SECTION X -- ARMORY -- TECHNICAL

1) The Philosophical Roots of Heraldic Design
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The Philosophical Roots of Heraldic Design
-- Viscountess Hilary of Serendip, OL, OP, KSCA

It's Victorian ...

It's not Medieval ...

I don't like it ...

With these fatal words, another local herald moves to the top of somebody's crud list every day -- thus adding fuel to the rumor that all heralds are pig-headed ignoramuses who don't accept anything they didn't design themselves.

Maybe the herald is a pig-headed ignoramus. Lord knows, we've got them.

On the other hand, chances are there really is a problem with the device. It feels wrong, but the herald can't explain why because the problem isn't a matter of heraldry at all -- it's a matter of philosophy. An emblazon which obeys the rules but contradicts the basic philosophical set of heraldry looks silly to the herald's educated eye, but if he's never seen the philosophy spelled out (or, having seen it, made the connection to heraldic art) he's left without words to explain his reaction.

In any age, the principles of graphic design tend to be related to much more basic philosophical principles. For example, modern Americans like art that seems to move. The more action the better. We like asymmetry. We even find near-total chaos pleasing at times -- a bit of this and a bit of that dabbed here and there can look quite natural and right to us. And philosophically, we believe that change is natural and right -- and inevitable. We believe that each year should be better than the one before. We think that each person, each business, each country has to keep growing and improving or it starts to die -- that's progress. There's a certain amount of sentiment for the reverse view -- that Murphy's Law and the Second Law of Thermodynamics are the proper models of the Universe, and that each year will be worse than its predecessor -- both Progress and Decay assume the essential changeability of the world.

Figure A: Balance

Figure A-1: Modern

Figure A-2: Medieval

"An emblazon which obeys the rules but contradicts the basic philosophical set of heraldry looks silly ..."

Not so in the Middle Ages. Their philosophical model defined the world as a shining and changeless tribute to the glory of God. All creation participated in the Great Chain of Being that connected the highest angel to the lowest worm, and on beyond the worm to the mud, wherein it crawled. There were many levels in the chain, each forming a chain in itself from highest to lowest, so there was gold to rule among minerals, there were oaks among trees, eagles among birds ... and kings among men. There was movement but no real change, for the nature of each thing was defined by God and it was set in its place so that the whole of creation, in symmetry and order, should reflect the perfect beauty of His will. It was as good for a worm to be a worm as for an angel to be an angel. "And," chuckled one quick-witted lady when I related this concept to her, "As good for a peasant to be a peasant as for a lord to be a lord."

Absolutely.

Medieval art -- especially Medieval heraldic art -- expressed and reinforced the philosophy which supported and justified the highly stratified Medieval society. Order and symmetry pleased the Medieval eye because they evoked the righteous order and symmetry of Creation; motion and asymmetry repelled because they implied a disruption of God's plan. This is why we tend to find Medieval pictures of Hell more interesting than those of Heaven -- they could draw action all right; it just stood for things they didn't like.

The last place anyone in the Middle Ages would think of representing motion and change was in his family device. The possession of armorial bearings placed a man in one of the most comfortable links of the Great Chain, and it would never enter his head to choose a drawing that reflected anything other than the propriety and permanence of his place.

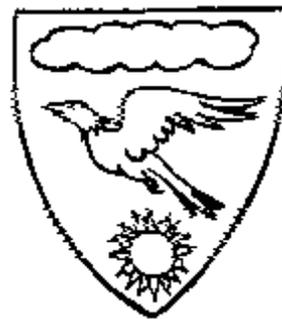**Figure B: Organization**

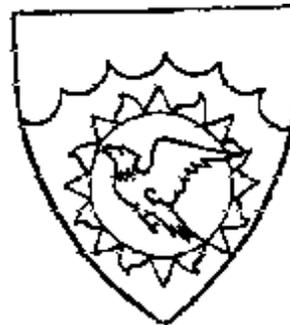Figure B-1: Modern

Figure B-2: 19th Century

Figure B-3: Medieval

"You can make the same basic design look much more like heraldry by simply centering all the elements and removing the asymmetric touches ..."

When you design your device, if you want it to feel Medieval, fill it with balance and orderliness. It doesn't have to be dull -- you can include a great deal of animation as long as it is balanced and self-contained. Consider the drawings in Figure A-- both represent a heraldic lion in the position defined as 'salient' -- standing on both hind paws, with both forepaws raised as though in the act of leaping upon prey. Both obey the rules of heraldry, but they 'feel' quite different. The first is clearly about to leap out of the shield in search of his dinner, while the second is poised serenely in space. The second lion could hold his position for all time ... just as the family who chose him for a charge would intend to do. Thus the second lion is far more Medieval in spirit than the first, and so he looks more 'heraldic.'

You can also include pretty much any collection of items you want (if you can find plausible Medieval forms), as long as the arrangement tends to hold your eye. Suppose, for example, you want a sun, an eagle, and a cloud on your shield. Figure B-1 is a passable modern design -- the sun at the bottom (it's more interesting there; suns at the top of pictures are old hat), the eagle soaring happily along in search of his dinner, the cloud drifting past in the other direction. It's not quite as heraldically law-abiding as the lion in Figure A-1 because the eagle is turned a bit toward 3/4 view to make him look a little livelier, but you could blazon him 'volant' and call his exact position artist's license. "Well, maybe it'll get through," your herald might say, "But I don't like it ..." Of course he doesn't like it --- the sun is sliding out one side, the cloud out the other, and the eagle out the front, and heraldic charges just don't act like that.

You can make the same basic design look much more like heraldry by simply centering all the elements and removing the asymmetric touches, which made them appear to move, as in Figure B-2. This version of the design would probably please your herald far better than B-1, but there's still a bit of a problem with it. It's what heralds refer to as 'landscape heraldry' -- a clear representation of a natural scene -- which was a style much favored in the 19th century and generally avoided in the 13th. Natural scenes don't really fit with Medieval heraldry on two scores, one philosophical, one practical. Philosophically, we're back to motion and change.
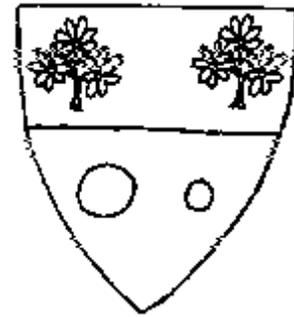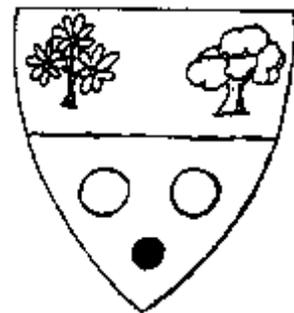
Figure C: Visual Weight
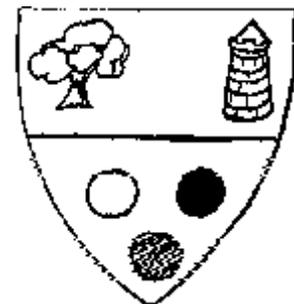

Figure C-1.

Figure C-2.

Figure C-3.

"Even if your natural instinct for artistic design is thoroughly modern ... you can still invent a device ... in a Medieval manner ..."

Natural suns rise and set, natural clouds drift, natural eagles return to their nests. No matter how balanced and serene the drawing, this kind of change is implicit in it. On practical grounds, landscapes (or skyscapes) have a lot of common with each other, which makes them harder to identify at a glance than more abstract patterns. On a battlefield, a man wanted a device that would say "so-and-so is here!" -- not one that said "I'm a picture of x ..." In Figure B-3, sun, eagle and cloud are woven together in a unified whole -- one pattern with nothing extra and no waste space -- exactly God's plan for the world, and incidentally a personal trademark which would have as much instant-recognition value as McDonald's Golden Arches.

Even if your natural instinct for artistic design is thoroughly modern and action-oriented, you can still invent a device that will say what you want to say in a Medieval manner if you follow a couple of simple rules of thumb regarding proportion and layout. Think of the charges on your shield as masses hanging in space. The trick is to balance the 'visual weight' of these masses around the center point of the shield so they all seem to be floating with no risk of falling out, and to make them as big as possible so they can be seen from far away.

Visual weight has three ingredients, two are very straight-forward: all other factors being equal, bigger pictures look heavier than smaller ones, and darker pictures look heavier than paler ones. A big black blotch may always seem heavier than a little white blotch. The third ingredient is psychological -- if two drawings are about the same size and color value but the viewer knows that one of the things represented by the drawings is much bigger than the other, the picture of the bigger item will seem both heavier and farther away. A sprig of daisies in one corner, for example, can't begin to balance an oak tree in the other -- the mind will insist on interpreting the daises as small and close and the tree as big and far away, giving the design a distressing three-dimensional twist. Two sets of daisies or two trees would be best, but you could get away with, say, daises and butterflies, or a tree and a tower. Figure C illustrates various combinations of visual weight.

Figure D: Symmetry
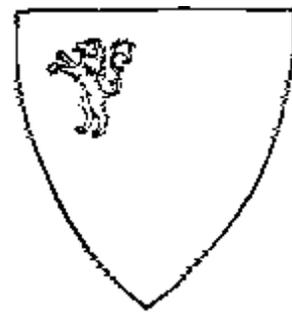

Figure D-1: Asymmetric

Figure D-2: Marginal symmetry per bend

Figure D-3: Full symmetry per bend

"A heraldic device that breathes motion and change is a contradiction in terms ..."

You have three good options for balancing visual weight on your shield: radial symmetry around the center point, bilateral symmetry along the pale (the vertical line down the middle), and bilateral symmetry along either of the diagonal bend lines. A single charge or a group of charges clustered around the center is in balance by radial symmetry. Two or more charges centered top and bottom are in balance on the pale -- as is one vertical or horizontal charge with about the same visual weight on either side of the line. A charge in top right balances one of similar weight in bottom left, and vice versa, giving bilateral symmetry along the bend. But a charge in top left can't balance one in bottom left -- with all that weight on the same side of the center, the design starts to keel over. Figure B-3 could be called radial symmetry, while Figures A-2 and B-2 are moderately complex examples of bilateral symmetry along the pale. Figure D shows several combinations of small charges balancing -- or failing to balance -- each other.

The last thing that separates something that looks like heraldry from something that looks like modern illustration is the sheer size of the design elements. At its origins, heraldry is severely pragmatic. It has a built-in philosophy because that was the philosophy of the people who developed it, but they weren't thinking about philosophy at all when they framed the rules. They were after fast identification, not deep meaning, and that required big, bold pictures with lots of contrast. Decide on a few charges and fill the field with them, leaving just enough background to make them stand out. You can *tell* people your life story any time; don't expect them to read it while you're charging across the field at them.

Stillness. Order. Symmetry. Clarity.

These are the principles that will give your design a Medieval flavor. You can probably ignore them and still persuade the College of Arms to register your device -- but do you really want to? A heraldic device that breaths motion and change is a contradiction in terms. Even if you don't understand why it should do so, it strikes a jarring note -- as out of place in a Medieval recreation as a storm trooper and electric pink veils. Borrow for awhile the Medieval certainty that every thing rejoices in its proper place ... It will refresh your mind for your daily combat with Progress and Decay, and will lead you to a much happier design for your device as well.

Figure D:Symmetry,cont.

Figure D-4: Radial symmetry

Figure D-5: Symmetry per pale -- filling the shield.

Note:

For a brief and engaging description of the concept of the Great Chain of Being and its influence on the English Renaissance, read *The Elizabethan World Picture* by E. M. W. Tillyard, Random House Vintage Book V-162.

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