta di una parte de' fondamenti del Teatro di Marcello, from Le antichità romane*, IV (Rome, 1756)





H

L

I

D

G

F

C

J

K

B

A





Wilhelm Kreis,  
Burschenschaftsdenkmal,  
Eisenach, 1902

#### IV

The Stanley Cup is monumental in the context of mass society. The cup accumulates names on its fat body with pedantic uniformity. Each new victory corresponds to a new list of names, and each set of thirteen lists of names forms a new ring added to the previous ones. All victories are recorded in the same way, so they all lose their individuality and are transmuted into the same archetypal victory. Heroes whose names are engraved onto the cup are not identified as individuals; instead, they are just part of a mass (in analyzing the Stanley Cup, nobody would ever suspect the difference between the name “Wayne Gretzky”<sup>1</sup> and that of “Steve Smith”<sup>2</sup>). Winners, in this respect, are equal to the vanquished. The Stanley Cup is not that different from a war memorial on which the names of the dead soldiers cover the monument’s entire surface. It is not by chance that the Stanley Cup looks pretty similar to some of Wilhelm Kreis’s scariest proposals for war memorials. The Stanley Cup was created using the same rhetoric of quantity that permeates those monuments. The form of the trophy is the result of an attempt to incorporate all victorious players into the cup, to use the mass of players as the raw material of which the cup is made. Names become the constitutive components of a mass: letters become the equivalent of Lilliputian human figures, somehow underscoring the massive scale of the cup (in a manner similar to that of the small human figures appearing in megalomaniacal Neoclassical architectural fantasies). As Elias Canetti noted in his commentary on Hitler’s architectural projects as described in Speer’s memories, the sheer quantity of names, or the iteration of the mass of dead soldiers, is what *makes up* the monument.<sup>3</sup>

1

Wayne Gretzky is to ice hockey what Diego Armando Maradona is with respect to a more fundamental sport.

2

Steve Smith, to give you an idea, is the hockey equivalent of Nando De Napoli.

3

Elias Canetti, “Hitler nach Speer”, in idem, *Macht und Überleben* (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium, 1972).

#### V

The duration of the victories appearing on the Stanley Cup is, however, limited (although the legendary ones engraved on the upper rings and onto the bowl itself will always remain). The accumulation of names on the body of the cup reaches a limit determined by the cup’s size. Not all the names of past victors fit on the present trophy. Rings are regularly removed and substituted with new blank ones. Thus, the cup remains the same while teams slowly disappear from its body. According to current regulations, a team will remain listed on the cup for a period between 53 and 65 years, depending on the position of the engraving inside of its ring. The Los Angeles Kings, who won the title last June, will therefore disappear from the cup around 2070. As

a result, victory is not eternal; it will last only for the time required to turn history into myth. Indeed, the history represented on the cup's surfaces is mythical, not real. The time frame defined by the Stanley Cup is similar to that of primitive populations without a written history. For these populations, the temporal distance between mythical and "historical" times tends to remain fixed (a certain number of generations) and to move through time – in absolute terms – like a weight linked to a float. Thus, if a missionary met population X in 1756 and got the impression that the community dated the origin of the world to around 1650, an anthropologist encountering the same population in 1892 would get the impression that they dated it to around 1790. The Stanley Cup works the same way: the amount of names on the cup's body is just sufficient to cover the time span reaching back to the mythical past.

According to Nietzsche's classification,<sup>4</sup> the "history" narrated on the Stanley Cup is not only non-*critical*, but also non-*antiquarian*. When it comes to the Stanley Cup, accuracy is really not an issue: the names on it simply produce a rhetoric of quantity. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that there are an incredible number of misspellings on the trophy (to provide just one example, Jacques Plante won five consecutive titles and his name was spelled differently every time). The history appearing on the Stanley Cup is purely *monumental*, recorded only for the enthusiasts and the fanatics.

## VI

The design of the Stanley Cup is not at all modern.

Not a single formal rule that shaped the cup's appearance is modern. The cup is heavy, symmetrical, earth-bound, massive, barbaric. When in 1948 the accumulation of rings with names was just mechanical and the rings were simply piled one on top of the other to produce a clumsy *endless column* below the bowl, the cup became ridiculous and its form had to be transformed in order not to compromise the rhetoric of the object. The somehow Brancusian design of the "stovepipe" cup was too open. The trophy visibly changed every year somehow undermining its supposed timelessness. Indeed, the Stanley Cup has to accumulate history and mass while remaining the same. The form has to be open to change and yet stable, eternal. Also, the "stovepipe cup" did not establish any relation with Lord Stanley's punchbowl. The base grew and the proportional relationship between base and bowl was just the automatic product of such a growth. Soon the NHL



Wilhelm Kreis,  
Bismarcksäule, Hameln,  
1910

4  
Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*Unzeitgemasse  
Betrachtungen, II: Vom  
Nutzen und Nachteil der  
Historie für das Leben*  
(Leipzig: E. W. Fritsch, 1876).

began to be annoyed by this unintended modernism of the cup and started to search for a proper design. The base had to become a proper one – fat, heavy and gigantic, but somehow still related to the bowl on top. As a result, the base grew below the punchbowl like a Piranesian substructure.

However, as far as I know, no designer was hired to make the trophy (at least, there are no traces of any designer's involvement in the re-working of the trophy). The cup evolved in response to pure necessity, somehow following its own inherent logic. In an amazing anonymous drawing of 1958 (?) conserved at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, a not particularly skilled hand painfully drew the mouldings of the cup. The trophy appears in an elevation and in a partial section, with a full size detail of one space for engraving. The drawing has clearly been made by somebody who was not trained for the job: lines are not even straight, curves are not symmetric on the two sides. The lack of professionalism is impressive, and somehow moving. The final result looks even more *unavoidable* because of the clumsiness of the hand that happened to express it.

So the amazing formal adventure that began with Lord Stanley's purchase of a standard silver punchbowl and then continued with teams adding rings to the base eventually reached a moment of formal crisis that was probably solved by a league committee (!?). The "stovepipe" arrangement was perceived as *formally wrong* in that it endangered the trophy's authority through its lack of balance, but the formal problem was solved in an anonymous, almost unconscious way. The Tower of Babel appearance of the contemporary trophy is the product of this process of formal selection. An NHL committee, one presumably comprising people without any sense of design, produced something that no polite, up-to-date designer could have imagined in the late 1950s. Somehow it seems that a bizarre necessity forced the cup to evolve into the monstrosity it is today.

