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A Basketball Concert

Shlomo Az-Ari

Contento de Semrik

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INTRODUCTION

I have had a love affair with basketball, especially the NBA, for over fifty years.

It started in my youth in Burlington, Vermont, where I designed a table-top basketball game by drawing pictures of star players with crayons, cutting them out as paper dolls and playing imaginary games with them. I still have some of these figures stored in a drawer here in my home in Israel. (My mother went to the trouble of sending me them a number of years ago when she moved from the home we grew up in.) They included stars such as Bob Cousy, Bill Sharman, Bill Russell, Bob Pettit, and Oscar Robertson.

My first personal contact with an NBA star happened when I was in elementary school. My older brother took me to his friend's house to meet Bob Cousy, who was visiting Burlington as a friend of the family. I remember shaking hands with him and feeling his fingers reach to my elbow. With those extremely large hands, it's no wonder that he was known as a ball-handling wizard! Years later, soon after Cousy had retired after an illustrious career, including a number of NBA championships with the

Boston Celtics, he returned. I was nearing the end of high school then, and he arrived as an honored guest of the sponsor of an all-star game in which I participated. Cousy played one half for each side, and I still remember that he was in better physical condition than any of us all-stars!

I also have fond memories of growing up in the era when the NBA transformed itself from a bush league to a truly professional association; it quickly became the most racially-integrated sports league in the U.S. I remember corresponding by mail with Bob Pettit of the St. Louis Hawks and Oscar Robertson when he was attending the University of Cincinnati. Robertson even answered my letters, encouraging me to keep practicing and continue to love the game.

I remember the time the reigning NBA champions, the Boston Celtics, came to my small town in Vermont for a pre-season exhibition game. I turned up at the entrance of the auditorium hours before game time, hoping to catch the eye of a player or coach who might let me walk in with him and see the game for free, as I could not afford the cost

of a ticket. I spotted Celtics coach Red Auerbach and approached him; he agreed to get me into the game for free. He even allowed me to enter the Celtics dressing room to say hello to Bill Russell and to get a few autographs from the other players. (Russell wouldn't sign autographs on principle at that stage of his career.)

Another time, I managed to arrange a ride on the Harlem Globetrotters team bus from their hotel in Burlington to the same auditorium. I managed to do this by locating and calling Wilt Chamberlain in his hotel room before the team left with the bus for the game. He had left the University of Kansas and spent the year with the Globetrotters, and he was about to start his NBA career the next year in Philadelphia. Surprisingly, Wilt agreed to meet me at their hotel, allowing me to ride the team bus to the auditorium and to see them perform. My friends from the neighborhood, who tried to get in to see the Globetrotters play by accompanying players as they got off the bus, were quite shocked to see that I had beaten them to it by arranging with Wilt beforehand.

One other NBA experience in childhood occurred when I attended a basketball clinic for a few days while in middle school. The clinic was held in Worcester, MA, and one of the teaching staff was Tommy Heinsohn, who was just finishing his successful NBA career with the Celtics.

During my medical school studies in Vermont, I had the opportunity to see Julius "Dr. J" Erving play for the University of Massachusetts when they came to play against my undergraduate school, the University of Vermont. He seemed to play effortlessly; with his smooth, super-athletic mobility, he hardly worked up a sweat. He soon went on to be a star, first in the ABA, then in the NBA.

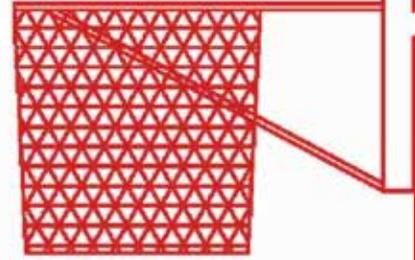
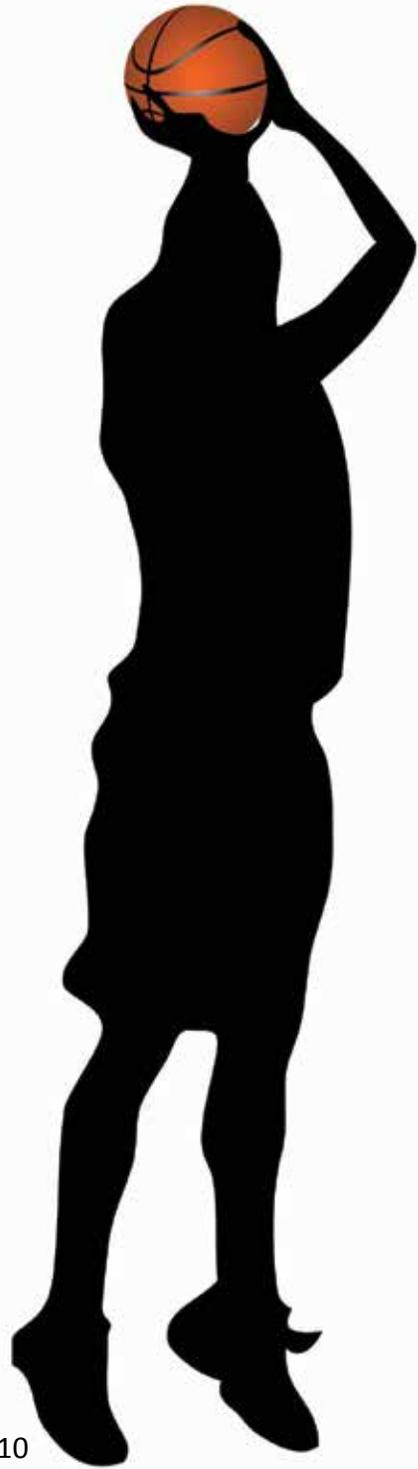
After moving to Israel, I once returned for a family visit to Boston and caught a Celtics game in Larry Bird's rookie year. On another visit to Boston, I saw a Celtics game in which Kareem Abdul-Jabbar played against them. As he passed me to enter the court, my eyes were at the level of his belly button! During a residency in Cleveland, while Magic Johnson and Larry Bird had their famous rivalry, I saw Bill Walton lead UCLA to spectacular

success, competing against David Thompson for North Carolina State. Both ended up going quite far in their professional careers. Later, during a two-year fellowship in Pittsburgh, PA, I managed to catch on television every single game of the Chicago Bulls with Michael Jordan (returning from his first retirement) and Scottie Pippen in the year they set the record for most regular-season victories. Upon returning to Israel, I would get up in the middle of the night to see Bulls games. I remember the feeling of not wanting to miss performances by Jordan, possibly the greatest basketball player of all time. Particularly memorable was his effort playing with a febrile illness in the playoffs against Karl Malone and John Stockton of the Utah Jazz.

In recent years, there has been some disappointment and disillusionment with the apparent greediness and selfishness of both players and owners. Nevertheless, my enthusiasm remains, especially considering Omri Casspi, the first Israeli to make it to the NBA, and the work ethic of players like Kevin Durant. I have tried to pass this on to my 13-year-old son, stressing to him the values of hard work and unselfish teamwork that are

the essence of success in basketball. The human dignity exemplified by the Bill Russell-era Celtics and many other teams and individuals can still be seen in the Kevin Durants of today. I still enjoy following the NBA to this very day, mainly through their website, NBA.com.

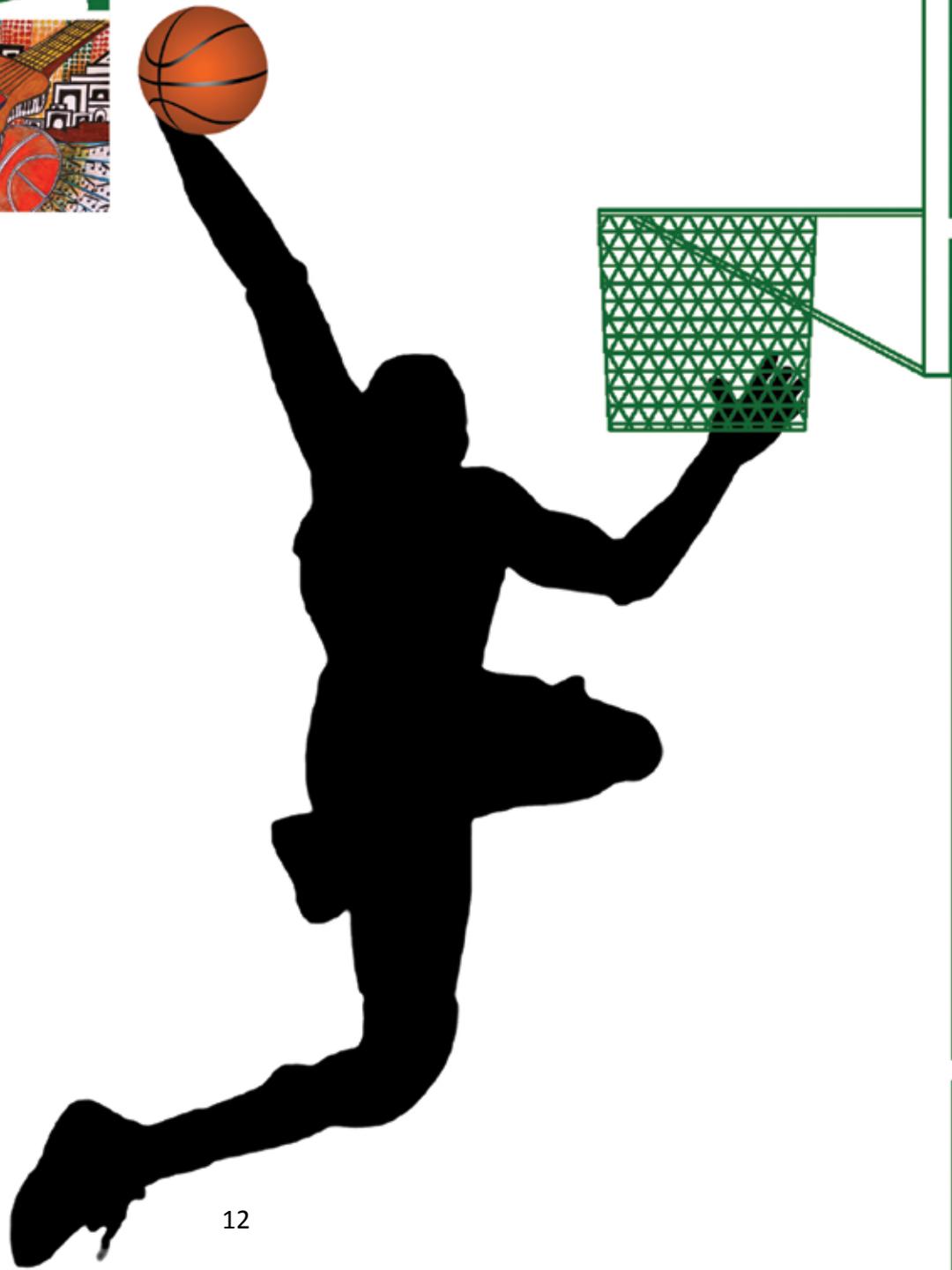
Dr. Robert Blumenthal.



ATLANTA HAWKS SINCE 1946

Painting inspired by the Atlanta Hawks logo

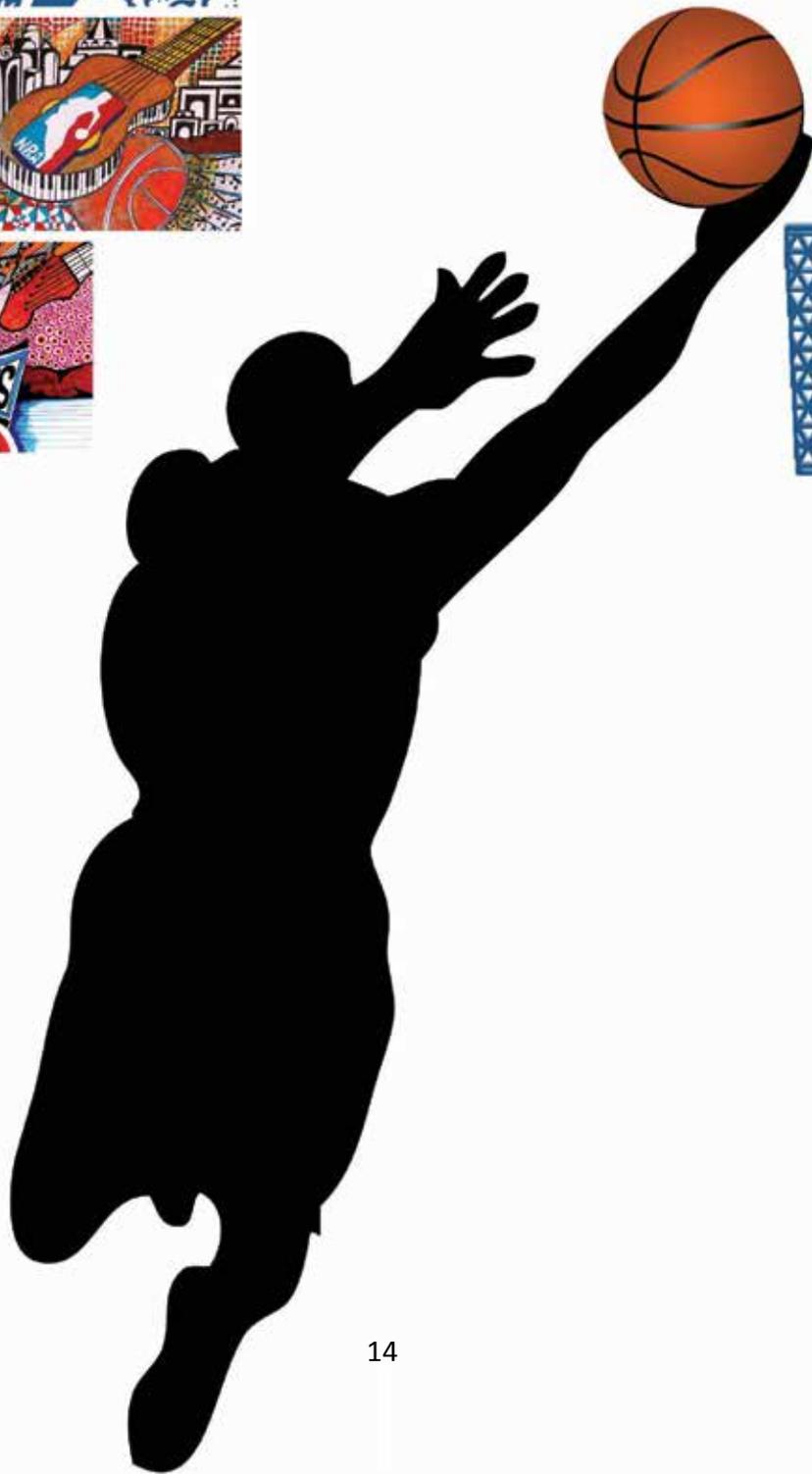




BOSTON CELTICS SINCE 1946

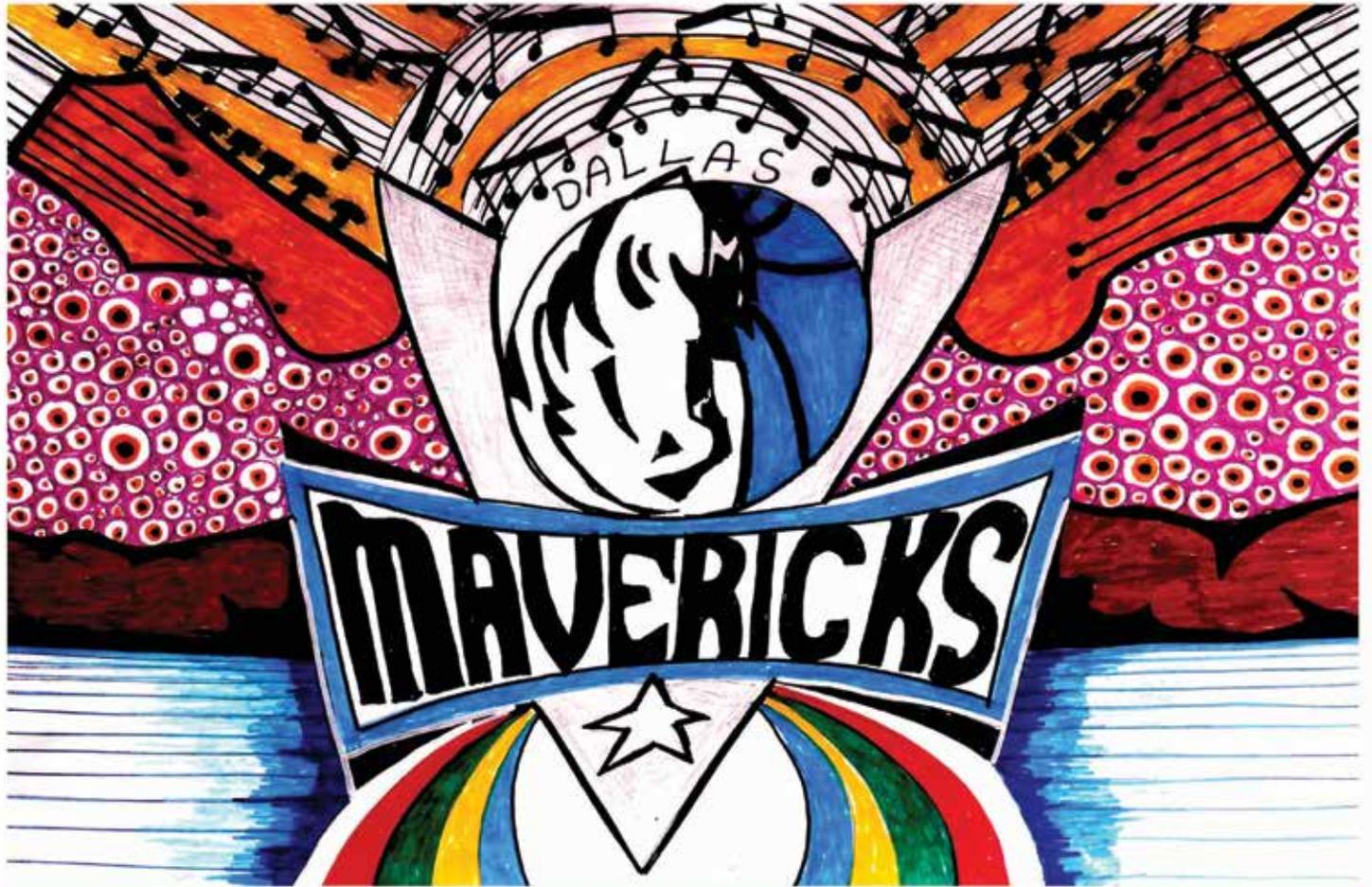
Painting Inspired By The Boston Celtics Logo

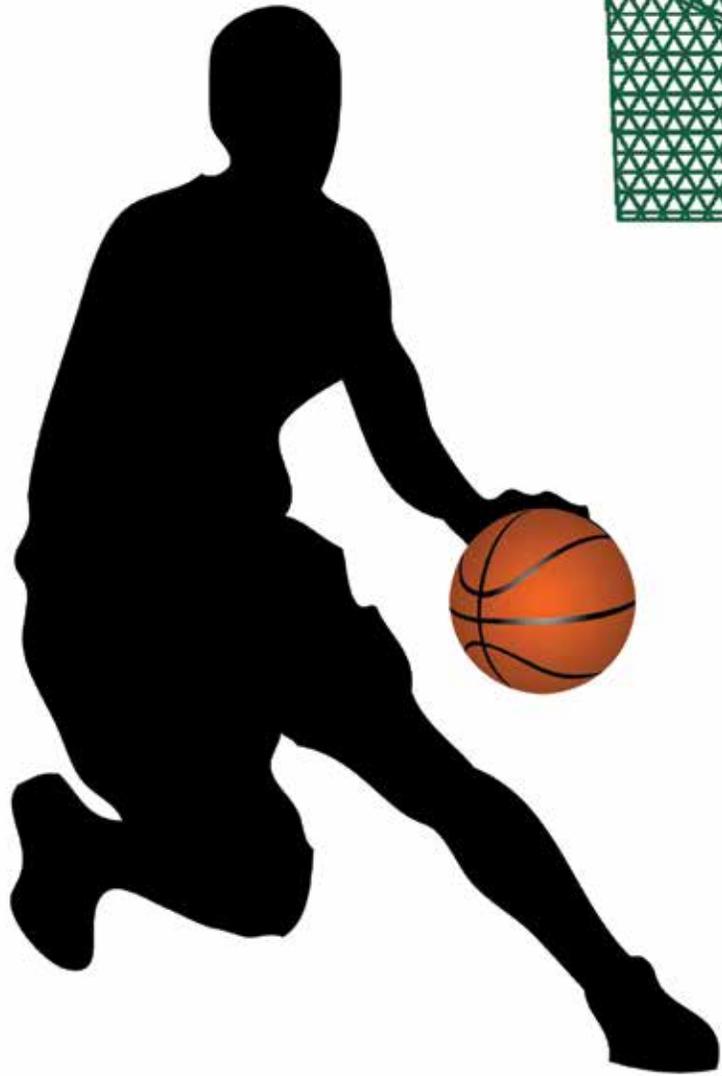
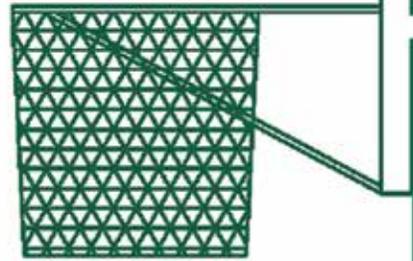




DALLAS MAVERICKS SINCE 1980

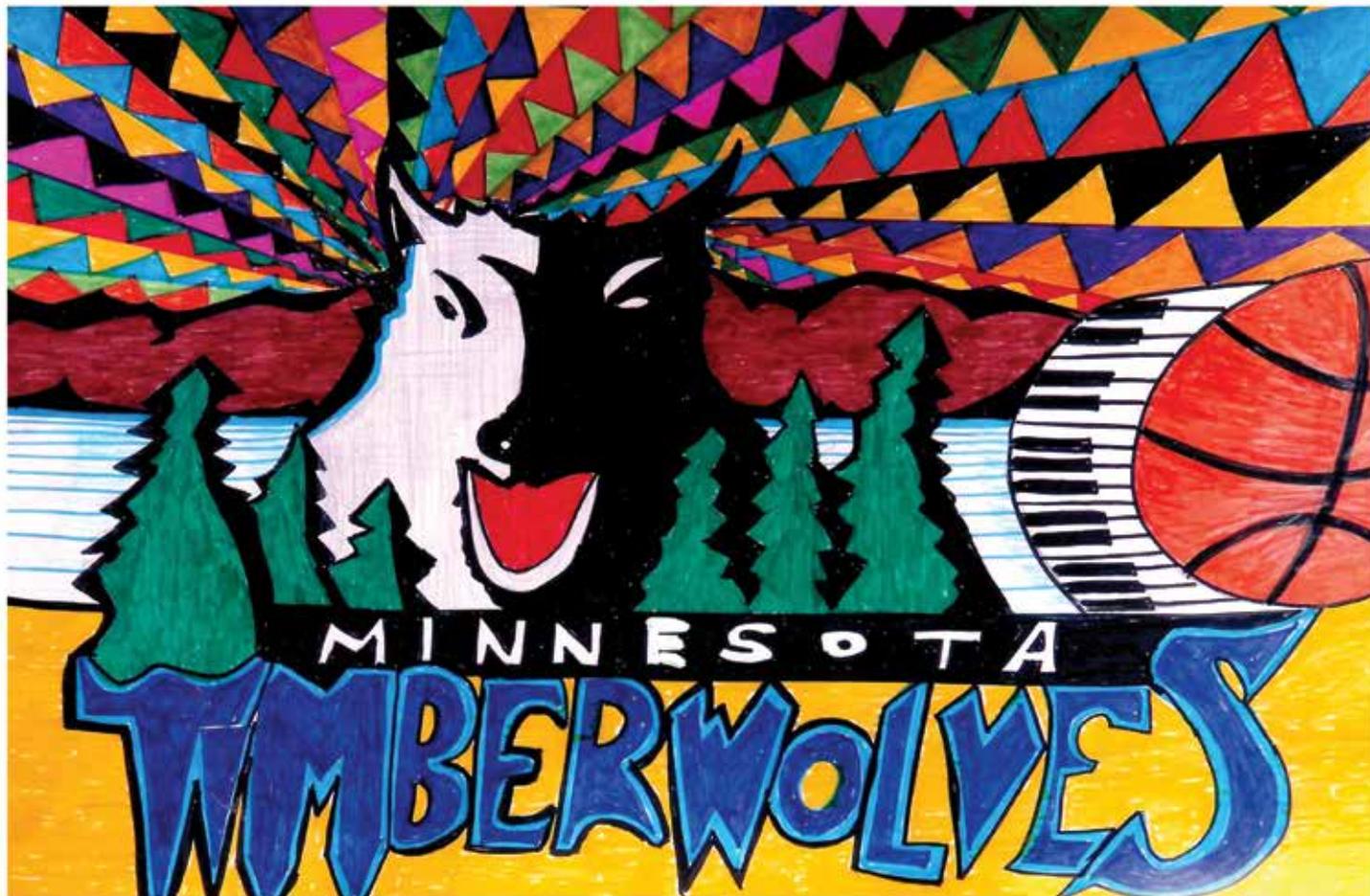
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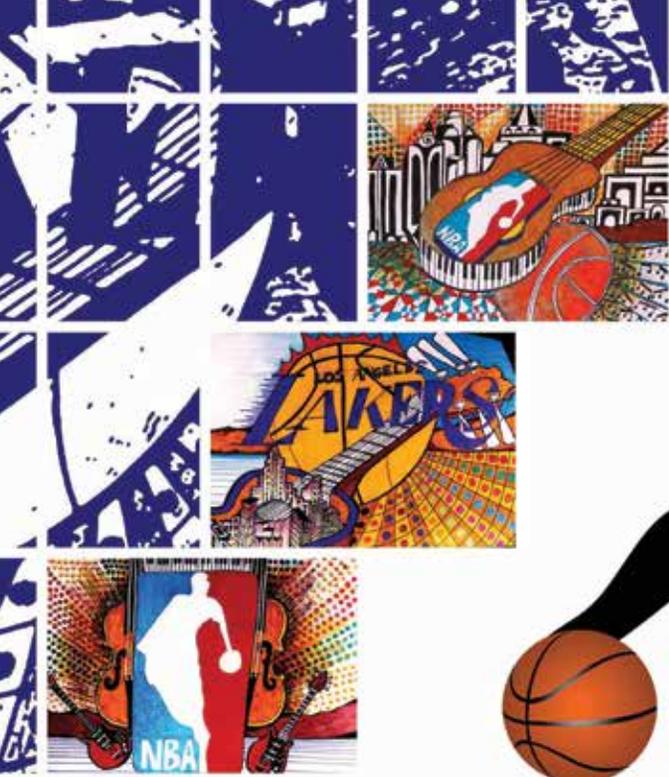




MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES SINCE 1989

Painting inspired by the Minnesota Timberwolves logo





LOS ANGELES LAKERS SINCE 1947

Painting inspired by the Los Angeles Lakers logo

